Arnold Whittall and the Perils of Transcontinental Serialism

Arnold Whittall: *Serialism* (Cambridge Introductions to Music). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Review Article by Christian Carey

Introduction

Arnold Whittall is Professor Emeritus of Music Theory and Analysis at King's College London. Apart from one book on nineteenth-century music[1] his musicological research has principally focused on the twentieth century. Perhaps his best known book is *Music Since the First World War*[2] which, after being published in three editions, was substantially revised and republished as *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*.[3] His latest book, *Serialism,* part of the Cambridge University Press Introductions to Music series, seeks to distill the history, techniques, and polemical arguments surrounding serialism into a single-volume introduction.

Given the wide range of figures involved, the intricacies of the subject matter, and the controversies surrounding serialism's reception, Whittall has set for himself quite a challenge. He ups the ante by arguing for a broader definition of the genre, suggesting that "tonality's adaptation and survival are intricately bound up in serialism's adaptation and survival."[4] While taking account of the book's strengths and weaknesses as an introductory volume, this essay will also evaluate some of the potential ramifications of commingling serialism with broader post-tonal practice, and explore how this impacts both study and reception of twentieth-

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1 Whittall 1987.

2 Whittall 1977.

3 Whittall 2000.

4 Whittall 2008, xi.

and twenty-first-century music. In addition, it will suggest some ways forward to bridge the gulf of perception that still exists between European and American scholars in their research of post-tonal music.

While *Serialism* is indeed an introduction to the subject, it is by no means from a *tabula rasa* level. It seems clear that the book assumes a historical understanding and background on the level of an undergraduate music major who has taken core courses in musicology or music historiography. Thus, the reader is expected to know basic biographies of major composers and a chronology of twentieth-century style periods and artistic movements. It also seems to be presumed that the reader will be at least somewhat familiar with Schoenberg's and Stravinsky's pre-serial music and the overall trajectories of their respective oeuvres. One wonders whether a bit more background here might be helpful – some brief discussion of the stylistic and technical moves undertaken to get from, say, *Verklärte Nacht* to *Pierrot Lunaire*.

Additionally, the book presumes a level of theoretical understanding of music that requires the reader to have the abilities of an undergraduate who has taken core theory and aural skills courses. While there is an ample glossary of post-tonal terms and care has been taken to gradually introduce items of greater complexity, by necessity the book covers a lot of pieces and compositional approaches very quickly. It would doubtless be helpful for the reader to have some grounding in basic post-tonal analysis before delving into *Serialism*.[5]

As will be discussed later, the book functions primarily as a musicological survey of serialism; readers will likely find it less useful for classroom teaching of post-tonal theory or for composition study. Whittall acknowledges as much, writing "In one important sense this book is restricted to historical excavation. It is not an introduction to how to compose serially, though students of these pages who want to try out the techniques for themselves should acquire a fair idea of what is involved quite quickly."[6] True enough, but one of the book's best features is its

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5 A sufficient introduction would be Straus 1991.

6 Whittall 2008, 15.

"excavation" of a number of series – row forms and sometimes matrices – themselves. While more in depth analysis of how they are deployed is often omitted, this alone may make it a useful compendium for composition students – and many full-fledged composers – who are interested in having a diverse selection of precompositional materials at hand.

Second Viennese School

Whittall's first book was a short guide to the chamber music of Arnold Schoenberg,[7] and he remains a persuasive figure when discussing the inception of serialism in the music of the Second Viennese School. Whittall presents succinct yet substantive analyses of several notable works by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. Perhaps equally vital is his discussion of the historical genesis of serial thought; specifically, the evolution of 12-tone practice in the 1920s out of the more generalized post-tonal environment that prevailed in the 1910s. After discussing one of modern music history's most famous aborted efforts – Schoenberg's abandoned oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter* – and providing us with a tantalizing glimpse of the gradual evolution of twelve-tone practice, Whittall begins in earnest with a discussion of Schoenberg's music from the early 1920s.

One of the best analyses in the book is Whittall's discussion of Schoenberg's Op. 25 Piano Suite. As the first work to contain 12-tone series in some of its movements, it is a logical place to begin. Whittall's side-by-side comparison of the Schoenberg *Musette* with its predecessor, the *Musette* from J.S. Bach's G-Major Suite, is a particularly elegant way to tease out a number of the central concerns he will subsequently develop in his coverage of Schoenberg. The analysis explores the juxtaposition of traditional rhythmic gestures with 12-tone rows, the differences between treating the series as a motivic element and treating it as an ordered aggregate to be subdivided into hexachords, tetrachords, etc. (with less concern for linear order), and the ways in which his music

[7] Whittall 1972.

emulates classical forms as opposed to the idea of a radical departure from tonality.

Whittall follows this analysis with a persuasive discussion of Schoenberg's Op. 26 Wind Quintet and Op. 29 Septet, focusing on the composer's development of thematic construction in 12-tone contexts as well as, in the latter work, the incorporation of folk melody. As the author points out, Schoenberg is comfortable dealing with irony, humor, and vernacular reference points quite early on in his exploration of serialism.[8] Whittall complicates the field still further when discussing the Schoenberg Third String Quartet's pseudo-programmatic inspiration. If serialism is a rupture with the past in terms of compositional approach, in Schoenberg's hands it still is meant to be as potently expressive as his freely atonal music and, indeed, past works from the classical music canon.[9] This systematic unpacking of many facets pertaining to the adoption of 12-tone technique is bound to be thought-provoking for many students. Doubtless, they will have to grapple with the contradictions inherent in viewing Schoenberg as a simultaneously radical and traditional figure; much as many composers in the postwar era have wrestled with and argued about Schoenberg's legacy.

In his discussion of Alban Berg and Anton Webern, Whittall seeks to provide a more nuanced reading of their respective relationships to Schoenberg's compositional approach. Whereas it is often popular to consider Berg as the Second Viennese School composer most likely to retain vestiges of tonality, and Webern as the more forward thinking and radical, Whittall points out that recent scholarship has created a more ambiguous picture. Even the chapter titles, "*Berg: Reverence and Resistance"* (chapter 5) and "*Webern: Discipline and License"* (chapter 6) make manifest the struggles exhibited in both composers' letters, sketches, and music.

While Berg does indeed nest tonal signatures – triadic formulations, centric devices – in his series, some recent scholars have pointed to this tension between tonal and atonal pitch elements as an intrinsic part of Berg's shaping of narrative and

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[8] Whittall 2008, 58-60.

[9] Ibid., 61.

musical structure, rather than a regressive or retrospective tendency. Whittall particularly points to Dave Headlam's research on interval cycles in Berg's music.[10] Headlam writes, "The underlying cyclic basis of Berg's music transcends surface distinctions of 'tonal,' 'atonal,' and 'twelve-tone' periods, terms which, although used as chronological guidelines, should be regarded as signifying differences in degree rather than kind."[11] Whittall also points out Berg's early and abiding interest in "the row discovered by Klein," an all-interval series he got from his pupil Fritz Heinrich Klein.[12] While Whittall rates Klein as a composer of "modest attainments," one can readily see why the series he discovered, with its multi-faceted tonal reference points "might be especially attractive to a composer seeking to preserve tonal qualities in a post-tonal context."[13]

In discussing Anton Webern, Whittall leans heavily on the research of Anne Shreffler, which explores the uneasy relationship between Schoenberg and Webern. Webern's move towards serialism is not given the traditional, romantic portrayal of an inexorable evolution. Rather Shreffler – and Whittall – portray Webern's adoption of the 12-tone method to be hardly a seamless trajectory, having many more fits and starts than his own public statements would seem to indicate. Shreffler's examination of Webern's sketches leads her to write of this transitional era as a "period of broad experimentation, during which he alternately accepted and rejected the new method."[14]

According to Shreffler, Schoenberg's relationship to his pupil is quite competitive as well. One is struck by an anecdote relating his reluctance to show Webern his 12-tone materials: a penchant for the proprietary that has often been talked about with regard to Schoenberg's later California pupils.[15] In Kathryn Bailey's *The Life of Webern,* this issue is made more ambiguous; Bailey asserts that

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10 Headlam 1996, 11. Cited in Whittall 2008, 72.

11 Ibid.

12 Whittall 2008, 68. Klein's all-interval series: 540972-8136TE (C=0).

13 Ibid. For more about Klein, see Headlam 1992, Ashby 1995, and Nolan 2003.

14 Shreffler 1994. Cited in Whittall 2008, 86.

15 Ibid., 286. Cited in Whittall 2008, 88.

Schoenberg told several different self-conflicting accounts about varying degrees of willingness to share his 12-tone research materials with Webern and other European students; in these disparate recollections the dates range widely.[16] But what remains clear is that Schoenberg's practice of jealously guarding 'trade secrets' well predates his arrival in the United States.

In addition to Shreffler's studies of the vocal works, Whittall (rightly) commends the reader to Bailey's writings on Webern,[17] and takes her discussions of his gradual adoption of serialism as an opportunity to excavate the genesis of several pivotal instrumental works. Whittall points to Webern's String Trio (Op. 20) as the work with which Webern "completed his years of transition."[18] Bailey contends that this is the piece in which Webern wrestles with and then ultimately dispenses with a literalist approach classical form.[19] As Whittall puts it, this is "another indication of Webern's determination to throw away his Schoenbergian crutches as soon as he had persuaded himself that he had paid the master due homage by trying them out in all good faith."[20]

Thus, Whittall brings the reader's attention to a foundational issue intrinsic to discussing serialism: evaluating the different attitudes Webern and Schoenberg had to traditional forms and 12-tone deployment. In addition to a nuanced discussion of Webern's struggles with classical formal designs in the String Trio and Symphony (Op. 21), Whittall also provides a succinct yet elegant overview of his development of a distinct approach to 12-tone composition – supplying several excellent examples of Webern's interest in symmetry and trichordal partitions of the aggregate. Despite later criticism of the austerity of Webern's approach, occasionally by pivotal figures such as Babbitt and Boulez, Whittall points out that "the aphoristic concentration and purity of his works has offered an inspiring model" to many Postwar composers.[21]

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16 Bailey 1998, 117-120.

17 See also Bailey 1991 and Bailey 1996.

18 Whittall 2008, 92.

19 Ibid., 93.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 100.

While the formative inceptors of 12-tone practice – the Second Viennese triumvirate – are given pride of place, other early figures are discussed as well. Whittall acknowledges that the use of 12-tone themes or melodies didn't begin with the Second Viennese School. He mentions Perle's inclusion of Skryabin, Bartók, and others in a broadly constructed group of early adopters of atonality. He indicates that we can find a 12-note theme as far back as Liszt's *Faust Symphony*. Since, in this instance, one is looking merely for melodies containing all twelve pitches of the total chromatic, not for pieces which deploy this as a series, one can delve back further still into music history, finding twelve-note melodies by J.S. Bach, Mozart, and others.

Hauer's role as an early theorist and composer in his own idiosyncratic version of the 12-tone technique is briefly discussed. While it is fair to say that some of Hauer's compositions are not exceptionally well wrought, Whittall stacks the deck a bit in his selection of a representative excerpt, finding in the rhythmically banal beginning of *Nomos* Op. 19[22] an example that pales in comparison to anything else the reader will encounter in the book. That said, Hauer was an influential teacher and theorist. Schoenberg's dismissive stance on Hauer's contributions – exemplified by the oft quoted "He sought his solution in the cosmos. I limited myself to the human brain available to me…"[23] – is presented here with only tepid rebuttal. But Whittall does acknowledge Schoenberg's abiding interest in defending, in proprietary fashion, his role as 'originator' of 12-tone composition.[24]

Other figures connected to 12-tone music's early years are mentioned; often we are given evocative glimpses rather than fully fleshed out portraits, but Whittall makes it clear to the reader that the Second Viennese School didn't work in isolation. Berg's aforementioned interest in Klein's 12-tone experiments is examined. Roberto Gerhard's early studies with Schoenberg and later adoption of 12-tone techniques, as well as some of his

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[22] Ibid., 26.

[23] Schoenberg 1975, 212.

[24] Those wishing to offer a supplementary reading to "rehabilitate" Hauer's reputation might consider assigning Covach 1992.

statements about postwar composers, are posited as an important bridge between the Second Viennese School's influence and later serial thinking.

Terminology and Analytical depth

The term serialism itself takes on various guises in the book. Throughout, serialism is reconsidered and indeed redefined from a number of vantage points. The notion that serialism refers to a small repertory of works, which were performed only for a short time period and are now historical curiosities, is strenuously rebutted by a wealth of associations connecting the core cadre of serialists with both the concert music of their predecessors and the wider practices of Postwar composition.

This process of enlarging the pool of composers to whom the tag "serial" may be loosely applied or associated creates a tendency in the book to reintroduce a cast of characters that comprise the "usual suspects" from Whittall's previous writings: Ligeti, Lutoslawski, Carter, and others. No one would argue that all three of the aforementioned composers, while not in any way strict serialists, might be worth discussing as significant post-tonal figures. But one is left to wonder why composers who don't manipulate ordered formulations of the aggregate are included in the author's discussion, except as points of reference for other ways of making post-tonal or, in some cases, chromatic but primarily tonal, music. This juxtaposition of a freer definition of serialism as a compositional practice with more a more specific criterion for its constituent elements is, in itself, telling.

Indeed, it can be a slippery slope. Sometimes, one gets a sense that composers are being given a disproportionate emphasis in the volume due to the author's interest in their oeuvre *in toto* rather than a strong argument that their music is impacted by serial thought. In particular, this becomes a tremendous pitfall when the author discusses American music: a topic we shall address more thoroughly later.

For now, let us consider how this amplifies the challenge of adequately introducing readers to a broad range of serial repertoire. How many composers can be covered in a 300 page long volume

without significant compromises of substance? True, Whittall covers some key figures of serialism – Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and later, Boulez, Dallapiccola, Berio, and recent British composers – perceptively and with as much detail as the book's scale allows. Correspondingly, he bows to the inevitable compromises that must result from this (relatively brief) format, sufficing coverage of minor (and some not-so-minor) figures with mere name-checking or biographical sketches.

Unfortunately, the place where the book most often cuts corners is in detailed analyses of works by postwar composers who *are* covered, at least from a historical standpoint, in some depth. As has been mentioned, this does not prove to be such a hurdle when discussing the composers of the Second Viennese School; but the brief analytical vignettes that many postwar composers receive is another story.

From Chapter Eight ("American Counterparts I") onward,[25] analytical charts, particularly of large-scale compositional and formal phenomena, are in relatively short supply. If they receive a musical example at all, the discussed works will most often be accompanied merely by their 12-tone series or a matrix; some by brief melodic snippets. If they merit a score example, it is usually terribly truncated. For example, the reader is expected to get an impression of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Gruppen*[26] from a 12-tone series and no other corresponding musical examples, formal schema, or diagrams. One finds this most unsatisfying.

Other important figures are given precious little room. Bruno Maderna and Henri Pousseur are mentioned as influential figures, but not analyzed. Iannis Xenakis' sieving process is tantalizingly but fleetingly analogized to serialism. The cursory treatment Stravinsky's 12-tone music gets is disappointing. He merits a mere six pages, while a discussion of minimalism's response to serialism gets four. Composers from Eastern Bloc countries who actually wrote 12-tone music – Tadeusz Baird and Kazimierz Serocki – are mentioned only in passing. Whittall instead prefers to perversely shoehorn the compositional practices of György Ligeti and Witold

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[25] Ibid., 117.

[26] A work for three orchestras composed in 1955-7.

Lutoslawski into an awkward, ill-fitting relationship with serialism.[27] Messiaen is allotted three pages; really a setup for Whittall's discussion of Boulez.

This latter figure is given some of the most thoughtful treatment of any of the postwar composers. Whittall unpacks his moves from studies with Messiaen to his early yet groundbreaking serial pieces *Sonatine, Structures,* and *Le Marteau sans Maitre.* The latter work receives the type of multifaceted and well-considered coverage that one wishes more pieces were allowed. In a later chapter, Whittall returns to Boulez with an enlightening, well-illustrated discussion of the two "Sacher" pieces *Messagesquisse* and *Incises.*[28] It elegantly demonstrates the evolution of Boulez's compositional approach from total serialism to more varied types of organization, with a concomitant series of rhetorical shifts.

The author is also enthusiastic and insightful in his coverage of Postwar Italian serialists such as Dallapiccola, Nono, and Berio. The latter composer is given the most attention, and Whittall makes a strong case for his pivotal role in the evolution of serial thought from the stricter practices of the twelve-tone and total serialist figures to more fluid sets of methodologies and a more flexible manner of deployment. Whittall writes, "In this respect Berio shared with many of his contemporaries and successors the tendency to organize a post-tonal language, which involved a continuum between centred and non-centred processes, in ways which occasionally acknowledged the systematic core fundamental to serial thinking."[29]

Whittall's coverage of serialism in England is more varied in quality. His inclusion of the works of Benjamin Britten[30] is one of several places in which the term serialism is diluted, making it seem as if nearly any 20th Century piece possessing a motive that contains all 12 pitch classes could arguably be considered serial. It's all the more puzzling when one considers that several of Britten's relative contemporaries might be more meaningfully discussed. One wishes

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[27] Whittall 2008, 157-60 and 189-93.

[28] Ibid., 205-9.

[29] Whittall 2008, 198.

[30] Ibid., 151-4.

that Humphrey Searle, an early example of a British serial composer whom Whittall mentions in the same chapter in a relatively dismissive fashion (and with no included musical examples – Britten gets three), might have been featured instead.[31] The same might be said of Elizabeth Lutyens or even Reginald Smith Brindle; the former is merely mentioned in passing, while the latter composer and author (of a book about serialism) doesn't even rate a mention in the bibliography.[32]

On the other hand, Whittall's coverage of more recent British composers is far better. He begins this section with Peter Maxwell Davies' early Five Pieces for Piano, demonstrating its simultaneous use of overlapping combinatorially-related row forms. He then demonstrates Davies' magic square formulations in *Ave Maris Stella.* Whittall views his later practice as a "modern-classic synthesis of chant-derived serial materials with harmonic processes focusing on the symmetrical [0,3,6,9] division of the octave."[33]

Alexander Goehr's post-Schoenbergian aesthetic is represented by chord formulations for his opera *The Death of Moses.* Whittall points out that Harrison Birtwistle's music isn't serial per se, but some of its concerns can be evaluated with regard to serial aesthetics. It seems a pity that Birtwistle's random number charts aren't brought up as a kind of aleatoric use of matrices. It's revealed through Richard Toop's analyses of *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* and *Superscriptio* that Brian Ferneyhough has upon occasion used serial methods in some of his "new complexity" style works.[34]

More revealing still is the coverage of Oliver Knussen, who advocates a freer use of serial techniques in a broadly constructed post-tonal practice, as much flavored by the American composer Elliott Carter as it is by the Second Viennese School and his own countrymen. Drawing upon Julian Anderson's research,[35] Whittall includes several charts and perceptive insights about Knussen's *Four Organa.* They demonstrate a composer whose language has the

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[31] Ibid.,153-4.

[32] Smith Brindle 1968.

[33] Whittall 2008, 228.

[34] Ibid., 232.

[35] Anderson 2002 and Anderson 2003.

breadth to encompass a host of techniques, including an individual take on serialism, without any sort of aesthetic cluttering.

Problems of Transcontinental Reception

As has thus far been pointed out, the coverage of European composers and musical trends is uneven in *Serialism;* there are however a number of bright spots. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the book's two chapters on American music. A number of prominent figures are merely name-checked. Very little American music, apart from Babbitt's and Carter's, is discussed in depth. And the selections which are chosen to represent even these two composers present a limited view of their respective oeuvres; one far less complete than Whittall's coverage of their European contemporary Pierre Boulez.

The 12-tone experiments of the American experimentalists and ultramodernists from the 1920s through the 1940s, while by no means the only of their myriad interests, is still a significant concern. Yet these composers are given tremendously truncated coverage: a section totaling less than two pages that includes no musical examples is expected to suffice for the discussion of Charles Ives, Wallingford Riegger, Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss, Carl Ruggles, Stefan Wolpe, and Ruth Crawford Seeger. That the latter figure, who is the only American woman composer mentioned in the entire book, is not subject to any meaningful scrutiny is particularly regrettable. A page-long segment on Varèse interrupts this segment on "pioneers" midway through: Varèse is undeniably an important composer, but a curious figure to discuss as a bastion of American serialism. Krenek is mentioned, but more for his brief textbook on 12-tone counterpoint[36] than for his serial compositions. Once again, one wishes that such an important work as the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* (1940) might rate more than a passing mention.

A passage devoted to Postwar mainstream composers who also experimented with the twelve-tone technique makes for an

[36] Krenek 1940.

awkward grouping of Copland, Sessions, and George Perle into the same section. One can understand comparing the first two composers' explorations of serialism, both coming relatively late in their respective careers. But Perle's accomplishments as a Berg scholar and theorist, as well as his development of 'twelve-tone tonality,' an idiosyncratic take on serialism, suggests that he deserves to be considered separately. The fact that Whittall discusses Perle's music without ever mentioning a single piece he composed is baffling.

Whittall's section on Milton Babbitt is more substantive, but at first it spends a fair chunk of time critiquing the aesthetics of his writings rather than describing or analyzing his music. Much is made of Babbitt's emphasis on the importance of Schoenberg in his theoretical articles. Whittall is quick to address the common criticism of American Schoenbergians as elitists and compositional isolationists: he brings along the heavy artillery to reinforce this view. To respond to the notion of Schoenberg's influence on American composers, Whittall quotes from Steve Reich's writings about Schoenberg, which suggest that atonality ignores both the harmonic series and rhythmic pulse. Reich writes, "Any theory of music that eliminates these realities is doomed to a *marginal* role in the music of the world. The postman will *never* whistle Schoenberg."[37]

This is followed by arguments from Roger Scruton and Bryan Simms about the limited viability of Babbitt's aesthetics and compositional approach. One has to wonder why Babbitt seems to be singled out for this rhetorical sort of piling on, as Whittall barely tells the reader what his proclivities are before releasing the hounds. It would be useful to allow some of Babbitt's proponents in print - Andrew Mead, Stephen Peles, Martin Brody, Oliver Knussen - to respond in kind. After all, four on one seems to be hardly fair. Mead is finally given a chance to speak about Babbitt's music (not his words), but only eight or so pages after Reich, Scruton, and Simms have muddied the playing field.[38]

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[37] Reich 2002, 187. Cited in Whittall 2008, 123.

[38] Whittall 2008, 131.

Babbitt's music is then given an in-depth and far more sympathetic discussion. The evolution of Babbitt's ideas about pre-compositional control over all musical elements is laid out in a clear and straightforward fashion, including examples from *Composition for Four Instruments* and *Post-Partitions*. His development of approaches to array composition, the time point system, and serialized dynamics are succinctly demonstrated. But the selection of repertoire skews towards his earlier works. The latest Babbitt work covered by Whittall is *A Solo Requiem* (1976-'77). This piece is used to illustrate issues of text setting. Very little is said about Babbitt's electronic music; a work like *Philomel* might prove to be a useful addition to this section on Babbitt's writing for the voice, while also raising issues about his works for the RCA Mark II Synthesizer. In addition, it seems a great pity that none of Babbitt's later pieces – the Sixth String Quartet, Swan Song No. 1, *Concerti* – are represented; nor is any of his orchestral music.

Despite this, Babbitt fares far better than his American 12-tone colleagues and students. In his section on "The Serial Inheritance," Whittall leans heavily on Stephen Peles' introductory chapter on 'Serialism and Complexity' for the *Cambridge History of American Music*.[39] While Peles' chapter is a good resource, it's meant to be an overview, not a comprehensive study of recent American serialism. Tellingly, Whittall writes that, "The distinctiveness of American thinking about serialism is difficult to assess when the opportunities to hear the compositional results are so limited."[40]

This is a statement that requires some examination. It is indeed true that American serial composers are woefully underrepresented on concert programs both in the United States and, in particular, abroad. One could say the same for many of the European serial composers discussed by Whittall: they could certainly be better represented on American concert programs. But barring that, sound recordings and scores of many of these works, while not plentiful, are available. There are many platforms of which Whittall and his readers might avail themselves – Naxos Music Library, the

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39 Peles 1998, 496-516.

40 Whittall 2008, 144.

Alexander Classical Database, DRAM, interlibrary loan, publishers, online vendors, and even many of the composers themselves.

The coverage that follows is little more than a list of names – Charles Wuorinen, Donald Martino, and Robert Morris – with no discussion of their music apart from surface generalizations (Wuorinen uses time points and rotational arrays, etc.)..[41] A more fleshed out list of American serial composers, as well as analysis of some of the more important works of this repertory – *Notturno, New York Notes, Reliquary, Synchronisms no. 6, Broken Consort in Three Parts,* Shapey's *Ninth String Quartet,* etc., would seem to be the minimum that this section requires to be adequate to its task. Instead, Whittall spends most of this second chapter on American serialism on Elliott Carter, a composer who neither self-describes as a serialist nor is easily analyzable from this vantage point.

Elliott Carter as American Serialist?

Whittall has long been engaged in researching the music of Elliott Carter,[42] a far more familiar figure in England and Europe than any of America's more strictly serial composers. While it is possible to view some aspects of serialism as influential on Carter's compositional language, his music has always resisted more thoroughgoing 12-tone analysis. It has long been known that Carter instead favors unordered PC collections, particularly all-interval collections. Whittall provides an analysis of *Gra,* pointing out how the work is saturated with the all-interval tetrachord (0146).

While it is true that an exploration of Carter's use of all-interval PC sets makes for a fruitful post-tonal analysis project, one wonders why Whittall uses it as the most extended analytical example of American composition in *Serialism.* After all, there are many composers who employ unordered collections in a post-tonal environment. If Carter's are among the most elegant, they are also often not entirely reflective of serial thought, but rather of a

[41] Ibid., 144-145.

[42] Whitall, 1968, 1-17.

completely different type of post-tonal practice. And, as Jonathan Bernard has discussed, Carter typically favors these all-interval collections in an environment that also includes a wide range of other PC-sets.[43] Some are subsets and supersets of the all-interval collections, while others are unrelated to them. Thus, the freedom with which all-interval collections are deployed creates a musical surface which is rightly and notoriously quite difficult to analyze from a serial perspective.

The pieces that Whittall raises as being more closely related to serial practice than *Gra* are two occasional works in which Carter employs the "Sacher hexachord".[44] While it is true that these pieces are probably the closest that Carter comes to composing serially, they are still a far cry from what one generally considers serial composition. While Carter does indeed use the Sacher hexachord as an ordered collection, acknowledging it as a cipher of the dedicatee's name, he employs the hexachord frequently as an unordered collection – his usual practice – as well. Moreover, it seems likely, given the relative isolation of these two works, that Carter is using the cipher in an ordered fashion due to the occasional nature of the pieces, not due to an abiding interest in serial ordering of pitch classes.

Two aspects of Carter's practice are given fleeting mention by Whittall: his employment of 12-note "tonic chords" and his creation of a *Harmony Book*.[45] There are no specific examples given of Carter's "tonic" chords and no substantial discussion of the *Harmony Book*.[46] 12-note Link chords in particular might be given more prominent place when discussing Carter in a serial context.[47] Carter's use of registral stratification of tonic chords might be meaningfully considered in the context of Whittall's expanded view

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[43] Bernard 1993, 231-266.

[44] A musical cipher of the dedicatee Paul Sacher's name: E b-A-C-B-E-D.

[45] Carter 2002.

[46] Whittall briefly mentions the *Harmony Book* on p. 147, and "tonic chords" on p. 206

[47] David Schiff, who coined the moniker "Link chords," describes them as follows: "Link chords are all interval twelve-note chords, each of which contains one or more instances of the all-trichord 6-note chord (#35: C, C sharp, D, E, G, A flat)." Schiff 2003, 53.

of what constitutes serialism. Indeed, Joseph Straus suggests that since the composition of *Night Fantasies* (1980), a work for solo piano, Carter has used the 12-note tonic chords to fashion a kind of 12-tone practice.[48] Each PC in the aggregate is assigned to a particular pitch and appears, at least primarily, in that octave position. That said, the PCs still appear in unordered collections in their horizontal deployments. In this sense, one could argue that Carter's use of them constitutes a form of serialism for the vertical dimension, if not the horizontal, in his later music.

The *Harmony Book* would also be a useful adjunct to this discussion. Carter's painstaking cataloguing of unordered PC-sets is suggestive of an approach to composing post-tonal music; one that prioritizes pitch organization that in some ways provides another vantage point from that of serialism, in that it allows considerable freedom and flexibility in terms of deployment. It also provides discussion of the all-interval sets; in particular, the 12-note Link chords.

Whittall and Straus: Two Authors Separated by a Common Publisher?

Given that Whittall is the Series Editor of Cambridge University Press' *Twentieth Century Music* series, it is unfortunate that he didn't seem either to have the opportunity or inclination to incorporate some insights from one of its most recent volumes, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* by Joseph N. Straus.[49] Published about a year after *Serialism,* it provides a valuable perspective on issues surrounding American serial composers and the reception of their music throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. And while would be unfair to pillory Whittall for not discussing an unpublished volume, whether or not he might have had an opportunity to see an early draft, some of its research was already readily available. Straus has published several articles discussing American serialism that provide a strenuous rebuttal to the notion

[48] Straus 2009, 52-6.

[49] See Straus 2009.

that its practitioners formed a rarified hegemony in the 1950s and 60s.[50]

Perhaps Whittall's attempt at broad inclusion of a wide range of composers under the umbrella of serialism is meant to dispense with the narrowly constrained taxonomy of post-tonal music's most vitriolic critics. But one occasionally wishes he'd take a page from Straus' book and go further in repudiating the grosser exaggerations of those who paint serialism with too broad a brush. Indeed, sometimes Whittall appears to be rather accommodating of such critiques. For instance, on p. 14, Whittall states, "Serial music is less prominent in concert programmes, or the schedules of record companies, than earlier classical composition or those types of music written since 1900 – from Debussy to John Adams – which remain most directly related to earlier tonal or modal techniques."[51] Following immediately upon this, Stravinsky biographer Stephen Walsh is given the opportunity to take a potshot about this challenge of reception – in a textbox no less.[52] He states that, "Every music student has experienced that moment of despair on first hearing Schoenberg explained in these terms, that feeling of disbelief that anyone would bother to write, listen to, or study music conceived in such a way."[53] This is a statement that begs for a response; it seems quite unsatisfying that Whittall doesn't provide an immediate counterpoint.[54]

Instead, he writes, "I have attempted to filter my biases, enthusiasms, and blind spots through as wide-ranging and evenly balanced a selection of composers and commentators as the format of the volume permits."[55] While it is indeed important to provide a critical perspective on serialism, Whittall's attempt to avoid overzealousness frequently means that any rebuttal provided to the

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[50] Straus 1999a and Straus 1999b.

[51] Whittall 2008, 14. While this is generally true, he supplies no studies or citations in support of this conclusion.

[52] Ibid.,14-15.

[53] Walsh 2006, 281-2.

[54] It's a pity that Walsh has never seen a student light up when a 12x12 matrix is first introduced in the classroom; even more so that he assumes that *every music student* would despair at such conceptions.

[55] Whittall 2008, 16.

grosser misstatements of serialism's more hyperbolic critics seems muted at best. After allowing Walsh to do his worst, Whittall writes in the chapter's summary that his "aim is to introduce readers to the ways in which a principal has impinged on so much music since 1900 that it might not be too extravagant to call the years 1900-'99 'the serial century.'"[56] All well and good, but prefaced by Walsh's portents of despair, one imagines many a prospective student or reader viewing this study of the serial century as a dose of castor oil by the end of its very first chapter.

Similarly, Whittall's statement elsewhere in the chapter that "it remains true for all of us that, if we do not find a serial composition 'musically compelling,' then no amount of technical information about how it was written, or claims about its historical importance will persuade us to take it seriously"[57] is, from a pedagogical standpoint, troubling. When facilitating students' first encounters with serial music an instructor would be well advised to bring to bear explications of its methodology and aesthetics. In gaining an understanding of these aspects of the work, a new listener may be able and, perhaps more importantly, willing to overcome initial misgivings about the challenges it poses. Our understanding of a work's background and processes may serve to refocus our listening and help us to understand ways in which a piece that at first strikes us as uncompelling may reveal its riches on repeated hearings.

On the other hand, Straus is unwilling to allow a number of misapprehensions, which have been widely promulgated about 12-tone music, stand uncontested. He uses the forceful term "myths" to describe what he views as various distortions in describing American twelve-tone composers, their intentions, and their place in both academe and concert life.[58] And while it would be unfair to expect a volume devoted to serialism in its entirety to match the abundance of American 12-tone music presented in Straus's volume, Whittall's book would certainly be enhanced by a more wide ranging and detailed portrait of serialism in America.

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Whittall 2008, 15.

[58] In Part Two of Straus 2009, the author presents some nineteen "myths" as section headings.

Serialism as a Pedagogical Resource

Given current economic realities, university presses are under increasing pressure to make their books as widely applicable as possible. Thus, it is understandable that Cambridge University Press suggests that *Serialism* is suitable for a wide-ranging audience: undergraduates, graduate students, and music professionals seeking to review the subject. *Serialism* on its own proves to be at least somewhat problematic for at least some members of all three of these categories.

For undergraduates, there is the question of comprehension. As mentioned before, the book assumes a level of musical understanding that will require the course to be, at the very least, an upper-level elective. More challenging may be Whittall's prose. While the text has been carefully geared towards avoiding the density of some specialist literature, it still has a tendency to move from vantage point to vantage point and piece to piece at a brisker clip than one may want in a text for undergraduates.

Graduate students may find themselves more accustomed to the pacing of the text and, one hopes, will have a stronger theoretical and musicological background upon which to draw. Here, one may encounter the aforementioned problems of analytical rigor and the curious omissions of the postwar chapters to prove to be stumbling blocks. In this essay, I have noted supplemental readings, which would serve to flesh out the *Serialism's* bibliography. But there are more fundamental problems than supplementing alone will adequately address.

As mentioned earlier, the book lacks substantial score examples and in depth analytical charts. And while it is the current practice to limit the number of musical examples included in an academic volume (due to the exigencies and expense involved in presenting examples of works still in copyright), it's difficult to imagine that most of the pieces discussed are adequately illuminated by their accompanying examples. One is quick to point out that this has long been a challenge for writers on contemporary music. Granted, it is expensive and time-consuming to obtain

permissions for score examples. And publishers are understandably concerned about allowing authors to reproduce large excerpts, lest they cut into the sales figures of study scores. But presenting a discussion of a gargantuan work such as *Gruppen* in an introductory text seems to warrant a more substantial visual component than a 12-note series[59] and more in-depth discussion than two pages of text.[60]

It's true that research libraries *should* have all of the scores mentioned in Whittall's book. But do they? Is there adequate access to scores and recordings of this repertory in enough venues to presume this? If Whittall feels that the opportunities to hear American serial music are "so limited" with the resources at his disposal as an emeritus professor of King's College, how will much of his readership fare?

How might Whittall and/or his publisher address this pedagogical challenge? A workbook with score examples and an accompanying CD might be one approach to addressing this paucity of supplemental material. Or perhaps availing themselves of the increasingly popular alternative of an online companion website, with score and audio examples, might be a more flexible solution; and one that would increase the potential readership of the book and maximize its readers' understanding of the material.

But even if these difficulties were alleviated, one overriding issue remains which makes the book essentially problematic. Its Eurocentric viewpoint of the evolution of serialism excludes or minimizes the contributions of a number of Postwar American composers and theorists. It makes little effort to incorporate Non-Western composers' or writers' viewpoints. Apart from Ruth Crawford Seeger, it almost entirely ignores women composers. If as Whittall states, the years 1900-'99 were indeed the "Serial Century," it should include a more diverse list of composers. With a substantial revision that provided a more balanced and transcontinental approach to introducing serialism, this volume

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[59] To be fair, later on Whittall does also discuss Stockhausen's *Mantra* and *Licht*. But still, these large works are still given quite a brisk overview, accompanied by one nine-measure music example and three small charts. See Whittall 2008, 209-212.

[60] Whittall 2008, 184-186.

could be a valuable classroom resource. As it stands now, it can only be recommended as a selectively read portion of a more widely assembled list of course materials.

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