



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Pace, I. (2017). Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989. *Tempo*, 71(282), pp. 101-103. doi: 10.1017/s0040298217000766

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/17645/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0040298217000766>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017). £24.95

A range of important monographs deal with twentieth-century Western art music or such music from after 1945; amongst the most illuminating are those by Paul Griffiths, Glenn Watkins, Arnold Whittall, Célestin Deliège and Hermann Danuser.¹ Of those published most recently, the third edition of Griffiths in particular makes a valiant attempt to shape a narrative for post-1989 developments. But in such literature in general, it has proved difficult to arrive at a coherent interpretation of music after the high point of avant-garde influence or centrality has been passed (which might be in 1959, 1968, 1973 or 1989, or other dates).

Tim Rutherford-Johnson's book starts from the premise that the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 is a sufficiently important musico-historical moment as to warrant a dedicated history from this point onwards, and includes plenty of information on musical composition from this period. In the first chapter, he acknowledges the boundaries of his approach, focusing on Western art music, including work from outside the 'West' which interacts with this tradition, and some work – such as that involving improvisation, or the work of Merzbow or Hildegard Westerkamp – which lies at the very boundaries of such a field.

This all seems fair; Rutherford-Johnson then goes on to say that his book is not 'an attempt to establish a canon of the "best" works composed since that date [1989]'; instead his rationales are based 'not on chains of influence and accumulations of prestige but on responses to questions from outside of the world of musical exchange value' (p. 23). But such a book, by its very existence, will establish canonical value and prominence for various composers. Furthermore, Rutherford-Johnson's criteria for inclusion rest primarily upon extra-musical associations, in most cases entirely regardless of whether these have, or could ever have, any impact beyond a small community of new music aficionados. With this comes extravagant geo-political claims for various music which are less convincing when one factors in limited awareness of such work. At the same time, a little reduction in the quantity of works mentioned would allow deeper consideration of some.

According to Rutherford-Johnson, musicians 'talk to one another, they have respect for each other's work, they attend each other's concerts, they discuss professional and aesthetic matters, and they disagree'; his history seeks to 'reflect such friendships and conversations' so as to 'better capture the reality of the contemporary music ecosystem' (p. 21) than through stylistic or technical considerations. There are many such 'ecosystems', depending upon location and social milieu; Rutherford-Johnson presents those which he himself frequents as if they encompass a totality. He evades

¹ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music: The Avant Garde since 1945* (London: Dent, 1981); significantly revised version as *Modern Music and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); further extensive revision as *Modern Music and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1995); Arnold Whittall, *Music since the First World War* (London: Dent, 1977); significantly revised version as *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Célestin Deliège, *Cinquante ans de modernité musicale: de Darmstadt à l'IRCAM, contribution historiographique à une musicologie critique* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2003); revised edition (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2012); Hermann Danuser, *Die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1984).

questions of inclusion within his own: how many people involved with this ecosystem do not have some professional involvement, or aspirations thereof, with new music? Who has the wherewithal to network with such people, or the time (or the location)?

This approach also entails a degree of provincialism, notwithstanding consideration of some international developments. A disproportionate amount of attention is given to composers from, based in, having worked, or with a major reputation in the UK. Henryk Görecki's Third Symphony is important because of its success in the UK in the early 1990s, Alvin Curran's *Maritime Rites* Tate because commissioned by Tate Modern London, Stockhausen's *Mittwoch aus LICHT* because it was performed in Birmingham. The Borealis Festival is singled out when it had a British artistic director, but there is almost no consideration of the changing nature of the Darmstädter Ferienkursen under three successive artistic directors, just passing mention of the Donaueschinger Musiktage, Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik and nothing on Musica Viva, Festival d'Automne, Ultima, Wien Modern, and others which feature prominently within many new music 'ecosystems'.

Composers and performers associated with the University of Huddersfield receive extensive treatment, with a whole section devoted to the ELISION Ensemble, and large chunks on composers they perform such as Richard Barrett, Liza Lim (who provides one of the pieces of advocacy on the cover) or Aaron Cassidy. There is also a shorter mention of Musikfabrik, but none of Ensemble Intercontemporain, Asko/Schönberg Ensemble, Ensemble Modern, Klangforum Wien, or the Arditti Quartet, all more prominent presences in European new music during the period in question. Even those Arab composers featured by Rutherford-Johnson have a British connection: Joelle Khoury was for a period based at Brunel University, while Tarek Atoui was featured at Tate Modern in 2016.

Many of the aforementioned writers, especially Griffiths, begin from the sounding music as a starting point for wider considerations. Rutherford-Johnson, however, has a tendency to privilege ideas over musical material, with little detailed consideration of the latter. A further hierarchy of inclusion privileges spectacular novelty over anything which might be viewed as part of a more integrative approach. This leads to complete neglect of the later music of Elliott Carter or Harrison Birtwistle, that of James Dillon, Pascal Dusapin or Bent Sørensen, while Kaija Saariaho or Rebecca Saunders are mentioned only in passing. Much of the writing on the music is rather blandly descriptive, and could often have been taken primarily from programme notes. Rutherford-Johnson often does not establish an independent critical perspective, and relies heavily on the work of others. For example, his section on Johannes Kreidler (p. 147) is indebted to the unmediated views of Martin Iddon. In the section on Thomas Adès, the citation of Dominic Wells' provocative statement that in Adès's work 'the tension between tradition and modernism is simply not an issue' (p. 244) is presented without independent evaluation or consideration of what might constitute 'modernism' in such a context.

A two-page section on Luigi Nono's *La lontananza utopica future* (1988-9), for example, says nothing at all about the use of pitch or rhythm, only very basic contextual information, insufficiently distinctive to substantiate its claim that 'The work sits between and articulates several simultaneous folds of history'. Similarly, Rutherford-Johnson's claims about the relationship of Lars-Petter Hagen's remarkable

Tveitt Fragments (2006) to Norwegian political/cultural history are made on the basis solely of cursory information about Gierr Tveitt, not on how Hagen engages with his music.

The case for choosing a starting date of 1989 needs to be made in musical as well as historical terms, an assumed relationship between the two examined critically and tested for vulnerabilities, not least through comparison with pre-1989 musical tendencies. Rutherford-Johnson does some of this, though the treatment can be sporadic and uneven. His final chapter, on 'Recovery: Gaps between Past and Present', on works entailing musical borrowing would be more robust through greater consideration of, various other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century related traditions – Liszt, Brahms, Ives, Mahler, B.A. Zimmermann, and especially Mauricio Kagel and Dieter Schnebel's *Re-Visionen* cycle, which anticipates many of the compositional issues discussed here.

The wider history of the post-1989 world does not lack divergent historical interpretations. For Rutherford-Johnson, the end of the Cold War sees the ascent of neo-liberalism and globalization. There is a weighty range of scholarly literature on the latter concept, with some tracing it back to the Roman Empire, the early Chinese diaspora, the silk routes established by Marco Polo, or later developments in transport and communications technology. Rutherford-Johnson's historical purview is narrower; at one point he even says 'Globalization today is almost synonymous with the Internet' (p. 143), a limited view of the concept, which neglects trade, arms, third-world debt, migration, and so on.

As for neo-liberalism, he ignores, for example, the fact that at the very end of the twentieth-century there were social democratic governments in power in most of Western Europe (Norway and Spain were the Western European exceptions), and moderate ones in the USA and Canada, certainly more so than existed in the 1980s. Rutherford Johnson claims that a supposed post-1989 neo liberalism required that art operate according to 'the rules of the free market', with 'reductions in state funding' (p. 32), lack evidence (the reality varies between countries). His subsequent conclusions about more populist forms of composition are belied by some of the examples he offers. On page 197 he himself includes funding as an example of increasing resources, contradicting the earlier claim. Earlier on, Rutherford-Johnson's statement that '*Different Trains* speaks of and to America in the 1990s: it is redeemed, technologically ascendant, media friendly, culturally dehierarchized, and postmodernistically optimistic' (p. 10) speaks the language of American nationalism (reminiscent of the Alex Ross of *The Rest is Noise*).

There is however some highly valuable material on musical developments in Eastern Europe, especially Poland, former East Germany and the former Soviet Union, as befits a book predicated upon the collapse of the Iron Curtain. In his short section on composers from the former GDR (pp. 234-7), Rutherford-Johnson includes interesting reflections on *Ostalgie*, post-Cold War yearning for some of the products and lifestyle of the GDR, and how the removal of state control changed the situation for many composers, but oddly neglects prior restrictions and censorship.

As an introductory text to a particular sub-section of post-1989 contemporary composition, this book will be of some service. As a more incisive history, it is

problematic. It will surely be lauded by those composers who receive extensive treatment within the book, but appears to have been written too hurriedly to make good on some of its own extravagant claims.

Ian Pace