

THE FALL AND RISE OF 'MODERNISM'

As a professional strategy within our various institutions in which distinct disciplines are placed in competition for resources, it seems prudent to continue to reject the image of musicology as trailing (by a century or so as some would have it), other disciplines (art history, linguistics, anthropology...) Such a rejection, however, is not always easy to maintain: these thoughts were set off in the midst of my idle dreaming at the most recent seminar at Westminster, and partly in response to Dai's call for thoughts on 'alternative histories', and I hope they are worth sharing, if only to discover whether my experience is at all unusual.

Naturally I cannot any longer be sure, but it seems that my undergraduate and taught

postgraduate years in the 1970s were marked by the total absence of the term 'modernism',

'Modern' yes, but there is a crucial difference, which it might be worth recovering. The word 'modern' is, of course, not. Prior to the Renaissance, the 'modern' was already opposed to the 'ancient'. From then to the nineteenth century, it meant just 'of the present', beginning to acquire

connotations of disavour which grew in strength in the present century. It is its suffixes which seemed transparent to my education. For Raymond Williams, to 'modernize' means the bringing

up-to-date of an essentially old institution, as opposed to the 'modern' which is wholly new

(Williams 1985:208-9). Similarly, for Harrison and Wood (1992), modernization concerns "those

processes of scientific and technological advance which caused the world to manifest itself differently than it had hitherto... the growing impact of the machine", while the related modernity

describes "the social and cultural condition of these objective changes: the character of life under changed circumstances". Modernism is, then, "the representation of that inchoate experience of

the new" (op.cit.:126).

For many writers, modernism is dated to the work of the symbolist poet Charles

Baudelaire, around 1848. David Harvey appropriates Baudelaire's original formulation in insisting

on modernism's paradoxical habitation of both the "ephemeral and fleeting with the eternal and

immutable" (Harvey 1990:10). George Steiner prefers his compatriots Mallarmé (the

point of origin is reasonably secure. So, why was I made aware of music which was 'of the

present' (and a rather long one at that), but without the informing ideology? I find the

