Prelude to Afternoons of Ultramodern Synaesthetes

This second Virtual Special Collection of articles from the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* archives, curated by and featuring an introduction by Brian Inglis, presents approaches to early musical modernism in the period around the First World War.

Within the context of correspondence between Sorabji and Philip Heseltine (whose article of 1918 is discussed), the essay engages with varied themes including gendered identity, women authors, post-tonal harmony, synaesthesia, and orientalism.

JRMA Collections: Prelude to Afternoons of Ultramodern Synaesthetes: Reflecting on Discourses of the Musical Association 1912–1922

Brian Inglis

This themed collection of six articles from the JRMA archives focuses on the decade 1912–1922. While clearly significant historically as encompassing both the height and the hinterland of the First World War; and musically as the genesis of highly influential works by Stravinsky, Schoenberg and others, there is a more specific motivation in choosing this particular epoch. In this period, the Anglo-Parsi composer Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892–1988) actively corresponded with the composer-critic Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock, 1894–1930); Barry Smith and I have recently made an edition of these letters.[1] Sorabji's outpourings are wide-ranging, covering topics running the gamut from the quotidian minutiae of domestic routine, through personal identities and emotional life, to esoteric philosophy and religion (occultist Aleister Crowley makes a memorably described appearance towards the end of the corpus). But much of the content focuses of course on music; its appreciation and aesthetics, as well as other artforms, notably visual art. Both Heseltine and Sorabji made their public debuts as critics, as well as composers, during this period: Heseltine in 1912 at the precocious age of 17 with an article on Schoenberg for the *Musical Standard*[2] (he makes an appearance in the current selection with his paper on 'The Modern Spirit in Music' of 1918); Sorabji in 1920 with an article 'Of Singers' for *The Sackbut* under Heseltine's editorship.[3] The latter publication was preceded by a plethora of letters to the editor on numerous musical topics – some of which, and the context of debates reflected thereby, are included in our edition.

This current issue, then, provides a context for and beside the book, both broader and more narrow. By mirroring the time-period of the Sorabji-Warlock correspondence, their musico-intellectual context is seen through the institutional lens of the Musical Association, rather than though Sorabji's specific subjectivity as a queer person of colour. During these dates, the Musical Association met on Tuesday afternoons – one can imagine after a good lunch, as the essentially critical discourse has something of the flavour of an after-dinner speech. The discussions which ensued hover somewhere between the Q&A of a modern academic presentation and an atmosphere redolent of the gentleman's club. Notwithstanding the latter, there is in the articles across the period a greater gender balance than might have been expected. This being the case, and aiming to foreground forgotten as well as remembered voices, in the selection presented here there is an equal number of articles by women as by male authors. (That said, one of the most striking features to contemporary academic ears, across the articles selected, is the unquestioned use of the male pronoun to denote the human subject. This is particularly discombobulating when utilized by the female authors, for example in Paget and Eggar.)

An overarching concern across the selection discussed below is the earnest desire – at least on the part of the more curious, progressive commentators – to appraise and appreciate modern and 'ultramodern' music on its own terms, not wishing to seem reactionary (a common, not-quite stated trope) while at the same time grappling with the need to explain the music and its value; in particular to account for its harmonic aspect in the context of apparently unaccountable extended and post-tonal languages and structures. And the music *was* modern: as recounted by Sorabji, London was a highly connected and networked, cosmopolitan artistic centre where the most recent works of Strauss, Scriabin, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky could be heard in live performance and studied in score format ('Breitkopf […] stocks nearly everything').[4] (Another contemporaneous article from 1916 is a transcript of a lecture-recital where a talk by Arthur Eaglefield Hull on 'Scriabin's Scientific Derivation of Harmony Versus Empirical Methods' preceded a performance of the said composer's piano music – including the fifth and ninth sonatas – by Arthur Alexander.)[5]

One route to understanding and valuing (excusing, even) modernist music was through reference to other artforms or disciplines – as Eaglefield Hull's paper in fact suggests. Deborah Heckert has shown how the art criticism of Roger Fry provided a route to appreciating modernist compositions in the years 1912–1914.[6] Sorabji too was an avid and regular viewer at London's art galleries and drew parallels between the 'colour harmonies' in contemporaneous art and music. Synaesthesia, of course, provided an existing context for such understanding, whether quasi-scientific and/or poetic: 'the later Sonatas […] exemplify Scriabin's most daring exploitation of his new harmony […]. Most of them were written at Beattenburg [sic; *recte* Beatenberg] near Lake Thun, a spot where some of the most wonderful sunrises and atmospheric effects may be seen; and there is no doubt that Scriabin, in his continual experimenting with the conjunction between Light and Sound, owed much (perhaps even the greater part) of his inspiration to his surroundings.'[7]

Synaesthesia is – even if not explicitly framed as such – foregrounded in the earliest paper here, 'Colour-Music: Experiments in the Educational Value of the Analogy Between Sound and Colour' by (Miss) E. R. Monteith. Evidently a teacher, Monteith expounds on the pedagogical value, particularly with younger children, of introducing a practical symbolic correspondence between pitch and colour. In other aspects recalling the well-worn tonic sol-fa amateur singing notation, this centres on the diatonic scale, forming an arbitrary analogy with the light spectrum. In addition to discrete pitches, Monteith introduces the concept of intervals and simultaneity, and through equating primary colours with the tonic triad the quite sophisticated notion of 'colour harmony'. The 'naturalness' of the equally tempered diatonic scale and its linked tonic triad, of which chromatic notes are 'embellishments', is not questioned. Nor is the source of the said 'variety': 'the East, where colour has always held a unique place, not only for its own sake but for the deep philosophic significance it holds for the Oriental mind'. This pervasive orientalism and essentialism was shared by Sorabji at the time: 'You see being an Oriental I have all the Orientals' colour-sense, in which Englishmen are lacking, and I feel quite at ease and at home in juxtapositions […] at which the ordinary [British] person pretends to be horrified'.[8] Yet Monteith expresses simultaneously a progressive desire to liberate children's sense of symbolic fantasy through creativity and play, in a heady mix of freedom and constraint, quasi-Saussurian semiology, and Baudelairean symbolism.

Thomas Dunhill, author of 'Progress and Pedantry: Some Modern Problems for the Theorist' (1913), was one of Philip Heseltine's teachers at Eton. Also a visiting professor at the Royal

College of Music and later Dean of Music at London University, he is best remembered as a composer. Dunhill tends towards the more conservative end of the critical dilemma outlined above. While politely criticising dryly regulative academic pedagogy (a critique he shares with Monteith), he wishes to assert the value of the canonic repertoire; yet at the same time glimpses the value of relativistic evaluation. At the core of his paper – picked up in the ensuing discussion – is the dichotomy between taxonomic analysis and criticism, including the burgeoning 'appreciation' movement. Yet Dunhill expresses a particular horror of polarised debate, in a manner as applicable to contemporary academic Twitterstorms, concerning the 'storm in a teacup' that he refers to in the pages of *Music Student* magazine (see p. 102), concluding:

> Intolerance is no sure sign of pedantry, nor is it a symptom of progress. But intolerance is common enough in both camps, and we must all beware of it […]. There must come upon us at times a faint foreboding that many perplexing things […] for which we feel scant sympathy, have their roots in human nature, and possess a very real and indelible meaning.

Mary Paget (1915) also argues for relativistic evaluation through exploring the history of music criticism and reception, focusing more on the listener. Fascinatingly, animal listeners are included through the reports of Thomas Matheson ('pigs will go anywhere after a zither', p. 70). Beyond criticism and reception, Paget delves into the history of musical *practice* (or as she puts it the 'rhythm of criticism') through composition and performance, leading to musings on historical weak and strong work concepts (though not of course expressed in those terms). Paget's paper's own critical reception – by chairman T. Lea Southgate – betrays the discourse of the English Musical Renaissance, through Southgate's concern with defining Englishness musically (including through folksong), while also questioning aspects of canonicity (from Handel versus Arne, to Beethoven versus the then-recently de-canonized Hummel). H. H. Statham iterates a common contemporaneous critique of the 'ultramodern school of composition': 'There seems a general want of melodic inspiration' (p. 85), which bears comparison with conservative critic Hugh Arthur Scott's complaint the following year of a lack of 'definite melody' in modernist music.[9]

Heseltine's 'The Modern Spirit in Music' (1918) picks up many of the threads left trailing by previous commentators, and adds a pertinent focus on the *sound* of music. The common progressive call for relativistic evaluation is here combined with the claims of aesthetic autonomy, and a proto-Foucauldian identification of secondary literatures as more typical of the 'spirit of the age'. Heseltine picks up a theme from his former teacher Dunhill's paper regarding the dichotomy between taxonomic structural analysis and a more holistic aesthetic (even hermeneutic) 'appreciation'. As one would expect from Peter Warlock, the sense of historical awareness is striking for the period, particularly of pre-eighteenth-century music. Likewise expected is his implied critique of the nascent British (or English) Musical Renaissance and other manifestations of musical nationalisms (pp. 126, 127, 129), and more (though not completely) explicit questioning of the attention lavished on Lord Berners: 'The production of such miraculously beautiful and perfectly wrought compositions as John Taverner's Mass on the "Westron Wynd" melody excites far less attention than […] the sensational discovery of a young gentleman with a title who has written a funeral march for a canary, and another for a rich aunt in what is called a "futuristic" style' (p. 126). Less predictable, perhaps, is his journey from spirit to the spiritual, given the rumbustious reputation of his alter ego Warlock (p. 122).

Katharine Eggar's 'The Subconscious Mind and the Musical Faculty' (1920) leavens the largely critical and historical discourse of the other papers with approaches based on musical sociology, (auto-)ethnography and psychology, albeit speculative rather than experimental. Unsurprisingly for the time, Freud and his psychoanalytic method loom large; more intriguing is Eggar's invocation of Maria Montessori, the pioneer of early-years education, which echoes Monteith in the concern with avoiding 'repression' (Montessori had visited England for the first time the previous year).

Composer Eugene Goossens, in 'Modern Developments in Music' (1921), recalls again the aesthetic polarisation which alarmed Thomas Dunhill – exacerbated in the intervening seven years – at the level of production (i.e. composition) rather than reception. His emphasizing of the importance of harmony and chromaticism echoes the 'definite melody' episode, and he is at the progressive end of the approach which seeks to provide a theoretical account or justificatory explanation of the new music. The familiar recourse to synaesthesia is duly deployed through reference to 'glittering steel-blue harmonies' (p. 63), as is reference to the aesthetics (and a faint echo of the rhetoric) of Futurism, along with a description of the more pared-down modernist aesthetic nascent in the 1920s (p. 64).

A new element is provided by Goossens's wider frame of reference – he acknowledges the existence of 'a great section of the British public' (p. 66) beyond the exclusive musical and critical space to which the other papers apart from Monteith's are addressed. Goossens's attack on the contemporaneous commercial music industry is however based on an exclusive notion of high musical taste and autonomous musical development. An implicit acknowledgement that the patronage model which supported this had crumbled (without being shored up by any broader-based public support) may be glimpsed in his positive references to new opportunities for dissemination afforded by recording technologies and film, and collaboration with sibling artforms in theatre and dance. His final swipe is as pertinent now as it was then:

> if *above all* we can forget occasionally the word British and think of Art as a thing cosmopolitan and international, without geographical borders, and thriving on the interchange of ideas of every nation – then the next few years will show us a condition of music and musical art […] in which all that is best and finest will receive due recognition (pp. 68–9).

As the successors of Goossens's audience on that January Tuesday just over a hundred years ago, his salvo hurled across the century which promises that the salvation of music and the arts belongs to us seems both inspiring and daunting.

Featured Articles

E. R. Monteith, 'Colour-Music: Experiments in the Educational Value of the Analogy Between Sound and Colour', *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 39 (1912), 85–102.

Thomas F. Dunhill, 'Progress and Pedantry: Some Modern Problems for the Theorist', *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 40 (1913), 95–115.

Mary M. Paget, 'Some Curiosities of Musical Criticism', *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 42 (1915), 69–88.

Philip Heseltine, ‘The Modern Spirit in Music’, *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 45 (1918), 113–34.

Katharine Eggar, ‘The Subconscious Mind and the Musical Faculty’, *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 47 (1920), 23–38.

Eugene Goossens, ‘Modern Developments in Music’, *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 48 (1921), 57–76.

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[1] *Kaikhosru Sorabji's Letters to Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock)*, ed. Brian Inglis and Barry Smith (Routledge, 2020).
[2] *The Musical Standard*, 21 September 1912.
[3] *The Sackbut*, 1/1 (May 1920), 19–22.
[4] *Sorabji's Letters*, ed. Inglis and Smith, 49.
[5] A. Eaglefield Hull, ‘Scriabin's Scientific Derivation of Harmony Versus Empirical Methods’, *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 43 (1916), 17–28 (p. 23). The previous year Eaglefield Hull had authored the influential textbook *Modern Harmony: Its Explanation and Application* (Augener, 1915).
[6] Deborah Heckert, ‘Schoenberg, Roger Fry and the Emergence of a Critical Language for the Reception of Musical Modernism in Britain, 1912–14’, in *British Music and Modernism 1895–1960*, ed. Matthew Riley (Ashgate, 2010), 49–66.
[7] ‘Scriabin's Scientific Derivation of Harmony Versus Empirical Methods’, *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 43 (1916), 17–28 (p. 23).
[8] *Sorabji's Letters*, ed. Inglis and Smith, 72.
[9] H. H. Statham, ‘The Melodic Poverty of Modern Music’, *Musical Times* 880/57 (1 July 1916).