Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

by Joseph N. Straus

Reviewed by Matthew Brown

One of the most important changes that has occurred in contemporary critical theory has been the dramatic turn against the aesthetics of modernism. The spirit of modernism dominated art and criticism from the 1920s to the 1950s and is generally associated with the anti-romantic works of Gide, Joyce, Lawrence, Mann, Eliot, Pound, Faulkner, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Matisse, Picasso, Le Courbusier, as well as to critics such as Hulme, Richards, Brooks, Greenberg, and other exponents of New Criticism. The term immediately suggests concepts such as autonomy, formalism, abstraction, objectivity, novelty, and elitism. Very roughly, modernists regard art works as autonomous entities that can be understood in their own terms, quite apart from any external considerations. Modernist artworks are often abstract in nature and explore the formal properties of particular materials; modernist criticism focuses almost exclusively on the determinate structure or unity of the artwork at the expense of artistic intention, biographical context, historical convention, and creative or audience psychology. Modernism is also preoccupied with the novelty and

cultural elitism of artworks; indeed, the movement usually identified itself with the intellectual avant-garde.[1]

Despite its prevalence over much of this century, modernism has recently been challenged in two main ways. First, postmodernists have rejected many of its basic tenets. Among other things, they insist: 1) art works are never truly autonomous and cannot be evaluated "objectively" on purely internal grounds; 2) art works do not have a single determinant structure or meaning, but are irreducibly plural; 3) the novelty and originality of an artwork is relative and that artworks gain meaning from other artworks; 4) the distinctions between "high art" and "popular culture" are only institutionally relevant. As a result, postmodernists have shifted in focus away from the abstract structure of the art work to the act of interpretation *per se* and to the notion of intertextuality. Second, scholars have shown that despite claims to reject romanticism, modernists actually endorse many quintessentially romantic precepts. For example, modernist attitudes towards formal structure, elitism and autonomy are closely related to romantic notions of organicism, the genius, the masterpiece, and "art for art's sake." Some scholars have even traced the origins of modernism back to writings of Bergson, Bradley, and Nietzsche; Sanford Schwarz, for example, has demonstrated Hulme's intimate knowledge of

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[1]See, for example, Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). The bibliography of materials dealing with modernism and postmodernism is enormous. I have benefitted from discussions with Doug Dempster, John McGowan and Dave Headlam. I have also learned much from John McGowan's recent book *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Bergson's work and Eliot's connections with the philosophy of Bradley.[2]

Given this ongoing debate about the nature of modernism, Joseph Straus's new book *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* is an important addition to the bookshelf. Rather than survey the entire question of modernism in music, this volume deals with one topic, namely the ways in which Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky, and Bartók transformed the tonal music of the past into their own modernist idioms. The basic thesis of the book is simple: despite obvious stylistic differences, the works of these five composers not only share certain underlying musical structures, but they also stem from similar attitudes towards tonal music of the past (p. 3).

Straus supports his case in a more or less systematic way. Having outlined three competing explanations of influence in music, he examines various different ways in which his five modernist composers responded to music of the past. This account moves from the most explicit responses, in which Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky, and Bartók analyzed or reworked specific pre-existant pieces, to more general cases in which they refashioned tonal forms, techniques, and styles. Although some of these analyses are recycled from earlier essays, Straus gives them new

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[2]See Sanford Schwarz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot and Early 20th-Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Eliot's dissertation on the philosophy of Bradley has been published as *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

meaning by placing each one in a wider critical context.[3] To his credit, he lays out his material in a particularly clear and lucid manner. Straus is especially skilled at integrating technical discussions into some larger argument; unlike so many theoretical books, this one never burdens the reader with unnecessary detail. This is a very well-presented book. In terms of layout, I have only two small gripes. First, the endnotes are rather cumbersome to use. In a volume of any size, footnotes always save the reader time and effort. Second, the book does not contain a bibliography. Even if Straus did not want to engage the issue of modernism in depth, it would have been very useful if he had at least provided the reader with access to more secondary literature.

Perhaps the most radical material in Straus's book appears in the opening chapter, "Toward a Theory of Musical Influence." Here, Straus sets out his underlying critical apparatus. He begins by noting that, despite obvious stylistic differences, the works of Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky, and Bartók written in the 1920s-1940s have one important thing in common—an ambivalent preoccupation with tonal music of the past. According to him, this ambivalence is evident in various comments by each composer and in various aspects of the music itself. In order to explain this fact,

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[3]See for example, "A Principle of Voice Leading in the Music of Stravinsky," *Music Theory Spectrum* 4 (1982): 106-24; "Stravinsky's Tonal Axis," *Journal of Music Theory* 26/2 (1982): 261-90; "Recompositions by Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Webern," *The Musical Quarterly* 72 (1986): 301-28; "The Problem of Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 31/1 (1987): 1-21; "The Progress of a Motive in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*," *Journal of Musicology* 9/2 (1991): 165-85; and "The 'Anxiety of Influence' in Twentieth-Century Music," *Journal of Musicology* 9/4 (1991): 430-447.

Straus turns to three theories of musical influence. The first, or immaturity theory, proposes that susceptibility to influence is a sign of immaturity and that although mature composers may quote earlier material, they gradually become independent from earlier masters and eventually find their own individual compositional voices (pp. 9–10). The second, or generosity theory, does not confine influence to a composer's formative years, but suggests instead that composers may continue to draw on their predecessors because creativity necessarily involves working within a continuously evolving tradition (pp. 10–12). Although he prefers this second model to the first, Straus insists that even this one fails to capture the tension composers such as Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky, and Bartók felt towards the past. As a result, he advocates a third theory, Harold Bloom's anxiety theory of influence (pp. 12–19). This model explains influence in terms of Freud's Oedipus Complex. For Bloom, poems should be regarded as aggressive rewritings of existing poems. These rewritings involve "misreadings" or "misprisions" of the earlier text; it is only through violent "misreading" that strong poets exert power and independence over their precursors. (Since weak poets cannot overcome the force of the past, their poetic voices remain repressed.) In order to convert Bloom's ideas to music, Straus defines eight ways in which composers remake earlier forms, styles, and even pieces—motivicization, generalization, marginalization, centralization, compression, fragmentation, neutralization and symmetricization (p. 17).

As mentioned above, Straus works out his ideas by moving from examples where these composers misread specific pieces in their analyses and recompositions to examples where they refashioned more general forms, styles, and so forth. Thus, in Chapter 2, "Analytical Misreadings," he examines instances where Schoenberg, et al., studied specific tonal works. His goal is to show that these analyses often tell us less about the piece than they do about the compositional concerns of the analyst. For example, he shows how Schoenberg's own preoccupation with motivic working led him to "misread" the harmonic and voice-leading structure of works by Brahms, Mozart and Beethoven. According to Straus, "When Schoenberg analyzes Brahms, he is not dispassionately and neutrally revealing musical structure; rather he is passionately struggling with the tradition, simultaneously to establish links with it and domination of it. . . ." (p. 31). Similarly, in Chapter 3, "Recompositions," Straus shows how in their transcriptions and adaptations1 the same composers imposed their own identities on their predecessors. Having examined works such as Schoenberg's orchestrations of Bach (Chorale BWV 654) and Handel (Concerto Grosso, Op. 6, No. 7), Stravinsky's reworkings of Tchaikovsky ("Lullaby in a Storm" from *The Fairy's Kiss*), Pergolesi (*Pulcinella*), and Bach (*Canonic Variations*), and Webern's transcription of the ricercar from Bach's *Musical Offering*, Straus concludes that these recompositions are related in two respects: first, each one tries "to neutralize a source piece by undermining its tonal harmony and voice leading"; and second, each one forces us "to rehear older pieces in light of post-tonal concern with motivic

saturation and pitch-class set manipulation" (p. 72). He adds that these reworkings actually allow the modern composer "to assert his priority over his predecessor, to prove himself the stronger" (p. 73).

In the next two chapters, Straus shifts his attention to the ways in which Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky and Bartók responded to two specific aspects of tonal composition, namely triads and sonata form. Chapter 4 looks at various ways in which these composers manipulate triads in post-tonal works. Drawing on numerous examples, Straus suggests that these composers used triads to establish links to the past and to exert their power over it (p. 95). Thus, the triad is first stripped of its normal tonal tendencies and then given new meanings that vary from context to context. For example, in Berg's *Violin Concerto*, the triad becomes part of the row; in *Symphony of Psalms* and *Oedipus Rex* it functions within a different hierarchic system; and in *Wozzeck*, in "Verbundenheit" from Schoenberg's *Six Pieces for Male Chorus*, Op. 35, and in Webern's Op. 5, No. 2, it is a subordinate set type within some more elaborate network of motivic and set relations (p. 95). Next, Chapter 5 examines what Straus regards as "the paradigmatic form" of tonal music (p. 96). This chapter discusses sonata form in five works—the opening movements from Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* and *Octet*, Bartók's Piano Sonata and String Quartet No. 2, and Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 3. In each case, Straus tries to show how, by rejecting orthodox tonality, twentieth-century composers transform the sonata model in idiosyncratic ways, by immobilizing its tension and subverting its

formal goals. While each piece may be guided by quite different principles, they share the same "revisionary impulse" (p. 132).

In the final two chapters Straus expands the analytical basis of his work by looking at numerous other post-tonal compositions. Chapter 6, "Six Emblematic Misreadings," examines half a dozen post-tonal pieces that "misread" earlier compositions. In particular he pairs the central movement from Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet, Op. 132; Berg's *Violin Concerto* with Bach's chorale "Es ist genug"; the *Lyric Suite* with Wagner's *Tristan*; Stravinsky's *Serenade in A* with Chopin's Ballade No. 2; the *Rake's Progress* with Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; and Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 3, Op. 30 with Schubert's String Quartet, Op. 29. Chapter 7 then explores various ways in which misreadings have ramifications not only at the surface of the piece, but also at some deeper level. Straus's first two examples are both taken from Stravinsky—*Symphonies of Wind Instruments* and *Symphony in Three Movements*—and the chapter ends with a discussion of Schoenberg's piano works Op. 19, No. 2 and Op. 33a.

Having outlined the overall scope of Straus's book, it seems appropriate to offer some general responses. From the outset, I should stress that Straus's musical analyses are usually very persuasive; he is too good an analyst to be criticized on that front. Furthermore, the topic and the material he covers are both extremely interesting and need to be discussed in a coherent way. However, I do have three main comments to his critical position as a whole. The first concerns Straus's views about the nature of

tonality. At the conclusion of the book, Straus warns against assuming that if a work has tonal allusions, then it can, *de facto*, be analyzed according to conventional tonal theory. According to him, invoking "the entire apparatus of tonal theory" will not only "obscure the coherence of the works in question," but will also devalue their achievement by representing them "as strange, deformed tonal compositions that employ traditional techniques grudgingly, incompletely, and unsuccessfully" (p. 184).

There is certainly wisdom in this warning. However, Straus implies that we can draw a sharp distinction between tonal and post-tonal practice. Unfortunately, neither Schenker, nor anyone else, has ever defined the transformational limits of tonal theory in any precise way. Furthermore, even if we can define the characteristic of tonality absolutely, we should not suppose that all tonal pieces will necessarily have every property outlined by the theory, or that there will be no borderline cases which are neither completely tonal nor completely post-tonal.

We can illustrate the potential problems with Straus's position if we look as his analyses of the opening movements from Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* and the *Octet*. Straus insists that both works replace conventional tonic-dominant functions with some other type of tonal polarity. In the *Symphony*, Straus claims that "A polarity of two pitch centers, C and E, and of two triads, C-E-G and E-G-B, plays the central form-generating role in this work" (p. 98). Similarly, in the *Octet*, he suggests that tonal relationships are established by the chromatic double-neighbor motion E♭-D-E♮-E♭ (p. 103). By projecting this chromatic

double-neighbor motion across the entire movement (with the exposition moving from E♭ to D and the recapitulation from E back to E♭), Stravinsky apparently replaces the dynamic property of conventional sonata form with a symmetrical one (p. 106).

While Straus is correct that the *Symphony* explores the functional ambiguity between the triads on C and E, he does not indicate that this interplay takes place within the context of tonic/dominant functions.[4] Indeed, these functions even appear in the opening bars of the piece: as soon as the main motive B–C–G is stated (mm. 1–2), it is transposed onto a progression from I^7 to $V^{\sharp 7}$ in the tonic C major. The dominant then returns at the end of the introduction (mm. 24–5); the opening motive sounds in the bass and the upper parts include the leading tone, the raised and lowered sevenths (F♯ and F♮). Later in the exposition Stravinsky tonicizes D minor for the second part of the bridge section, and F major for the second group; the former is inflected by a local VII^7 (m. 74), while the later is articulated by a motion V_2^4–I_6 (mm. 97–8). When this material recurs in the recapitulation, we find similar functional progressions; when the second group returns in C, it is prepared by a clear dominant (mm. 271–2) and when Stravinsky sets up the coda (m. 339), he transposes the second part of the bridge to the dominant (mm. 288ff.).

Similarly, in the *Octet*, Straus's chromatic neighbor motion co-exists with functional progressions. Once again, the dominant

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[4]It should be noted that tonal composers also exploited the ambiguities between the tonic and mediant. A good case in point is the opening of Haydn's String Quartet, Op. 33, No.1. The piece starts with the sixth F♯–D and it is not immediately obvious whether the material is "in" D major or B minor.

is established in the introduction: mm. 1–4 clearly move from V to V_6 as does the rest of the introduction (V, m. 5ff. to V^6_5, m. 41). Once the main movement is underway, tonic-dominant functions reinforce each of the main tonal areas: the opening theme moves from I to V (mm. 42–48), and the second group is locally tonicized V^4_3–I (mm. 67–9). Stravinsky even tonicizes E for the return of the second group in m. 128.[5]

Now, in suggesting that the *Symphony* and the *Octet* both have orthodox tonal functions, I do not reject Straus's basic point that Stravinsky "remakes the sonata form from the inside and bends it to his own aesthetic and musical purposes" (p. 107). Rather, I am suggesting that the issue of tonal allusions in Stravinsky's music is a good deal more complex than Straus admits. There is still much to be learned from analyzing this repertory from a tonal perspective.

My second comment concerns Straus's Bloomian model. Although I am not averse to the idea of applying Bloom's anxiety theory of influence to music, Straus does not consider some obvious problems with the model. Indeed, although Bloom's ideas have been challenged in various ways, he ignores these counter-arguments almost entirely.[6] One obvious problem is that by

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[5]Although I agree with Straus that this movement manipulates traditional sonata form, I am not persuaded that the recapitulation begins with the second group on E (m. 128). The problem is that while there are clear precedents for beginning a recapitulation off the tonic, and for reordering the sequence of themes, it is not clear that a recapitulation can exploit both these anomolies. As it stands, nothing in Straus's account satisfies Cone's sonata principle.

[6]Straus does mention feminist criticisms of Bloom, see fn 49, p. 190.

invoking Freud's Oedipus Complex, Bloom constructs a theory that is bound to the psychological intentions of the author. Unfortunately, by grounding these intentions to the unconscious, one is left wondering how interpretations can be tested empirically, especially on dead artists. Secondly, Bloom has also been criticized for selecting his data in an arbitrary manner. Although he makes broad claims for his model, Bloom himself considers only a narrowly defined historical period of poetry extending from Milton and Spencer through Blake, Shelley and Yeats to Hardy and Stevens. Thus, he simply disregards other poets who do not fit his preconceptions, and other literary genres, such as the novel. Bloom is no more systematic about what aspects of a given poem to discuss; although his revisionary ratios are general, the intertextual readings *per se* apply to individual works and are not necessarily generalizable to all poems. Thirdly, Bloom has been challenged because his theories are rife with value judgements that maintain typically romantic notions of the genius and the masterpiece. These value judgements are clearly evident in his distinction between strong and weak poets. According to Bloom, the former are "major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death," while the latter simply idealize.[7] However, he offers no concrete criteria for chosing between either group; as Suresh Raval notes "Bloom's interpreter is a solipsist who, given his concept of the exclusive nature of each 'strong' interpretation,

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[7]Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.

cannot provide valid criteria for distinguishing either between strong and weak interpretations or between different strong ones."[8]

Although Straus is not as blatantly cavalier in his arguments as Bloom, he is not entirely successful at avoiding the preceding pitfalls. To begin with, he is equivocal about any Freudian component. Straus obviously recognizes Bloom's debt to Freud and repeatedly invokes intentional evidence from each of his five composers. Nevertheless, he boldly announces in the Preface that his book "is a study of musical construction, not of compositional psychology or creative process" (p. vii). Similarly, Straus, like Bloom, is not always absolutely systematic in his selection of data; he does not explain whether the pieces he analyzes are typical of the five composers in question, or whether the particular extracts are typical of the works as a whole. As we have already seen, his analysis of Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* stresses the ambiguity between triads on C and E, but ignores obvious functional relationships. Lastly, Straus is quite happy to endorse tired value judgements in the Bloomian manner. For example, in his discussion of *The Fairy's Kiss* and *Pulcinella* Straus concludes:

> For most of his life, however, Stravinsky avoided a direct confrontation with the classical mainstream, preferring instead to focus on weaker, more susceptible predecessors like Pergolesi and Tchaikovsky. Through them he would comment on common-practice styles without dealing directly with the true giants of those styles. (p. 70)

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[8]Suresh Raval, *Metacriticism* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1981), 170.

In this particular case, it is not clear that in Bloom's terms a strong composer could really achieve greatness simply by "misprisioning" obviously weaker figures.

My third comment concerns the relevance of the term 'modernism' to music. Although it is by no means clear that the music of Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky and Bartók is really modernist (I am not entirely convinced that they do share the same views of the past), there is strong evidence that Straus's own analytical methods rely on modernist assumptions, and hence are open to the sorts of post-modernist criticisms mentioned earlier. At the start of this review, I stressed that two of the main traits of modernism are its emphasis on the autonomy and the objective structure of the artwork. Now, it is clear that these ideas run throughout the whole field of music theory. We see them, for example, in Milton Babbitt's famous term 'contextuality' which describes works that create their own syntactic context, and in Edward Cone's claim that good pieces determine their own means of analysis.[9] We also find them running through Straus's book.

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[9]According to Babbitt, contextual works are those whose "structural characteristics" are "less representative of a general class of characteristics than they are unique to the individual work itself." See Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?" *High Fidelity* VII (February, 1958): 38–40, 126–7, reprinted in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin ed., *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Schirmer, 1984), 529-34. For a critique of Babbitt's modernism see Susan McClary, "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition," *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 57–81. Edward Cone describes his brand of particularism as follows, "The good composition will always reveal, on close study, the methods of analysis needed for its own comprehension. This means that a good comparison manifests its own structural principles, but it means more than that. In a wider context, it is an example of the proposition that a work of art ought to imply the standards by which it demands to be judged. Most criticism today tacitly accepts the truth

Straus makes it clear that he is not interested in questions of "compositional psychology or creative process" but on studying "musical construction. . . in music-structural terms."[10] When we look at what these "music-structural terms" are, we see that they still rely on the modernist notion that a work should follow the same basic principles on the local and the global level. For example, Straus defends his reading of the chromatic neighbor motion in Stravinsky's *Octet* precisely on the grounds that it controls small and large-scale organization:

> In tonal music the use of tonic and dominant at the local level to form cadences corresponds to the use of tonic and dominant at the highest level as tonal areas and structural goals. In the Octet Stravinsky creates a compelling analogy to this relationship by using the chromatic neighbor idea both at the local level to create a sense of cadential arrival and at the highest level as the structural background. (p. 105)

This analysis ends up being radically contextual in Babbitt's sense because we have no reason to suppose that other post-tonal works

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of this statement and sets about discovering the standards implied by a given work and testing how well it lives up to them." Cone, "Analysis Today," *Musical Quarterly* 46 (1960), 187. For a discussion of Cone's connections to New Criticism and modernism see Fred Everett Maus, "Review: Edward T. Cone, *Music: A View from Delft*," in *Music Theory Spectrum* 13/1 (1991): 99–105. Although Brown and Dempster do not use the term modernism in their paper "The Scientific Image of Music Theory," (*Journal of Music Theory* 33/1 [1989]: 65–106), they do show how Babbitt, Cone and others endorse particularism, one essential modernist trait.

[10]Modernists follow Beardsley and Wimsatt in denying the significance of external intentions to the understanding of art works. See Monroe C. Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3–18.

will also be based on chromatic double-neighbor motions. Indeed, although Straus promises to demonstrate "underlying musical structures" common to his five composers, and although he uses general concepts such as pc sets and levels, he in fact shows how each post-tonal piece represents an individual response to the problems of tonal composition. Given that Straus's methods are fundamentally modernist, it is hardly surprising that they make the music of Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky and Bartók look modernist too.

In outlining these responses to Straus's work, I do not wish to suggest that they totally undermine his work, nor that they argue against adapting critical methods from other disciplines. On the contrary, this book is interesting precisely because it breathes new life into analytical debates by absorbing ideas from other areas of research. However, Straus has taken only the first step; he needs to explore the ramifications of Bloom's work in greater detail and engage the growing body of secondary literature dealing with modernism and postmodernism.

To sum up, Joseph Straus has produced a stimulating and well-written book. As an application of Bloom's anxiety theory of influence, and as an explication of the relationship between modernist composition and the tonal tradition, it has some problems. Nevertheless, the book's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Straus has given us all much to think about and has challenged our thinking in significant ways. I certainly recommend that this book should be read by anyone interested in the development of twentieth-century music.