

Adam Harper: *Infinite Music: Imagining the Next Millennium of Human Music Making*. Zero Books, 2011, 234 s. (Kindle ed.), ISBN 978 1 84694 924 1

How would it be possible to argue for a new modernism in music that follows the spirit, and not merely the technique of the modernism of the 20th century? This question is the starting point of Adam Harper's book on a new musical modernism. Harper, a British musicologist, states that the old modernism ironically seems to have conservative adherents in academic circles that often seem to have very specific ideas of which composition method is preferred. To overcome this problem, he builds his argument on the thesis that modernism is not "a state or a set of particular techniques or characteristics, but a direction" (p.2) He then goes on to discuss this direction by a systematic account of concepts I will discuss below.

Harper is inspired by John Cage's sound space, where the composer discusses five determinants that make up sound: frequency, amplitude, timbre, duration and morphology (envelope). The result is a total sound space on which the discussion of all possible music is founded. Harper argues, however, that music comes before sounds, as (musical) sounds themselves are a result of musical values expressed by a number of variables. Pure rhythm, independently of pitch and timbre for instance, is no sound in itself, but it is a musical variable. Instead of sound space, Harper suggests a much wider music space, which is a system of "infinite musical variability that puts all existing music into the context of its much wider and unrealised possibilities" (p.111) or the "the continuum formed by all musical objects" (p.61). It thereby becomes a broadened and relativistic version of sound space, where the variables are endless, as opposed to five, and the values of these variables are continuous. Musical objects are consequently defined as subsets of musical space, by having at least one constrained variable.

According to this model, styles, instruments, and works are all then examples of musical objects, as they all constrain music space in some way by allowing different "degrees of freedom". A piano, for example, constrains the musical space by allowing only certain discrete pitches, as well as by other variables determine the instrument's characteristics. Ragtime is also a musical object by some constraining characteristics in music space that demarcates it from other genres. Beethoven's "Große Fuge" constrains music space in a much more detailed way by specifying tempo, instruments, pitches and durations and so forth that makes up all the degrees of freedom necessary to perform the work.

This model may seem too abstract, but it gives Harper the possibility to discuss a new musical modernism and where it differs from the old one. Innovations of 20th century have explored the outermost extremes of the map of possibilities that the author calls the music space, but the second phase of innovations remains: "the infinite task of colonising the entirety of music space." (p.112) Harper discusses this inwardly exploration of music's "pure, unspecified, unquantised potential to vary" that follows the spirit of modernism in an age of post-experimental music, where certain conventions and traditions have long been discarded. As stated in the book, we commonly still have old fashioned image of "new music", where it means the dismantling of conventions, rather than adoption of new ones. The previous modernists explored the edges of music space and attempted to dismantle the conventions. In light of this, the author's suggestion of defining modernism as an

inward exploration of music space is a refreshing one, especially when it does not mean going backwards or taking the postmodernist route.

Critical listening, therefore, means revealing more information about music space to the listener. By founding the discussion on the continuous music space with infinite variables and values, Harper is also able to discuss a wide array of topics such as discrete vs. continuous variables in music, musical image and musical meaning through making use of vocabulary such as music space and musical objects he introduced earlier.

The author also discusses musical perception by “images of music” that are musical objects as they appear to the mind. Accordingly, they reduce all possible manifestations of information from musical objects to a certain set of features according to affordance (p.133) Images of music, without which all we hear would be disordered sounds are only possible as they recur. Repetition is therefore a very important element in music; it creates images and changes them depending on what is repeated and how.

New music demands an increase in its degrees of freedom. “Synthesis” is one such way to reach new music through balancing repetition and difference and “alien styles” are another way that works in a similar way to synthesis but starting from scratch, instead of familiar material. Harper could have mentioned here Schönberg’s concept *developing variations*. This technique, as the composer argued, was essential, as homophonic music produced its material by modifying/developing repetitions of earlier material. Neither does the author mention *Klangfarbenmelodie*, which was another novelty from the old modernism. Here, contrasts in timbre were used in creating melodies by distributing lines to several instruments. Repetition of timbre that occurs with one instrument delivering a line was therefore interrupted. The old modernism, therefore, seems to have explored music space in more ways than just atonality.

Harper is willing to go beyond the traditional western way of practicing music by his discussion of “alien genres” towards the end of the book. At the same time, he demarcates musical activity from non-music as any activity that have been specified by composers or listeners as musical. (p.33) This is unavoidable, as he puts musical intensions before sounds, but it also partly prioritizes the composer – and therefore somewhat reinforces a traditional hierarchy found in western art music. This issue aside, Harper accomplishes discussing musical modernism from new perspective, one that is very relevant in the 21st century.