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Contemporary Music and Its Futures

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Patrick Valiquet

This journal's title, *Contemporary Music Review*, implies a special relationship with music history. Rather than foreground genre, idiom, location, period or technique, the adjective 'contemporary' seems to stake out its boundaries at the edge of time. Unlike other historical periods, the contemporary needs neither beginning nor end. Once invoked, the contemporary can simply persist; it is less a specific place *in* time than an abstract relation *with* time, the coordinates, capacities and tensions of which interpellate an observer with a particular perspective *on* time. Understood in this sense, the contemporary can just as easily involve distance as it does presence; just as easily direct attention backwards as it does forwards. One thing that is clear is that the contemporary now has its own history – a malleable one depending on which historians and theorists one chooses to believe, but evidently extending backwards as many as 36 years in the case of this journal alone. And as the contemporary ages, the work of invoking or enacting it increasingly involves answers to questions about abstraction and representation.

These questions are certainly not unique to music or music criticism. Consider, for example, the recent ubiquity of the cinematic trope figuring the present not as a shared, unified horizon so much as a fragmented and shifting inter-dimensional puzzle, in which characters can accordingly inhabit 'alternative' contemporaries, the natures of which then depend on the choices of some supernatural or even non-diegetic agency. A classic example occurs at the narrative apex of the 2014 science fiction film *Interstellar*. His mission clearly in jeopardy, the astronaut Joseph Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) ejects from his failing spacecraft into the event horizon of a black hole. He finds himself miraculously able to act 'across spacetime', sending Morse code messages to his own daughter through a 'tesseract' that leads him to the bookcase in her bedroom decades earlier. This action, in turn, ensures that Cooper's daughter will go on to invent the technology that allows humanity to progress toward the specific future in which his success is not only probable, but necessary for the sake of extraterrestrial colonization. The miraculous tesseract turns out to be the work of the future people whose advanced intelligence is the implied result of that colonization process. Note that, despite the prominent thematization of inter-dimensionality here, linear causality and intentionality in the universe of *Interstellar* still seem to work as humans would normally expect: without at least a couple of abstractions it would be difficult to produce fiction at all.¹ The film's message seems to be that the solution to the catastrophe of global degradation is to be found *not* in the knowledge we have now, but 'out there' in one of many possible futures. Justice and peace, the trope implies, are matters for the end of history: all humanity can do now is try to stay competitive and keep progress going until we get there.

The power of this plot device lies in the way it politicises the present. In Octavia Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred*, for example, a mysterious force shuttles the protagonist inexplicably between past and present. The book's narrative follows what is in effect a kind of fold in history, linking relationships of care and moments of trauma across two intersecting plot trajectories. The fragmented present forces the reader to confront the horror of slavery not as a bounded, finished historical event but as a process working at the level of the protagonist's genetic code; slavery, in a sense, as metaphysics. Hypothetical changes enacted

in the past enable the reader to encounter an apparently harmonious present in the *subjunctive*, to consider the ways that things *could* be going differently, and thus arrive at a better understanding of the necessities and contingencies that constitute the now of everyday experience. The name for this imaginary time of hypothetical resolution in French is *uchronie*. The term comes from the title of an 1876 novel by Charles Renouvier, a central philosopher of history, religion and law under Napoleon III, and an important influence on the pragmatist thinking of William James. In a lengthy preface, Renouvier leads his reader to understand that the core of the text has been passed down in secret by a scholar fleeing the inquisition in the years following the execution of Giordano Bruno. The fictional author of this text finds himself intellectually hamstrung by the church's failure to reconcile the new empirical science with its metaphysical commitment to a single, personalised Absolute. If Europeans in the past had chosen to remain polytheistic, he asks, would they today be better equipped to accept the pluralist metaphysics that the new sciences seem to demand? What, for example, would have happened to philosophy if the Roman empire had chosen *not* to back Christianity? Renouvier's novel is both the answer to that question, and an experiment in the kind of critical history that he saw his pluralist metaphysics as making possible. It treats the Absolute as an event like any other, a specific node in a chain of relations with no necessary outcome at any given time. If many events and their results are accidental, thought Renouvier, then it must always be possible to speculate about the ways that things could have turned out differently. If the future, that is, truly remains unwritten at any given moment, then the relations which we later seem to discover between historical phenomena must themselves be abstract and contingent. It would mean, in other words, that we could understand historical relations as, in a critical sense, both open to experimentation, and not reducible to brute facts.²

We might think about the writing of music history as entailing a similar challenge to identify the reasons *why* particular events, figures, ideas and works attained dominance while others seemed futile; and indeed why we today might, in particular cases, feel inclined to resettle old scores or redirect old narratives. Unfortunately, this kind of reflection rarely operates at a higher level than arbitrary revision. Some of the recent 'new materialist' interventions, for instance, seem to offer a similar kind of reassurance as the plot of *Interstellar*; the comfort in knowing that there have always been exceptions to the historiographical mistakes of sexism, speciesism, strict canonicity or Western supremacy. These authors are relieved to find that the 'modest witness' of modern science was never anything more than a web of partial and ephemeral contingencies (Haraway 1997, 24; cf. Piekut 2012). Digitally remediated recordings and archival sources seem to lend new meanings to past certainties just as they reshape our cherished senses of scholarly responsibility and critical distance (Walton 2015). Mapping the past as a network of relations across heterogeneous collectives of humans and nonhumans makes 'the music itself' return 'with a difference' (Piekut 2014, 213). Significantly, what these interventions promise is not novelty but, as Emily Dolan has written, a kind of renewal, a vehicle to convey musicology *back* to long established passions and rigours, 'whereby we can recast the loving adoration of musical culture as a new kind of worthy intellectual engagement' (Dolan 2015, 91). Inter-dimensionality, remember, brings Cooper not forward but *back* to a time when progress was still possible. The point, it seems, is to get back to the work of winning.

In a more literal sense, the conference *Alternative Histories of Electronic Music*, convened at the Science Museum in London in April 2016, invited its delegates to question 'familiar narratives' of male, elite, Western dominance in the field and create new historiographical spaces for 'little-known individuals, institutions, or artefacts, perspectives

absent from “standard” accounts (however defined), and/or promising methodological approaches such as those found in science and technology studies’ (Mooney et al 2017, 144). Note how the term ‘alternative’ is used here with a distinctly *additive* inflection: the possibilities for concatenation must be infinite – we can no longer place *limits* on our understanding of music history. The organisers are quick to point out that their account is ‘not motivated by a desire to reject previous scholarship on electroacoustic music’s history’, but rather ‘to serve as an illustration that all history is contingent: no account can be complete in every detail; none can accommodate all viewpoints, or interrogate all sources’ (ibid). The consensus seems to be that we might overcome our despair about the bad old days of music and musicology simply by extracting more resources from an ever-expanding archive: we can reject the singularity of the objective gaze and rest well knowing that more will always be better; indeed, that more and better are all we can ever have.

American anthropologist Paul Rabinow has linked the contemporary with an ethnographic turn from ‘reproduction’ to ‘emergence’ (2008). Under this logic, contemporary practitioners no longer orientate society collectively towards the new as did the modernist avant-garde; rather, they practice a kind of ‘secession’ in which they simply ‘stylize’ and ‘reconfigure’ the ‘clustered elements’ of the modern ‘in a recursive manner’ such that novelty arises independently of their goals and concerns (3). Privileging emergence, for Rabinow, means working under the assumption that the future contains an irreducibly open set of possibilities, the shape and meaning of which cannot be deduced from the evidence at hand, or from established distinctions like subject/object and individual/culture. The contemporary here is strictly ‘a significant site of inquiry’ in which ‘older and newer elements are given form and worked together, either well or poorly’ (3). It is a space, ultimately, of ‘claims’ and ‘claimants’ to authority, and the ‘power relations within which and through those claims are produced, established, contested, defeated, affirmed, and disseminated’ (4). Instead of seeking truths about ourselves and the world with which to hold back emergence or structure the future, Rabinow argues, we should resign ourselves to openness and commit to the joyful labour of competitive forecasting and deal-making.

Said another way, the form of the future is the form of probability that directs a two-sided observation as something more or less probable or more or less improbable, with a distribution of these modalities across everything that is possible. The present can calculate a future that can always turn out otherwise. ... With a little distance, experts and counterexperts as types appear to be equally convincing and equally plausible, their assertions about the future equally unconvincing and equally implausible. It is desired that they have transparent interests and values. Their opinions count because we know what they represent. Negotiations can then be defined as an attempt to increase uncertainty to the point that the only remaining reasonable option is communicating with one another. (Rabinow 2008, 59-60)

I pause with this passage because, with the benefit of hindsight, I think that we should all be able to agree that Rabinow’s ‘politics of understanding’ (understanding in the sense of agreement) has far more radical implications than he may have realised when he wrote it. Rabinow here is extending an insight from the late German sociologist and systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, taken from a late lecture from the collection *Observations on Modernity*, published in English translation in 1998. Rabinow is interested primarily in the way Luhmann theorises ‘observation’, a theory that draws heavily on Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s ideas about the self-differentiating and self-preserving capacities of biological systems. Observation, for Luhmann, is reducible to dialectics: to observe is always to draw a

boundary between the system and its environment; observations are thus fundamentally binary in nature, and this is the basis for both scientific knowledge and social critique: new knowledge cannot happen unless one is able to stand outside of the existing field and differentiate the whole system under observation from yet another environment. Essentially, progress for Luhmann depends on second-order observation.³ Rabinow is interested in the way Luhmann theorises what happens to observation in a state Luhmann calls the ‘ecology of ignorance’, a hypothetical time when communication ceases to be orientated towards the new. In Rabinow’s focus on the form of Luhmann’s theory, however, we entirely miss the problem Luhmann is trying to solve. Luhmann theorises his ‘ecology of ignorance’, in which institutions and individuals communicate for the sake of communicating and hope that they will find useful knowledge and pleasant aesthetic forms purely by chance, specifically and exclusively as a solution to the problem of environmental destruction (Luhmann 1998, 75; Luhmann 1986). Luhmann understands an ecology of ignorance to be a desirable project when a society, which for Luhmann is always a closed system with internally differentiating organs and functions, must develop an ethics in relation to ‘external’ problems, such as problems in the physical environment (1986, 6-7). In this condition, realised Luhmann, society can no longer rely on its powers of observation: objectivity is blocked. Better, in this situation, to hope for a solution to ‘emerge’ from the noise of society’s ongoing differentiation, than to hope for the impossible dream of knowing what to do about, for example, climate change. What Rabinow is (perhaps unintentionally) endorsing is thus a kind of eco-totalitarianism: the turning of all politics, regardless of consent or intention, into a kind of rudderless informational energy generation such that everyone on earth might be mobilised to fight against environmental collapse whether they realise it or not simply by miming meaningful debate at higher and higher frequencies. The ‘politics of understanding’ is a vision of an atomised social mass incapable of mobilising dissent, a total suppression of both learning and critique.

It would be useful to have Luhmann’s problem in mind when we read Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth’s (2017) claim to be able to detect ‘empirically’ – manifested, so to speak, in the dynamic intersection and ongoing entanglement of musical discourses, musical instruments, musical practices and musical objects - a condition of contemporaneity that functions like the one in Rabinow’s account. On the surface, it seems a perfectly justifiable proposition. British universities and research councils, at least, have indeed governed themselves in recent decades in a manner not unlike a Luhmannian ecology of ignorance. Instead of contributing to a collective effort to discover the truth about anything in particular, casualized research and administrative workers, especially in the arts and humanities, struggle against each other to make competing claims to relational abstractions such as ‘innovation’, ‘impact’ and ‘excellence’.⁴ Similarly, Born and Haworth see the contemporary as an apt description of the ‘dehistoricized’ state in which they find in the ‘substantive qualities’ of internet-based music communities’ references to modernism and postmodernism. They back their claim up with a comparative analysis of the link ecologies of different generic ‘assemblages’ – modernism and postmodernism, they seem to suggest, have become insipid memes, traded for impact rather than for anything to do with their past promise (646). Arguing against a 30-year-old analysis by Frederic Jameson, and ignoring entirely the intervening secondary literature on the intellectual and cultural history of postmodernity and postmodernism, Born and Haworth call for an ‘urgent revision’ of the ‘linear dualism and historical realism’ of earlier periodizations, and claim to ‘expect... alternative periodizations [to] emerge to unpack what is now being bundled under the “contemporary”’ (647).⁵ Their goal, apparently, is to make their understanding of history more contemporary with the contemporary. They understand the contemporary itself – including, evidently, their own

project – as simply another set of self-organizing molecular claims about the nature of time, claims they nevertheless want to convince us describe structures that are ‘immanent’ in the socio-material relations created as musical objects and practices emerge and clash with one another (612-3).

Unlike Rabinow’s, Born’s account of temporality holds on to modernism’s emphasis on the primacy of attention and experience.⁶ Borrowing terms from phenomenology, she describes musical temporality as differentiated into immanent relations of ‘retention’ and ‘protention’. The terms come from Edmund Husserl, who explained human time perception as an eidetic sequence of impressions and intentions about past, present and future objects, strung together continually as an organism moves about in the world (Zahavi 2003, 83). Reflecting on attention in this way can help to explain how musical objects seem to suggest or refer to each other in the flux of auditory experience. Born’s suggestion, however, is that we can use the same terminology to describe the way musical objects themselves relate *to each other* immanently across time and space, independent from the situated perspective of any listener. This is the point of departure she marks from the Husserlian temporality of cultural production theorised by Alfred Gell, whose work she introduced to music scholars in her 2005 article ‘On Musical Mediation’. In Gell’s (1992) original account, these eidetic temporal impressions are ascribed to culturally situated individuals and not to objects themselves. What distinguishes Gell’s approach from Born’s is his specification that there is additionally a *real* passage of time which should be conceived as an objective chronological series, independent of human retentions and protentions. As Matt Hodges (2008) explains, Gell doubled subjective with objective time in order to provide for difference and relativity between cultures, which he needed to do because he ignored any and all later revisions to Husserl’s work, from Martin Heidegger to the post-structuralists. Ultimately, Gell’s move does not rescue him from the ethnocentricity of both of his conceptualizations. Both the subjective notion of time as experience of succession and the objective notion of time as passage through a real chronological sequence owe their conceptions to Enlightenment accounts of history, cosmology and moral selfhood. Neither Gell nor Born explains why we must understand Husserl’s account as more authoritative than any other: Husserl for them is a brand of authority, perhaps a coat of dazzle paint on the neoliberal juggernaut of ‘invention’. Gell’s move does, however, absolve him of the as yet unanswered challenge which distinguishes Born’s approach: to demonstrate how objects in themselves can be understood to have impressions or intentions about one another, independent of human perception.

Clearly there are important senses in which artefacts help cultures to organise time insofar as they can *represent* contrasting ‘inertial’ and ‘accelerative’ tendencies (Urban 2002, 19-20; Thomas 1989). If human perspectives on time are bounded and real, however, then the actual futures of material things must remain fundamentally unknowable. As Renouvier tried to prove with *Uchronie*, understanding history as an entirely objective unfolding of events makes it impossible to conceive of people as having a meaningful capacity for critique: the chance to take an active hand in solving the problems history sets before them; the chance to fail or fade into cliché. For the purposes of historical explanation, it must also, for example, be possible to differentiate an act undertaken in complete conviction from an act undertaken hesitantly or under compulsion. It may in retrospect appear as if there is a simple two-way relation between an act and the effect it causes in the future. At the moment when an action takes place, however, its potential ramifications are necessarily much less clearly defined. Historical relations are abstractions that can only be discerned from a distance – this is the very nature of risk, and indeed, as Hannah Arendt emphasised, of political phenomena in general. It should trouble us deeply, Arendt argued, whenever we see people trying to act in

the contingent present as if future historical accounts of their effects on others were somehow already written (Arendt 2006, 87-88). Progress is not something humanity pursues with eyes confidently forward. We watch progress happen, Walter Benjamin (1968) imagined, as if it were a violent storm obliterating the past, the blasting force of which propels us irresistibly backwards into a future that, by nature, we cannot see.

It is also surprising that Born should insist so strongly on molecular, thing- and subject-centred levels of agency in historical relations when the sheer volume of data now available surely points to the potential for experiments at molar and conceptual levels of organization. The conversation about music's 'alternative histories' passes in silence over questions about the logic of history. Consider the absence, for example, of methodological counterfactualism, of which Renouvier could be considered a founding figure.⁷ A counterfactual is in essence a logical proposition about the patterns that can emerge from a set of historical evidence. Insofar as one understands history as entailing real occurrences that have real effects, that is, as involving changes of condition, the agents and patients of which are actual subjects, objects or events, then this implies a negative test of causality, which can be expressed in simple subjunctive statements: e.g. if this particular agent had not acted in a particular way, then this particular change would not have happened (Kaye 2010, 38-9; Carr 1961). The same logical device can then be deployed as a thought experiment, allowing historians to test their own certainty about the inevitability or contingency of a specific course of events by hypothesising about how things could have been otherwise had other conditions been met. Contesting the truth of an event, even hypothetically, is clearly a political act, and therefore such experiments are to be used with a certain caution (Evans 2014; Tambolo 2018). But they have seen significant use, particularly in political and economic history, where are used to form hypotheses about the explanatory value of different narrative projects, or to weigh the contributions of particular individuals or groups (Nolan 2016; Ben-Menahem 2016). Counterfactuals should help us distinguish, to draw an example from Nelson Goodman (1955), between things that happen by 'law' and things that happen by 'accident'. An example of a law is the statement 'the entropy of ice is lower than that of liquid water', which supports the counterfactual 'if the object I am examining *were* ice, then its entropy *would* be lower than that of liquid water'. Aesthetic judgements fall more often into the category of accidental regularities. For example, the statement 'Stockhausen is a more famous composer than Koenig' does not support the counterfactual 'if the composer I am studying were Stockhausen, then she would be more famous than Koenig'. If you ran history again, Koenig might come out on top, but entropy would still work the same way. The statement about ice and water describes a law, while the statement about Stockhausen and Koenig rests upon an experientially contingent pattern that could play out in a radically different way under other cultural and historical conditions; there is no natural law of better composing as there is of entropy. Counterfactual thought experiments are obviously of no use in finding new historical evidence, but they can be useful in explaining the evidence already to hand. In this precise logical sense, as political historian Geoffrey Hawthorn put it, success in historiography can sometimes mean 'understanding more and knowing less' (Hawthorn 1991, 37).

Note that I am by no means arguing that counterfactualism offers a panacea against our forerunners' most unattractive preconceptions as diagnosed by music's 'alternative' historians.⁸ I am concerned, however, that the absence of this kind of abstract thinking from our methodological conversation could be symptomatic of much deeper malaise in the music disciplines. To accept music history's partiality as a logical proposition is to undermine established practice almost across the board. Counterfactual argument does not take bets

about what is to come; it *excludes* the reassurance of a contiguous future where expectations simply play out as real relations. It commits the historian to what Jean Wahl once identified, in the thinking of William James, as a ‘metaphysical temporalism’: an understanding that ‘the future is really something non-existent precisely because it exists *qua* future’ (Wahl 1920, 108). In contrast, try to imagine a musician or music scholar surrendering the future of a cherished genre or period. In the search for alternative histories, a more or less stable fantasy of indefinite cultural futurity places strict limits on the scope and resilience of any critique. Perhaps the problem with these alternatives is not that they render the past inaccurately. Perhaps it is that, instead of grappling with the inescapable challenges posed by the present, they swear uncritical allegiance to the ‘Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism’ (Edelman 2004, 4). Perhaps the answer is not to expand or extend so much as to strategically dismantle and try again.

Periodising Neoliberalism

Born and Haworth are certainly not alone in putting forward (albeit perhaps ironically, considering that the contemporary is supposed to attenuate the overall relevance of sequential novelty) speculative claims about potential models for a new ‘period’ in music history. The turn of the millennium seems to have ushered in a sense, at least among certain European and American academics, that the course of history itself had imperceptibly either come to a halt or changed direction at some point in the past. We can detect the effects of this break in mentality in both academic music and academic writing in from around the middle of the 1990s. Turn of the millennium social scientists came to the understanding that progress was simply a matter of tracking competing claims in fields that worked like marketplaces, and thus shifted their attention ‘from looking into the future to looking at how the future as a temporal abstraction is constructed and managed’.⁹ As British sociologist Mike Michael put it, ‘we are only in the present, and in “managing” in the present we deploy representations of the past and the future’ (Michael 2000, 21-2). Since around 2016, speculation has become particularly intense about the periodizing effects of the decline of Soviet communism, on the one hand, and the propagation of neoliberal governmentality across both universities and the music industries, on the other (Brodsky 2017; Rutherford-Johnson 2017; Ritchey 2019).

Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi notes how the capitalist certainty about progress contrasts both with pious Christian tradition in which the end figures as a space of absolute and eternal judgment, and with the Ancient Greek view of prophesy as a cursed endeavour because it impeded on the privilege of the gods (Berardi 2009, 51). In the early 1970s, Bifo suggests, the scope of capitalist representations of the future began to shrink, until by the close of the century they finally retracted altogether (44). For many historians, the 1970s stand out as a decade of crisis both imagined and real: the beginning of the end of the Cold War coinciding with the beginning of the end of the ideal that the State could continue to act as sole guarantor of the collective liberty, equality and prosperity of its citizens (Ferguson 2010; Morgan 2018; Moyn 2018). Similarly, it is in the aftermath of the 1973 Oil Crisis that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) claim to identify the emergence of a quasi-Hegelian ‘New Spirit of Capitalism’: their findings on the absorption of ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ critiques must be understood as anchored in real changes in management ethos over the ensuing two decades. Jean Baudrillard, writing a decade earlier, writes as well of the celebratory hyper-capitalism of the early 1990s as the consequence of a moment when ‘history took a turn in the other direction’ and events began ‘sloping in reverse direction’ (1992, 23).

What has this period in reverse done to contemporary music? Critic Tim Rutherford-Johnson (2017) sees the post-1989 epoch as a relatively autonomous compositional mediation of ‘external’ social and political forces (7). Because ‘music, like any art form, is not immune to events around it’ (8), he argues, ‘technological, social, and political developments can and do influence developments in art in two ways: they either enable them, or they inspire them’ (17). From the Adornian perspective familiar to most music critics, this is of course a very convenient explanation, because one of the things it means is that music’s futures can be mapped out in the already established fashion: all that needs to happen is for contemporary music to continue its negative dialectical dance with new partners in the material base like digital technologies or just-in-time logistical networks (19). The relationship between new music and history remains effectively unchanged – note how Rutherford-Johnson specifies in his book’s title that the concern is not contemporary but ‘modern composition and culture’. ‘New music’ deploys the material resources of the present to carry sedimented critical subjectivity into a more rational future, and modernity extends indefinitely forward. In the introduction to a 2017 forum for the journal *Twentieth Century Music* renewing and reconsidering the periodizing implications of the journal’s scope, David Clarke argues that, whatever our conclusions about when a new era began, we should make sure to conserve the possibility that ‘the will to make music ... may continue to afford subjective non-identity against’ the ‘principle of the commodity and the fluidity of the marketplace’; in other words, that it is ‘all the more urgent that in our discourses about them we grant those musical practices, whatever their sphere, their moment of relative autonomy’ (Clarke 2017, 416-7). In neither Clarke’s nor in Rutherford-Johnson’s vision is there much concern with anything being allowed to escape or transcend our dynamic, open future. From now on, they suggest, there are only criss-crossing continuous lines of ‘influence’ and ‘inspiration’ extending from a venerable Western tradition to an enlarged and diversified field ‘enabled’ by computerised communication networks.¹⁰ This is especially convenient if we wish to avoid dirtying our hands with consideration of the eminently contested ‘posthistorical condition’ that Suhail Malik recognises as being ‘realised’ through the ‘operational logic’ of contemporary art under neoliberalism (Malik 2016, 133-4), or indeed with its apparently less contentious articulation as the ‘ecology of ignorance’ celebrated by Rabinow.

Regardless of whether or not the music disciplines want to own up to *already being* a neoliberal formation in their own right, with all the difficult epistemological, moral and aesthetic self-reflection that this move would entail, it is clear that simply sustaining the struggle to overcome music’s ‘external’ conditions is not a responsible political strategy. As Marianna Ritchey reminds us, relative autonomy, that degree of freedom from social and material constraint that allows enterprising cultural formations to forge new pathways for the circulation of symbolic commodities, is no longer anything particularly threatening to capital; indeed, it is what the neoliberal order promises to everyone and everything as a reward for competitive participation (Ritchey 2019, 12; cf. James 2019). Cultural events that propagate across information networks need not obey the rules of industrial era narrative time, where we can simply wait until a new thing inevitably negates an old thing in a progressing sequence. The same technological infrastructure that has made possible recent liberalizations in the public sphere is also: (a) the most effective means of centralized cultural and political control that human beings have ever imposed on themselves; and (b) a serious epistemological obstacle to the dialectical understanding of historical progress (Galloway 2014; Drott 2018; Cohen 2019; Zuboff 2019). Anglophone translations of Actor-Network Theory tend to attenuate the sense of capture and immobilization implied in the word ‘network’ for francophones. When, for instance, Gaston Bachelard used the term *réseau* (net) in the early 1950s, he meant it in terms of *casting* a net *over* an object of study in order to

stabilize and measure it.¹¹ As Michel Serres notes, a node in a network is not ‘dialectically entangled’ with its neighbouring nodes: it is an intersection of forces, both completely localized and always potentially under the sway of whatever provisional whole should need to harness its energy (Serres 1968; Callon 1990). A network has no historical state other than now; it can represent history but only in a way that excludes actual historicity. Digital objects only persist, pointing towards the future until someone turns them off.¹² Contemporary data protection regulations, where they exist, demand the registration of consent or participation in the form of discrete decisions that give one access or not at various scales of organization. No forwards or backwards; only in or out.

For a few decades after the Second World War, it was fashionable to think of the progress of modernity as a *threat* to human cultural diversity (Johnson 2013; Gilman 2004). To modernize circa 1960 was to standardize and to massify. Today many musicologists deem it necessary to *defend* the modernist ethos against the ‘dilution’ of plurality (Heile 2011, 637). It will take more research to identify the spatiotemporal boundaries of this conceptual transition in the humanities. If we were to plot the process on a timeline from the 1980s to the 2000s, we should see the declining legitimacy of modernist aesthetics in the music disciplines proceed basically in inverse relation with the rise of neoliberal policy making. Rutherford-Johnson draws a correlation between post-1989 aesthetics and the end of the ‘social democratic consensus that had steered the West through postwar reconstruction’ (2017, 6). Consensus, of course, was in part a nationalist myth with limited power to reshape the ideological character of established institutions (Prasad 2006; Garland et al 2012; Davies 2017; Moyn 2018). Curiously, the decades since the advent of Thatcherism have also been marked by a steady increase in government spending on cultural programmes and institutions of all kinds; the problem is that instead of spending its money on bolstering its own capacity to provide services, the state in Britain focuses on bolstering a parasitic class of private and charitable ‘providers’ that it expects to operate in competition with each other – indeed, it frequently enforces that competition as a control mechanism (Offer 2008; Tomlinson 2016). Insofar as neoliberalism has ever corresponded with a coherent set of policy positions – an unwise bet considering that the neoliberal ethos is to *evade* policy at all costs (Harvey 2005; Cahill et al 2018; Zamora and Behrent 2019) – it has manifested predominantly as a strategy for empowering and harnessing cultural and economic interests ‘from below’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Prasad 2006; cf. Hayek 1944). Neoliberalism is not some clever plot to rule the world. It is, by definition, an impudent, generalized refusal to plot or plan *anything* beyond one’s own immediate ‘well-being’ (Scharff 2016; Cabanas 2016).

What would the musical consequences have been had European and North American governments responded to the economic and political breakdowns that began in the mid-1970s with something other than neoliberalism? Centralised planning was still the preferred option of both left and right in the early days. Would a planned economy have managed to steer clear of the excesses of musical ‘postmodernism’ or its zombified simulacrum ‘the contemporary’? Certainly not, if you believed Daniel Bell (1974) or his teacher Fritz Machlup (1962), who like most conservative economists of their generation saw cultural ‘flattening’, ethnic diversity and rising consumerism as inevitable effects of a coming transition in ‘advanced economies’ from industrial manufacturing to information-based services – the pinnacle of Western modernization. Bell believed that, while decentralization could be efficient in many ways, planning was the only way to sustain anything like political equality or authority in a network society (Ampuja and Koivisto 2014). Would a move back to planned economies somehow restart the course of history? Andreas Malm (2018) writes of history returning with a vengeance in the approaching climate catastrophe. McKenzie Wark

(2016) suggests thinking of capitalism itself as already a thing of the past. What is clear is that our slide backwards from the 1970s is not yet slowing. Under these circumstances, the value of petitioning states or universities to encourage further musical sublimations of the neoliberal seems at best profoundly questionable.

Summary

Soon after I joined this journal as Associate Editor in 2015, I began to wonder about the sustainability of its scope. The proposals for special issues which crossed my desk were about music from as far back as the middle of the last century; others were contemporary only in the sense of not referring to any specific period. The present of *Contemporary Music Review* seemed to stretch backwards in time, at least to the 1980s, often earlier. Was contemporaneity, I wondered, simply the period to end all periods, stalled because it faced no new historical conditions? Could contemporaneity be framed positively, as a gesture of reverent acceptance towards the vibrant flux of new music's self-congratulatory 'mobile stasis'? (Born 1995, 326) In contrast with the totalizing visions of Bifo, Born or Rabinow, *Contemporary Music Review* publishes few explicitly predictive claims about the future. Claims to deal with the future of music research more broadly seem content to point backwards to the happy liberal democratic diversity idealized by the generations who unwittingly ushered in the neoliberal era.¹³ The generation of teachers and research workers finishing PhDs in contemporary music today faces a discipline in which reasonable visions for the future have become almost impossible to discern. I accepted long ago that the decision to take a reflexive research interest in the way music scholarship mythologizes democracy made me nearly unemployable in a university music department. As I write this, only two of the five authors whose work appears in this issue have long-term, full-time academic employment. Scholarly and managerial negotiations of contemporary complexity appear to have played a substantial role in the devaluation of our labour.¹⁴

Instead of focusing on generating yet another set of novel symbolic-capital-accruing 'claims' about ever brighter futures, the essays collected here analyse the contemporary as a problem in the present, a matter of ever-present care and concern. As we believe it is with this journal as a whole, we want to show that representation must be at the centre of any problematization of contemporaneity. Academic music research is still linked inexorably to the classical music professions, including musicology, which in most parts of Europe and the Americas are still structured so as to silence voices deviating from the white, middle-class norms of the mid-20th century (see e.g. Madrid 2017; Bull 2019; Ewell 2020). If there is any part that *Contemporary Music Review* can play in this struggle, it is to claim representation as *our problem*, a problem that we inherit as citizens of the so-called West, and a problem that plays out constantly in *our* work and everyday lives. The authors in this issue face the problem of representation as contemporaries – members of the last generation to experience childhood in the 20th century. We share concerns that have become visible only in our lifetimes, just as the concerns we leave behind may become visible only to the next generation (see Mannheim 1929).

Accordingly, the articles in this issue set up a series of 'obstacles' (Bachelard 1953, 11) to the normal run of contemporary musical practice and contemporary music scholarship. We hope to foster a sense of kinship among what Sara Ahmed (2019, 212) calls *nonreproductive agents*: those in contemporary music studies who seek to stop things from

going as they have been going for the past several decades, and as dominant voices would clearly have them continue to go. Alexa Woloshyn's essay depicts the strategic production of 'jaggedly colliding' contemporaneities as weapons against racist expectations about musical modernity in the part of the world currently known as Canada. Woloshyn shows how the fight for an Indigenous classical music poses new questions about representation in contemporary music history and theory. Danielle Sofer examines (albeit in a more strictly analytical register than Rabinow) the contemporaneity of scholars and their discursive apparatus. Sofer's article shows how musicological research tools keep apart contemporary sonic production practices differentiated exclusively by race, and how the privileging of predominantly white European compositional practices operates at the level of metadata. Adam Harper's article explores contemporaneity in terms of liveness and co-presence, especially in the commodified production of the contemporary mythos of 'embodied' contact with digital instruments. Harper draws our attention, moreover, to expressions of contemporaneity relevant in relation to so-called 'new materialisms' and to the engineering of new musical interfaces. Marie Thompson, finally, turns our attention to reproduction itself, both in the sense of contemporary musical representations of reproduction and in the sense of the role of reproduction in the construction of contemporary music and contemporary musical institutions. Reproduction in Thompson's view provides an important critical apparatus against gendered configurations of creativity and innovation.

In this introductory essay, I have reflected upon the construction of the contemporary as theoretical pivot point between the past and the future in music scholarship, and the contemporary as perspective on musical and music-historical constructions. I have also looked at the contemporaneity of neoliberalism and the role of neoliberalism in the periodization of contemporary music. And lastly, I hope to have provided a few reasonable justifications for the contemporaneity of this special issue.

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Notes

¹ On the limits of metaphorical abstractions like causality, directionality and intentionality for understanding the physical universe. See e.g. Roselli 2018; Ladyman and Ross 2013; Bhaskar 2007.

² Renouvier expands on this assertion in his four-volume *Philosophie analytique de l'histoire* (1896-7).

³ Rabinow 2008, 57-66; cf. Luhmann 1998. Although Luhmann uses a uniquely formal biocomputational jargon to describe this process, it should not be understood as unique to cybernetic systems theory. Similar accounts of the structure of critical and scientific knowledge in the contemporary francophone literature had their roots more firmly planted in Marxist dialectical materialism. See Lecourt 1975; Tiles 1984.

⁴ If we take the Luhmannian perspective, then we should think of these abstractions not as externally imposed upon the social sciences and humanities, but as the work of internal responsive configurations, as of course they were in fact (Thrift 1997; Strathern 2000; Barry et al 2008). In Britain, arts and culture subjects in particular tend to attract students with relatively upward class mobility, which may explain their evident lack of immunity to marketization (Bull 2019). Several scholars have already traced the overriding middle-class economic interest of the British humanities back to 19th century liberal utilitarianism and social Darwinism (e.g. Bulaitis 2020; Ahmed 2019; Golding 2013; Soffer 1994).

⁵ A complete list of secondary literature would obviously be too long for one footnote, but I have in mind especially contributions by Born's immediate contemporaries such as Habermas (1987), Connor (1989), Harvey (1992), Anderson (1998) and Ryle and Soper (2002).

⁶ On the modernizing implications of the concern with temporal experience in music and sound see Erlmann 2010 and Grant 2014. Homi K. Bhabha has pointed to the specifically triumphant imperialist implications of the modernist account of temporal experience, implications evident, for example, in the first poem of T. S. Eliot's *4 Quartets* (1943), 'Burnt Norton', which aestheticizes both the metaphor of progress and the subject-centring characteristic of Husserlian time consciousness. See also Bhabha 1994, 338-367; Ahmed 2006.

⁷ Being generous, one could perhaps make an exception for the recent interest in musical counterfactuals, but these are usually couched in a normative language of 'fakes', 'fantasies' or 'forgeries', and considered only as factual objects in an otherwise conventional historiography, for example in recent work like that of Lawson (2017), Reece (2018) and Atton 2019.

⁸ The ultimate ambivalence of counterfactualism is amply illustrated by the controversy surrounding Conservative historian Niall Ferguson's efforts to defend the reputation of British imperialism, such as in *The Pity of War* (1998), where he argues that, had Germany won the First World War, the Second World War would have been avoided and the British Empire would still exist.

⁹ The quote is from Brown, Rappert and Webster (2000, 4). Consider also the rise to dominance of Pierre Bourdieu's 'field' theory, and especially his extension of the market metaphor to the competitive exchange of 'symbolic' and 'cultural capital', amongst nominally left-leaning accounts of musical culture by the mid-1990s, e.g. Straw 1991; Born 1995; Thornton 1995; Frith 1996.

¹⁰ What computation makes impossible or dangerous is obviously of equal or greater concern, especially now that it operates on the level in which identities and communities are constituted. For contrasting views see e.g. Peters 2009 and Bratton 2016.

¹¹ I am thinking in particular of this passage in Bachelard's *Matérialisme rationnel* (1953, 22): 'Le matérialisme factice, la chimie scientifique, le rationalisme des lois inter-matérielles

ont jeté sur le “règne minéral” un réseau de relations qui ne se présentent pas *dans la nature*.⁷ See also Galloway (2004) on the distinction between ‘distribution’ and ‘decentralization’.

¹² In similar terms as Born, but much more specific in scope and shedding her overarching distrust of reason, see Yuk Hui’s (2016) account of digital objects and their ‘tertiary protensions’.

¹³ Nigel Osborne’s (1984, ii) inaugural editorial rehearses this intention quite unequivocally. See also e.g. MacArthur, Lochhead and Shaw 2016. The latter is notably neither explicitly interested in the ‘future’ as a concept, nor explicitly engaged with the relevance of Deleuzian thinking for understanding cultural diversity. The editors neglect to situate Gilles Deleuze as a real (upper-middle class, European, etc.) historical person, and furthermore fail to argue the validity of the book’s exclusively white perspective, which is particularly inexcusable given the centrality of Deleuzian concepts to postcolonial theory, and the centrality of postcoloniality in the Deleuzian canon on music. Cf. Hallward 2001; Weheliye 2005; Bignall and Patton 2010; Burns and Kaiser 2012.

¹⁴ In addition to furnishing prominent theories of the contemporary humanities and social sciences, Born, Strathern and Thrift have also held high profile administrative and consultative roles in European education and research policy.

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