

Ideas of the New

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“Nothing New? Understanding Newness in Medieval and Contemporary Music”

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The idea of the new is inhabited by contradictions; inseparable, as it apparently is, from “the old”. As the quotation from *The Devil’s Dictionary* on the present conference’s website says, “there is nothing new under the sun, but there are lots of old things we don’t know”. “Nothing new under the sun”, perhaps, yet we have to face the contradictory fact that under that same sun everyday “a new day dawns”. It’s the second half of that quote from *The Devil’s Dictionary* that concerns me today, though, the “lots of old things we don’t know”; do we *really* not know them? have we simply forgotten them? or have they been repressed - in the psychoanalytical sense - or marginalised, in the political sense - by social and historical pressures respectively? It is still difficult for us to look at “the new” without the ideological and conceptual frames and filters that belong to a historical period which *may not be ours* any longer. Modernity, and its variously defined *modernisms*, seem to have made the idea of “the new” their own, placing “the new” so much centre stage that anything not “new” has tended to be pushed into the wings; what Walter Benjamin identified, in the context of surrealism, as “the outmoded”.

Many of us, when confronted by the new, struggle, initially, to make sense of it. Typically we triangulate meaning, as it were, from the twin points of our personal memories and our cultural competences - to anchor the new experience in relation to the already known. Confronted with “the new” the phrase “well, at least it’s different” shunts the new off into the flexible category of “the different”, from where, once categorized *as* “different”, it can be dealt with later. And this conflating of “difference” with “dealing with later” is integral to Derrida’s neologism *differance* - a differing and a

deferring that is never completely achieved, any sense of a signified behind the signifier (in Saussurean terms), any final and ultimate meaning, being infinitely deferred.

We might for a moment, then, place a hold on “the different”, as one possible destination, placement, or marker, of “the new”.

Difference, though, is a loaded term that also carries within itself an ambiguity, an instability, an undecideability. The word “different” is associated, in English at least, with two prepositions that, on the face of it, move in opposite directions - *from* and *to* - but in association with the word “different, we find that rather than naming opposites, they combine in a “to-ing-and-fro(m)-ing”, a dynamic process of differing that moves between points, or circulates within a given space; *from* and *to* position the word “different” in terms that are bi-directional, and as different differences differentiate themselves, a network emerges - which has, of course, been proposed as one way to think of a language, or a culture. Within this structure of understanding, “the new” in any absolute and non-contingent sense is an impossibility. Networks within culture arise not *ex nihilo* but emerge and grow from established points. New connections, or what I will be discussing as “inventions”, depend, for their emergence, on existing knowledge and modes of understanding, and for their subsequent and necessary assimilation into a culture.

If the new is “different”, this draws us towards Derrida, and his *differance* that conflates difference and deferral - the structure of language is dependent on systematic difference, the meaning of language is always deferred. His essay “Psyche: Invention of the Other” is concerned with the idea of the new, formulated in terms of “invention”. Any invention must be “evaluated, recognized, and legitimized by someone else, by an other who is not one of the family: the other as member of a social community and of an invention” (pp. 4-5) - “an invention can never be *private* once its status as invention, let us say its patent or warrant, its manifest, open, public identification, has to be certified and conferred” (p. 5). Invention, is thus always in relation to a social “other” that, in effect, countersigns it.

This locates the status of an invention *as* invention in relation to its future - its validation after the event, as it were. But Derrida also draws attention to the original ambiguity in the meaning of “invention” as something that is not only made for the first time (its familiar modern meaning), but is also something discovered, unveiled, with the logical supposition that in order to be discovered, something invented - something new - must have been, in a sense, already there. “Invention”, then, is positioned in relation to past and future, advent and futurity.

SLIDE 2: “Never . . . does an invention take place, without an inaugural event. Nor is there any invention without an advent, if we take this latter word to mean the inauguration for the future of a *possibility* or of a *power* that will remain at the disposal of everyone. Advent there must be, because the event of an invention, its act of inaugural production, once recognized, legitimized, countersigned by a social consensus according to a system of conventions, must be valid *for the future*. It will only receive its status of invention, furthermore, to the extent that this socialization of the invented thing is protected by a system of conventions that will at the same time ensure its inscription in a common history, its belonging to a culture: to a heritage, a patrimony, a pedagogical tradition, a discipline, a chain of generations. Invention *begins* by being susceptible to repetition, exploitation, reinscription” (p. 6)

And there is a resonance of that sense of movement I mentioned earlier in relation to “different from” and “different to” in the etymological roots of “invention” and “advent”, whose common root is the verb *venire*; to come - thus: *invenire*; to come upon, and *advenire*; to come to.

If we take “invention”, then, as one of the possible modalities for “the new”, something can be an invention - can be new - only insofar as it has a past *and* a future; a past that can be constructed as an advent to its appearance - this advent might attract the name “history”, under certain conditions - and a future that is a function of its having been

socio-culturally sanctioned *as* invention; something that *was* invented, and has been taken up into a culture.

Webern's "The Path of the New Music"

Many of the themes in "The Path to the New Music", a series of eight lectures given by Anton Webern in 1932-1933, make strange reading for us today. Though psychoanalytical literary theorists such as Shoshana Felman, Maud Ellman, and Jacques Lacan warn against attempting to psychoanalyse the *writer* of a text on the basis of that text, the almost obsessive insistence on the "naturalness" of a particular set of historical, musical materials in Webern's text does make us wonder if something is being repressed.

SLIDE 3: ". . . the things treated by art in general, . . . are not 'aesthetic', but . . . a matter of natural laws, [such] that all discussion of music can only take place along these lines" (Webern, p. 11). If, according to Goethe, ". . . colour is natural law as related to the sense of sight . . . one can say that music is natural law as related to the sense of hearing" (Webern, p. 11).

". . . one must approach [great works of art] . . . in the same way one has to approach works of nature; with the necessary awe at the secrets they are based on, at the mystery they contain" (Webern, p. 11).

Webern claims to demonstrate how Western triadic harmony, and the diatonic scale, arise from the natural overtone series, claiming forcibly that ". . . as a material it accords completely with nature" (Webern, p. 13) - *completely???*

As a claim for literal truth the proof offered is blatant nonsense, and his logic gets even riskier as he implies a historically necessary process by which musical material becomes ever more distanced from triadic harmony as the more acoustically complex parts of the overtone series are explored. Dissonances, and eventually microtonality, are "contained within the notes that nature provides" (Webern, p. 16).

However, although the *literal* claims to truth that Webern makes here do not really stand up to much careful scrutiny, there is, nevertheless, a strong resonance with the idea of “invention” as “discovery”. As metaphor - rather than literal truth - Webern’s insistent invocations of “the natural”, outline a narrative of scientific discovery that contrasts significantly with the usual, mid-twentieth-century history of Great Composers (though there’s plenty of this in “The Path to the New Music” too).

SLIDE 4: “. . . just as a researcher into nature strives to discover the rules of order that are the basis of nature, we must strive to discover the laws according to which nature, in its particular form ‘man’, is productive” (Webern, p. 11).

For Webern “the new” need not be restricted to “the now”

“. . . new music is that which has never been said [sic]. So new music would be what happened a thousand years ago, just as much as what is happening now, namely, a music that appears as something never said before” (Webern, p. 12).

For Webern, then, “the new” arises in terms of what Derrida has called “an advent” or “an inaugural event”, and as with Derrida’s insistence on the social validation of invention, countersigned by the culture in which it emerges, so does Webern appeal for the twelve-tone method to be countersigned and validated by calling upon his culture, *qua* past precedent, to validate the new. The new is immanent in the already existent, an inescapable evolutionary destiny, and this allows for the reappearance of the idea that “the new” is something waiting there to be discovered, an idea that had been sidelined, just as its sense in the word “invention” itself had been sidelined from the seventeenth century. In 1932, Webern’s assertion that “. . . the diatonic scale wasn’t invented, it was discovered” (Webern, p. 15), might not make quite the sense it did in 1932.

It is no coincidence that the modern meaning of invention - and of the new - as something humanly constructed, rather than found, emerges in or around the seventeenth century when the notion of authorship in its modern sense was (arguably) also emerging, and

when scriptural accounts of the world were being superseded by secular, scientific ones. Prior to this historical moment the world had been made by a creator-God, but God had not manifest Creation in its totality, and Man's role was, therefore, to reveal this totality. The dual notion of invention makes perfect sense here - Man does not "create", but "unveils, reveals, comes upon". However, this notion that nothing can be absolutely new because God has already created everything in the world, begins to shift, from the seventeenth century, towards the modern, enlightenment world view that increasingly puts man - rather than God - at the centre of things. "Discovery" as such transfers itself into imperial and industrial activities, and the idea of invention grounded in discovery and revelation is replaced by a notion of invention that results from an individual, human, genius, who takes all the credit. The emergent concept of authorship, and its claim to intellectual property rights would be weakened if that property was, in a sense, already there for the finding - though this is, of course, a complicated example, given the history of colonialism and the current copyrighting of biological matter, but there is not really sufficient time to explore the nuances of the argument that arises at this point.

It is interesting, then, that in that historical moment that perhaps more than any other claims "the new" for itself - early-twentieth-century modernity - one of those "old things we don't know" should return. Even allowing for wit, Stravinsky's "What gives the artist real prestige is his imitators", and Picasso's oft quoted "I do not seek. I find", along with Webern's insistence on the "natural", can be read as symptoms of a resituation of the new in relation to its own historical situatedness.

Lawrence Kramer, amongst others, has pointed out the connection of the idea of "originality" with the emergence of "commodification"; "genius" is very much a mercantile phenomenon, closely related to the rise of capitalism and ideas of intellectual property, authorship, and the commercial value of the author's productions. Though the modernist "Shock of the New" may in one sense be a critique of bourgeois values, the idea of "the new" *qua* product is fundamentally grounded in the very value systems of individual authorship and copyright constitutive of bourgeois culture. The refusal of repetition, and the insistence on technical and aesthetic innovation as the measure of

musico-cultural worth, has been, and in many respects still is, an unchallenged fundamental in the general value system of the arts. Whether concealed behind the mask of modernist “artistic necessity”, “negative dialectics”, or Webern’s quasi-biological teleology, or more explicitly displayed in popular culture’s latest “new thing”, “the new”, figured in terms of originality, accrues cultural value.

The psychoanalytically-informed ideas of denial and repression with respect to the past reach a kind of zero point in the period immediately after the Second World War. Works such as Boulez’s *Structures Ia*, Cage’s *4’33”*, and Schaeffer’s *Cinq Etudes de Bruit* seem to be striving to, in a sense, “reinvent” what music might be. They have certainly been represented as such in sufficient musicological accounts to have acquired a certain cultural acceptance.

Free improvisation - searching for the new

However, such claims are quickly consumed in the same contradictions that inhabit “the new”. Alan Durant writes that for “quite a number of contemporary improvisers . . . improvisation is a human activity which gains value exactly from the fact that it constructs . . . no ensnaring conventions or intrinsically detrimental value judgements; it frees the human from the social” (Durant, p. 270). Derek Bailey’s term “non-idiomatic improvisation”, in its avowed distancing of itself from stylistic idioms, tends to underwrite such claims, though Bailey’s insistence on the collective nature of improv suggests that it is freedom from “the cultural”, configured in terms of conventions and styles, that he is concerned with, rather than “the social” as such. John Cage, however, rejected improvisation because rather than liberating us from the social, he saw it as a site of human expressivity, personality, and learned or remembered material. At particular moments in his career, the only guarantee of “the new” for Cage was, effectively, to set up control systems that should effectively prevent - legislate against, if you like - any culturally determined musical structures. As Cage famously put it, Satie and Webern - two composers who are otherwise rarely coupled together - had “the only new idea since Beethoven”, that idea being that the fundamental parameter of music is duration. Silence is integral to music, and because silence can *only* have duration (not pitch or timbre), then

it follows that duration can be said to apply to all instances of music, whereas pitch and timbre only apply to selective moments of music. Of course, Cage is projecting this “new idea” onto Satie’s and Webern’s work from his own, finding justification in the past for a present condition, rather as Webern had projected back through musical history *his* need for serialism to be seen as the natural progress of musical material; in both cases, of course, a selective history is reconfigured as *telos*.

Cage and Webern, in common with most modernists, make claims for their versions of “the new” that distance them from what might be thought of as “the cultural”, explicitly with Cage, and implicitly for Webern for whom “the new” is allied to the natural, the traditional binary opposite of the cultural. We can find this rejection of “the cultural” in favour of “the natural” in several of the discourses of “the new” from the second half of the twentieth century. The theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, for example, rejects that which is culturally “learned” in favour of a specialized conception of the training of the actor that leads them to develop a sense of *physical intelligence*. Grotowski’s

SLIDE 5: “main principle is . . . react - react with the body”.¹ “. . . Bodily activity comes first, and then vocal expression . . . First you bang on the table and afterwards you shout!”,² “. . . thought must be excluded. The pupils are to speak the text without thinking.”³ “. . . If you think, you must think with your body You must think with the whole body by means of actions”.⁴

Here thought is on the side of the culturally already known, against which the actor’s body is figured as not only allied to the “natural”, but also to “the new”. Close in spirit, if not praxis, Stockhausen writes that

“[t]he most profound moments in musical interpretation and composition are those which are not the result of mental processes, are not derived from what we already know, nor are they simply deducible from what has happened in the past”.

¹ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 185.

² Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 183.

³ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 176.

⁴ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 204.

Thinking is an obstacle to the state of consciousness required by his “Intuitive Music”; he writes that “acting, or listening, or doing something *without thinking* is the state of pure intuitive activity, not requiring to use the brain as a control”.⁵

The choice of the term “intuitive”, with its connotations of a “natural” or biological ground is significant. Text-scores such as *Aus den Sieben Tagen* carry injunctions to expand one’s consciousness, in conjunction with explicitly physical, material factors - to “Play a vibration in the rhythm of . . .”.⁶

In free improvisation, which emerged at roughly the same time, one critical strategy against the allegations that “anyone could do that” has been to neutralize the criticism at source by figuring improvisation as something that comes “naturally”. For Bailey improvisation is “a *natural part* of being a performing musician”,⁷ “a basic instinct, an essential force in sustaining life”.⁸ As something “natural”, improvisation is imagined in terms that situate it outside of the generally cultural; Bailey writes that

SLIDE 6: “[t]ransient musical fashion . . . is unlikely to have any effect on something as fundamental as the nature of improvisation”;⁹ “as regards method, the improviser employs the oldest in music-making. . . . it pre-dates any other music - mankind’s first musical performance couldn’t have been anything other than a free improvisation”.¹⁰

In predating any other music, improv is positioned, logically, as pre-cultural. We can see a pattern emerging: the “new”, for Grotowski, Stockhausen, and Bailey, is grounded in “the natural”, which is doubly figured as something biologically embodied, and also prior to or outside of what is considered to be “the cultural”.

For all three “thinking” and “memory” are markers of “the cultural”, against which they appeal to “the natural”, a fundamental state lost under the regimes of rationalism and

⁵ *Stockhausen on Music*, p. 124 *needs refs!!! (emphasis added)*

⁶ *ref to Aus den Sieben Tagen score!!!*

⁷ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 142 [emphases added].

⁸ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 140.

⁹ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. xiii.

¹⁰ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 83

linguistically ordered thought: Nature and the body, in their arguments, come before Culture and the mind.

Derrida

SLIDE 7: “The enterprise of returning ‘strategically’, ‘ideally’, to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. . . . is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent” (Literature Inc., p. 236).

The “most potent” of the metaphysical consequences of binaristic thinking is the notion that the dominant side of the equation is originary, *ex nihilo*, ideal and pure, temporally and epistemologically preceding the subordinate side, which is figured in terms of a degeneration, or a fall. The expulsion from Eden is thus a paradigm case for Western culture, and in their different particular articulations Webern, Cage, Grotowski, Stockhausen and Bailey all play to this agenda. What counts is the originary, the *ex nihilo*, the unprecedented, that which “has not been said”, which is not already known, not thought about, not part of culture (yet) because it is intuitive and natural.

For Derrida aletrous binarisms structure “the metaphysics of presence”, which presupposes that there is thought - primary and originary - which precedes language, and which is then put into language and communicated. Speech seems, to the speaker who hears themselves speak, to be coterminous with thought, and thus appears closer to the presence of the the thought than writing, which merely transcribes speech. However, no matter how much speech might be claimed to be closer to the truth of thought than writing in the name of a “metaphysics of presence”, speech is no less structured by language than writing, and therefore however close to an originary “truth” it might imagine itself to be, this truth cannot come before its articulation. As Jonathan Culler puts it:

SLIDE 8: “A word’s meaning within the system of a language . . . is a result of the meaning speakers have given it in past acts of

communication. . . . the structure of a language, its system of norms and regularities, is . . . the result of prior speech acts. However, when we take this argument seriously and . . . look at the events which are said to determine structures, we find that every event is . . . already determined and made possible by prior structures. The possibility of meaning something by an utterance is already inscribed in the structure of the language. . . . however far back we try to push, even when we try to imagine the “birth” of language . . . we discover that we must assume prior organisation, prior differentiation” (Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 95-96).

Derrida, however, is not the only one to hope for the dissolution of the binaristic logic which has imposed (often unconscious) limits on Western philosophy. Recent theories of consciousness have not been content to reduce the body to Nature - or to its scientific avatar, biology - and leave Culture to the mind. Just as Derrida’s deconstruction is not content merely to reverse the terms of a binarism, but to critically dissolve the binaristic ground upon which the metaphysics of presence stands, Gibson’s “environmental consciousness” and Varela’s “enactive cognition” fundamentally problematize the notion of binaristic thinking, in particular that body and mind are separable paradigms, and that embodied consciousness is separable from the environment in which it exists; “the *body is in the mind*. Mind is rendered possible by bodily sensations and actions, from whose patterns it emerges At the same time, the *mind is in the body*, in the sense that mind is coextensive with the body’s neural pathways and the cognitive templates they comprise”.¹¹

Varela questions not only the idea that consciousness is fundamentally concerned with *mental* representations, but the “three fundamental assumptions” that stand behind it:

SLIDE 9:

¹¹ Borgo, p. 42, citing Bowman, Wayne, “Cognition and the Body: Perspectives from Music Education”, in Bresler, Liora (ed.), *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds: Towards Embodied Teaching and Learning (Place of publication not known!!!:Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004)*, p. 36)

- that we inhabit a world with particular properties, such as length, color, movement, sound, etc. . . .
- that we pick up or recover these properties by internally representing them . . .
- that there is a separate subjective “we” who does these things.

Against this he proposes an *enactive* cognition, “to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is rather the enactment of a world *and a mind* on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs”.¹²

If consciousness is enactive - something we do - then we do this within limits set not only physiologically but also culturally. When I use the violin in free improvisation what I do passes through, and is formed by, personally internalized cultural filters of sonority, history, learning, expectation, listening, watching, and acting. I have often tried to understand my improvising in terms of intuitive physical reactions to the sonic gestures coming from my fellow improvisers, in which I have imagined my violin as a scientific device, a seismograph of my inner state, or even a lie detector. However, the neutrality attributed to such an instrument is delusional. The violin is not - and can never be - a neutral measuring device; it is saturated with cultural meanings, as an object as much as as a sound. From the point of view of enactive consciousness, the violin is not simply a physical object with finite properties but something that is only fully constituted *as* a violin in its inter-relationship to my bodily consciousness (my ears and right forearm are as much a part of the violin bow, in cultural terms, as the wood and horse hair) and the culture inside of which this bodily consciousness has emerged.¹³

Improvisation, then, is not originary at all, is not “new” in that sense, but represents a play across memory, history, embodiment, and a culturally situated consciousness. The

¹² Varela et al, p, 9

¹³ “Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to

conditions of possibility of improvisation are the palimpsests of what music *is* or *has been*. In terms of a theory of an enactive consciousness that refuses the separation of the mind from the body, or the self from its material/cultural environment, these palimpsests are multisensory and widely distributed. Alan Durant has observed how our bodies and personal histories can be figured as a form of “psychical ‘notation’ or ‘score’”,¹⁴ and this resonates strongly with Culler’s interpretation of Derrida cited earlier, that “however far back we try to push . . . we must assume prior organisation, prior differentiation”. Such a - dare we say it - ontological condition of “Music” sets up the possibility of something - an improvisation, for example - to *be* music. Might we imagine, then, that an enactive model of consciousness allows for a similar deconstruction of binaristic thought as that which might “in another place” be termed intertextuality. This is not to claim that enactive cognition and intertextuality are interchangeable, but rather that they name and account for, in different cultural and conceptual registers, models of “the new” - and the possibility of “the new” - that take critical account of claims that distance “the new” from “the cultural” that are no longer sustainable. To think of improvising as a site where texts of all sorts coincide through the (embodied and enactive) consciousness of the improviser is to unseat improvisation from its privileged claims to presence or origins, and to return it to its proper place, as a cultural practice.

Pre-Natal and Post-Mortem: The Impossible New

Having returned improvisation to its proper place, I’d like to conclude with the idea of the return, which, on the face of it, is the opposite of “the new”. Lawrence Kramer has used the idea of what he calls musical “revenants” to critique, in explicitly Derridean terms, “the romantic and modernist ideal of originality”.

- **SLIDE 10:** “Revenants do not have to worry about originality. What they bring is not difference, but that estrangement within sameness by which sameness becomes compelling. Not difference, but what Derrida named *différance*, the continuous distinction and deferral of the same from itself. . . . They suggest that there is no need to seek difference

make his own. . . . the world into which he is growing is one that is humanly constituted through language and custom” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 13). *needs full refs as first citation*

from the past because that difference is always already present, in the present. . . . The same returns in order to live on - differently”.

He continues:

“But it is not by accident that I am writing about ghosts. The living on I spoke of, at its outer limit, occurs in the closest proximity to death. Perhaps this is because death above all is what mandates living on, what necessitates it: if the same were not fated to disappear, to be absent not from one place but from every place, there would be no need to demand the return of the same to its own place, no need to piece together the traces of the same like Isis patching together the bits and pieces of the dismembered and disseminated Osiris” (Kramer, “Ghost Stories: Cultural Memory, Mourning, and the Myth of Originality” (pp. 263-264)

I take Kramer’s words as a starting point to speculate on what unprecedented originality might be. If the moment of each of our deaths marks the beginning of a world that does not have us in it, then an entirely unprecedented originality - an absolute “new”, let us say - would mark the end of a world that did *not* have this “original” thing in it. This would be an “impossible” and, to us, entirely “other” invention; we could not know it, just as we cannot “know” death. As Elizabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin put it

SLIDE 11: “Perhaps the most obvious thing about death is that it is always only represented. There is no knowing death, no experiencing it and then returning to write about it, no intrinsic grounds for authority in the discourse surrounding it. As Kenneth Burke has written, no one can “write of death from an immediate experience of it, the imaging of death necessarily involves images not directly belonging to it . . . [It lies] beyond the realm of such images as the living body knows” (Bronfen and Goodwin, p. 4)

¹⁴ (Durant, in Norris, p. 273)

The absolutely new, that which truly was not in the world in any shape or form prior to its initiation, is also “beyond the realm of such images as the living body knows”. What we might call the “pre-natal” with respect to the new, and the post-mortem with respect to ourselves, are both impossible knowledges. Like vectors travelling in different directions, Death and the absolutely new are mirror images of one another. If the absence that is death makes the revenant necessary, post-mortem, as Kramer suggests, then we might imagine that the pre-history of the new serves a similar purpose - to represent to ourselves these impossible possibilities, and to make them bearable.