Controversies Incorporated

The following article is a response to Richard Toop's 'Four Facets of "The New Complexity" ' published in the last issue of Contact (Contact 32 *(Spring 1988), pp.4-50). Further responses to this and other matters raised in* Contact *should be sent to Christopher Fox, 3 Old Moor Lane, York YO2 2QE.*

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Complexity, Capitulationism, and the Language of Criticism

Facets without Perspective?

Richard Toop's 'Four Facets of "The New Complexity" ' is a tour de force, remarkable both for the skill with which it places penetrating analysis in a vivid documentary context and for the fact that Toop's own voice is not swamped by the voices of the composers themselves. This response is intended more as complement than critique, in recognition of the importance of the issues Toop raises, and in the belief that moving back from his very close focus may shed some additional light on the contemporary scene, in musicology as well as composition, that is his own prime concern.

Toop writes as, in some respects, a concerned outsider whose view of music in Britain is that 'parochialism seems to have taken over with a vengeance'.[1] He is also, as his terminology makes clear, wholeheartedly against any manifestation of 'New Simplicity' or 'New Romanticism' (although neither of these is a tendency confined to the British Isles). Toop may well be right about the parochialism. But it is possible to look at the undoubted differences between various composers active today in a rather different way, and one reason why I'm attempting to do that here is because I believe that the so-called 'New Romantics' – if not the 'New Simpletons' – are a rather more complex and deserving breed than Toop is prepared to allow.

Toop is careful to create the appropriate context for his study by stating, at an early stage, that the analyses which form the core of his article are 'partial'. What this means is clear: 'Whereas much recently-published analytical work is intended not only as an exegesis of individual pieces but as a contribution to a more or less specific theoretical genre, I should make it clear that mine . . . does not share the latter aspiration. I am . . . seeking to give a provisional account of the compositions I discuss; beyond that, however, my main aim is to give some indication of each composer's creative process, of *composition* as a "putting together" of *personal* preoccupations, both aesthetic and technical' (p.4). In this way Toop distances himself from the kind of approach to analysis that would give the general priority over the particular and the views of the commentator more prominence than those of the composer. The result is nevertheless far from an exercise in public relations, or anodyne music-appreciation. As Toop acknowledges, none of his four composers is exactly anti-intellectual and so he is able to avoid any suspicion that he, as musicologist-commentator, is guilty of that 'all-purpose anti-intellectualism' that, he believes, is 'still very much embedded in the collective psyche of the musical establishment' in Great Britain (p.4). Anti-intellectual, no: but frustratingly narrow, perhaps. It is precisely because he stays as close as he does to what he regards as the composers' 'personal preoccupations, both aesthetic and technical' (but primarily the latter) that he risks creating an aesthetic – if not also a technical – vacuum. Moreover, by giving one fundamental issue too little attention, he makes the kind of critical comparison (between 'complexity' and 'capitulationism') that his polemical stance should promote, more difficult for others to undertake constructively. What is missing, in my view, is a proper, i.e. theoretical, consideration of the aesthetics of structure, such as would help to create a clearer picture of where these four composers actually stand in terms of the development of the art in our time. Of course, Toop could reasonably argue that such matters, however interesting and important, go beyond the 'provisional' and 'personal' brief of his essay. Hence my own concern to complement rather than criticise his work.

From Modern to Postmodern

If pressed, most musicologists will admit that 'perspective', whether historical, cultural or theoretical needs careful handling, if unrealistic claims and improbable 'connections' are to be avoided. Its relevance must nevertheless be tested, especially in cases like that of Toop's 'Gang of Four' where the foreground of planned compositional procedure, and something of the composers' own views of wider structural and cultural matters, have been so fully and authoritatively set forth.

The kind of perspective I have in mind relates most fundamentally to the value, generally recognised by music theorists, in determining the extent to which 'modern', progressive twentieth-century music differs both from earlier music, and also from more conservative twentieth-century music. This may seem a straightforward matter where compositional style and personality are concerned. It may even remain straightforward when technical distinctions between 'tonal' and 'post-tonal' languages are proposed; and when the term 'structure' is used simply to connote the *use* of one or the other 'language', the distinction may still be obvious. But problems come thick and fast when the ways in which structures (the formal foundations or frameworks of compositions) participate in, and ultimately help to generate aesthetic effect and response are brought into consideration. They do so because the basic research about perception – how we process and retain musical 'information' – is still being done. So today theorists are still arguing about how we 'hear' as familiar a post-tonal composition as Schoenberg's little piano piece op.19 no.6. Do we, as Fred Lerdahl seeks to demonstrate, hear this music hierarchically, to the extent that something he terms 'Atonal Prolongational Structure' can be proposed?[2] Or, in the absence of the only musical conditions shown with theoretical validity to generate genuine

organic integration and to create convincing hierarchies which – even if we do not literally 'hear' them in performance – powerfully affect the way we listen, should we accept the fundamental difference between both structure and perception with respect to tonal and post-tonal music and propose that (for example) Schoenberg's op.19 no.6 makes sense simply as a succession of separate events that relate in various ways, but which are not hierarchically integrated?[3]

For some musicians – notably but not exclusively among the 'all-purpose anti-intellectual' British – this issue, and my way of putting it, will sum up all that they dislike about 'theory'. It seeks to base extravagant conclusions on unreal distinctions: it thinks too hard and doesn't listen hard enough. I do not propose to spend precious time and space in refutation of this unreal, thoughtless view. My only purpose here is to indicate the ways in which such issues as those touched on above can (and should) provide some helpful perspective when it comes to considering not only Richard Toop's 'Gang of Four', but the wider contemporary context he so trenchantly characterises as 'complex' versus 'capitulatory'.

I have written elsewhere about what I believe to be the essence of the post-tonal 'revolution': 'a shift from the unifying integration of contrasted but nonetheless related elements (synthesis) to the establishment of an equilibrium, a balance between elements that remain distinct (symbiosis)'.[4] I have also proposed that musical Modernism operates principally in terms of the second possibility. In another essay I have subdivided this Modernism into musics that favour either confrontation or complementation, and it is the former category – 'at its most challenging . . . when composers literally juxtapose materials from past and present, or when they attempt to preserve essential features of an old system – especially of course, tonality – in radically revised forms, yet in such a way that the music cannot be convincingly explained solely in terms of that preservation'[5] – that has most in common with what literary theorists and writers on modern aesthetics tend to term Postmodernism, or Poststructuralism, and *its* near (some would say close) relative, Deconstruction. In a recent study, as full of definitions of its subject as it is of references to exponents of that subject, Linda Hutcheon declares that 'the contradictory nature of postmodernism involves its offering of multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts in full knowledge of (and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts'.[6] Just as Hutcheon labours mightily to persuade us that Postmodernism is not simply a rejection of Modernism (or even of the traditions Modernism continues by other means), so Christopher Norris, as cool-headed a guide to the quicksands of Poststructuralism as one could wish for, underlines the historical dimension in what many have tended to conceive as a wholly tradition-rejecting phenomenon: 'deconstruction is not so much a passage "beyond" philosophy – or beyond the resources of logocentric reason – as a testing of the language, the concepts and categories, which make up that same ubiquitous tradition'.[7] In Postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, we find 'problematization' rather than 'synthesis'.[8] In Deconstruction, as Norris reads it, we reach the point where synthesis of a kind may possibly occur, but only in the sense that 'opposites merge in a constant *undecidable* exchange of attributes'.[9] And Norris later refers to 'that essential feature of a deconstructive reading that consists, not merely in *reversing* or *subverting* some established hierarchical order, but in showing how its terms are indissolubly entwined in a strictly undecidable exchange of values and priorities'.[10]

The Need for Balance

I am not for a moment suggesting that we should strive (theoretically) to make musical Modernism and Postmodernism conform in all their essential structural criteria to the other arts, though the analogies are there and they are striking. What is valuable, I believe, is that the perspectives which these terms and discussions create provide a proper basis from which to view *all* the different manifestations of musical language and style current today. The most important thing of all about terms such as 'balance' and 'complementation' is that they are as much aesthetic as technical in their associations: the value of a work consists in its attainment or presentation of these qualities, deemed by the listener in question (even if only by implication) to be good things. So when Michael Hall writes of Birtwistle that ' a piece is not completed until equality or a "non-symmetrical balance" has been established',[11] he is making an aesthetic judgement as well as a technical observation. And when Richard Toop himself writes of Ferneyhough that 'much of the forcefulness and richness of the *Carceri* pieces arises both from the conceptual obstacle courses that the composer sets himself in the realization of individual layers, and from the violent collisions between these layers',[12] aesthetic and technical interpretation could hardly be closer.

If we now return to 'Four Facets', it is clear that Toop spends most of his time, in Structuralist vein, singling out various significant technical features for comment and providing a fascinatingly explicit, and unfailingly readable, insight into how (complex) surfaces relate to source materials and their manipulations. In his conclusion, some of the basics for a broader view do emerge: with these four composers 'there are no recantations of "modernist heresies",' and they can even, with due caution, be proclaimed the 'logical inheritors' of 'Western classical tradition' (p.49). Instead of following up this background material, however, Toop looks to the future. He argues, persuasively as always, that the 'fringe' Britishness of these notably unparochial composers makes them especially open to extra-European influences. Their musical world, we infer, will become increasingly 'open rather than bounded' and this is one reason why complexity is preferable to capitulationism.

For composers, the present piece – or the next – is what matters most. But critics – musicologists – need to take a broader, more balanced view. Toop could certainly have dug more deeply into his perception about the 'different versions' of that 'counterpoint between instinct and reflection' he finds in his quartet of composers (p.50), and into its aesthetic implications. He might then have been less vulnerable to the complaint that he applies Lachenmann's dictum (about 'emotional' and 'intellectual' listening) to *thinking* about music without acknowledging that musicology *can* get the balance right.

The point is so important because – even in ignorance of the music, beyond what Toop says about it – one senses the extent to which these four composers are inescapably engaged with the most fundamental of all artistic issues of our time: whether to aim for a Postmodernist coherence that results from the balancing out of distinct contrasts or confrontations, or

whether to continue to develop the 'old' Modernism, in which a non-hierarchic, organic continuity may be sustained, and contrasts and conflicts kept 'classically' subordinate. Here again I am using musicologists' rather than composers' categories, but the reductive opposition between those musicological categories is more apparent than real: they are not inflexible absolutes but rather identify tendencies as a basis for the separate characterisation and interpretation of individual compositions.

From this perspective, the evidence as Toop presents it is appropriately mixed and ambiguous. Michael Finnissy states, of his *Verdi Transcriptions* Book I, that 'I try to allow pieces to grow organically' (p.12), and Toop's own response to the work – 'one really does hear it as one big piece' (p.15) – also gives priority to integrative factors. So too does Toop's comment on Finnissy's String Trio: 'the work avoids all trace of "bittyness" ': and a process 'has a certain sense of inevitability' (p.16). With Chris Dench, it may be that one reason he now finds *Tilt* relatively 'shallow' (p.27), compared with *Enoncé*, is the former's emphasis on juxtaposition. With Richard Barrett, by contrast, it seems clear that, in *Anatomy*, superimposition is more to the point than synthesis, and there is a 'constant, unresolved opposition' in *Temptation* (p.36): by the end of the section on Barrett, indeed, the term 'synthesis' seems fit only to be derided. But whether James Dillon reinforces this tendency, or redresses the balance, is difficult to judge. If, as seems to be the case, Dillon seeks to advance beyond the constant 'abruption' he finds in Xenakis (p.39), then organicism might well be on the agenda. What seems more likely, from Dillon's own comments – though Toop does not follow this up – is that a fascination which Dillon illustrates by reference to Amy Clampitt's description of the amaryllis as a 'study in disruption' leads him to make music out of 'this kind of moment where things are between order and disorder' (p.41). As a statement of aesthetic principle with great technical implications, this remark is perhaps the most thought-provoking in the entire essay.

I have been arguing here that there is no way in which even the most organic Modernist music can be hierarchic – prolongational – in the full, tonal sense defined by Schenker. Rather its organicism consists in giving priority to continuity, to an evolving (not 'Experimentally' non-dynamic) consistency that may be either motivic or gestural or some way between the two. Here, perhaps, is where the distinction between 'complexity' and 'capitulation' may most productively be sited. I regard the most positive conservative aspect of the New Romanticism as the attempt to preserve the essence of coherent argument, the placement of motivic statement and elaboration (a technique deriving – in theory if not always in practice – from Schoenberg's 'developing variation') in an appropriate harmonic context. But the more determinedly it pursues modes of creating surface continuity, the more conservative the music of the complex composers may appear, and I would tentatively cite Finnissy's recent orchestral composition *Red Earth* in evidence. The principal challenge for complex music is to create material as memorable, and a formal context and treatment as rich and refined, as is possible (if rarely attained nowadays) with motives. If New Romantics have their work cut out to devise materials and contexts that do not sound stale, complex composers have their work cut out to distinguish between arresting intensity and empty gesticulation.

Common Ground?

The Minimalists and Experimentalists already have their exegetes, and one day no doubt even the English New Romantics will find a Toop to expound their techniques and explain their aesthetic stance. Of course, no amount of theoretical or analytical exposition will persuade those who dislike the revived Romantic style, and the kind of musical ideas that go with it, to change their minds. But I will reiterate my belief that, when it comes to the aesthetics of structure, all composers – save, it would seem, the Experimentalists[13] – are facing the same challenge: how to generate effective forms that are neither mere assemblages nor undifferentiated 'states'. Just as Toop's quartet are not simply wholehearted post-tonal juxtaposers who use local complexity to compensate for the lack of all larger balance and coherence, so the New Romantics are not invariably mindless worshippers at the temple of tonal tradition, who hide their impotence behind a thick veil of halfhearted pastiche. Recent works by Robert Simpson and Nicholas Maw provide particularly nourishing food for thought in this respect, for despite, or because of, the evident associations with tradition, a real Postmodernism is not merely alive but is growing in this music.[14] After all, the sense of local hierarchies doing as much to prevent as to promote a grandly comprehensive, truly organic synthesis is likely to be more apparent in music which still preserves the distinction between consonance and dissonance, if not diatonic and chromatic, in its style and syntax.

I will leave the argument there, appropriately open-ended. This article is an immediate response – provisional, personal – to Toop, and far from the long-meditated, exhaustively-argued fifty-page rejoinder he deserves. If it does not sound too illogical, I would defend my response on the grounds that the issues involved are too important to wait for the kind of carefully-plotted treatment that would do them justice. Composers – even complex ones – may find them supremely unimportant, though I hope not. As a musicologist, I will concede that theorists do find it much too easy to detach themselves from the realities of what composers think and do. But there are realities – real ones! – in musicology too. The ideal position for a full response to complex music would be a pragmatic, sceptical, undyingly curious one, somewhere between my distance and Richard Toop's closeness. The best of both worlds?

1 Richard Toop, 'Travelling Hopefully', *Contact 31* (Autumn 1987), p.42.

2 Fred Lerdahl, 'Atonal Prolongational Structure', *Contemporary Music Review* (forthcoming).

3 Even the hierarchically-disposed organicism of the Bach C major Prelude, as shown in the celebrated Schenkerian analysis (see Heinrich Schenker, *Five Graphic Music Analyses* (New York: Dover, 1969)) is more mental construct than experienced, heard-in-time 'reality'. It is a legitimate interpretation of the musical language and structure which, if present in the mind when the music is being heard, does most to create the impression that one actually perceives a single structural span in all its diversified unity. The Schenkerian revolution consists precisely in the gulf the theory drives between compositions which can be convincingly analysed by

such means and those which cannot – paralleled, of course, by the gulf between those who believe Schenker was right and those who do not. As for op.19 no.6, I cannot share Lerdahl's interpretation of bars 7-8 as ultimately subsumed under the previous 'event'. Subordinate, in the sense of providing unequal contrast, by all means. But Lerdahl's (my) problem is that his graphic medium promotes the absorption of elements that I hear as leading more independent existences.

4 Jonathan Dunsby and Arnold Whittall, *Music Analysis in Theory and Practice* (London: Faber Music, 1988), p.173.

5 Arnold Whittall, 'The Theorist's Sense of History: Concepts of Contemporaneity in Composition and Analysis', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol.112, no.1 (1986-7), p.2.

6 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), p.60.

7 Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987), p.138.

8 Hutcheon, op. cit., p.221.

9 Norris, op. cit., p.35.

10 Norris, op. cit., p.56.

11 Michael Hall, 'The Sanctity of Context: Birtwistle's recent Music', *The Musical Times* (January 1988), p.15.

12 Richard Toop, 'Ferneyhough's Dungeons of Invention', *The Musical Times* (November 1987), p.626.

13 See Michael Parsons, 'Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies', *Contact 30* (Spring 1987), p.16.

14 For two relevant studies, see Lionel Pike, 'Robert Simpson's "New Way",' *Tempo*, no.153 (June 1985), and Bayan Northcott, 'Nicholas Maw: the second phase', *The Musical Times* (August 1987).