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## From post-tonal to postmodern? Two string quartets by Joseph Phibbs

Essentially Richard was a marooned modernist. If prompted, Gwyn Barry would probably agree with Herman Melville that the art lay in pleasing the readers. Modernism was a brief divagation into difficulty; but Richard was still out there, in difficulty. He didn't want to please the readers. He wanted to stretch them until they twanged. (Martin Amis: *The information*, p.170).

MARTIN AMIS'S 1995 NOVEL, *The information*, about a failing writer, Richard Tull, and his improbably successful confrère, Gwyn Barry, slips such knowing observations between the lines of its determinedly dystopian narrative. Leaving aside the question of whether Melville's comment ruled him out as any kind of modernist, the claim that modernism offers pain, not pleasure – that what is difficult cannot be simply, instantly enjoyable – strikes a chord at a time when, as art-critic Waldemar Januszczak has recently asserted, 'art's main task [...] is to be popular. Whatever it takes, however it's done, it needs to get punters through the door. And that's it.' Reminding his readers that the likes of Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Van Gogh 'made art for profound civilisational reasons. To memorialise, to imagine, to lament', Januszczak declared that while 'there is nothing wrong with popularity [...] the problems start when the artistic experience is distorted and cheapened to keep up visitor numbers'.<sup>1</sup> Another art critic, TJ Clark, writes in a not dissimilar vein that 'seeing is difficult' and, in a discussion of paintings by Frank Auerbach, concludes that 'the picture, if it's any good, is obliged to discover the interdependence of its features; but it also ought to show us what a strange thing – a shock, a scandal, a leap into being, a "getting in the way" of our normal fabric of vision – this *happening of totality* really is.'<sup>2</sup>

The idea that 'totality' as 'interdependence' – a classicising, integrative impulse – benefits from being offset by things that are strange and shocking seems designed to delineate Auerbach's modernistic essence, allusively estranging rather than photographically reproducing his favoured English locations. In this context, it is useful to draw a distinction between modernism as fundamentally evolutionary – questioning rather than rejecting certain traditions – and avant-garde as revolutionary, aspiring to something completely new: and it could be no less useful to acknowledge the reality of a strategy making it possible 'to have our modernist cake and eat it', as Christopher Chowrimootoo argues is the case with Benjamin

1. Waldemar Januszczak: *The Sunday Times*, 'Culture', 6 September 2015, p.17.

2. TJ Clark: 'Frank Auerbach's London', in *London Review of Books*, 10 September 2015, p.9.

Britten,<sup>3</sup> perhaps in imitation of his teacher Frank Bridge's own 'moderate modernist leanings'.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, and accepting the endless terminological slippages that seem to attend any attempt to encapsulate the entire history of aesthetic expression as a conflict between centripetal classicism and centrifugal modernism, 'middlebrow modernism' might stand for modern classicism: and modern classicism might in turn be synonymous, or closely connected to, postmodernism, on the assumption that while viable 21st-century art can never entirely escape certain modernist attributes, it might make a point of distancing itself from the purest manifestations of such attributes, even using the 'middlebrow' to destabilise the 'highbrow'. Britten's occasional blending of tonal and 12-tone after 1950 would be a case in point, countering modernism's 'divagation into difficulty' with 'pleasing' (but not 'cheapening') elements of quasi-classical stability.

### Loosely traditional

On 22 June 2012 the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, gave the world premiere of *Rivers to the sea* by the British composer Joseph Phibbs (b.1974), a 25-minute single movement whose structure, according to the composer's programme note, 'corresponds loosely to traditional symphonic form'.<sup>5</sup> Phibbs points out that the title is that of a collection published in 1915 by the American poet Sarah Teasdale (1884–1933), whose texts he has set, along with much more recent poems by Nicholas Heiney (1982–2006), in his cycle for countertenor and guitar called *Shore to shore* (2007). Appropriately enough, therefore, in *Rivers to the sea* 'the presence of the sea acts as a constant driving force behind the work as a whole'. Yet, as with Teasdale's verse, there is a no-less important urban aspect, which comes to the fore in an exuberant final section called 'Neon with sunrise' – perhaps an ironic allusion from the composer to Peter Maxwell Davies's *An Orkney wedding with sunrise* (1985). Poetically and pictorially, *Rivers to the sea* evolves from nocturnal landscape and seascape to 'cityscape' at daybreak. But Phibbs underlines a particular analogy between compositional design and the nature of river water: 'currents of sound flowing inexorably towards a greater whole, independent and yet indivisible parts of a single entity': and at the end, with 'the radiance of the sun replacing the ever-shifting world of neon', the music 'once more returns to a sense of unity'.

In themselves, references to 'a sense of unity' and 'traditional symphonic form' could indicate an aesthetic predisposition to affirm basic classical values, and a corresponding resistance to the fundamental tenets of modernism. Once more, a morass of competing terminologies beckons: music that is neither traditionally classical nor unimpeachably modernist risks being

3. Christopher Chowrimootoo: *Middlebrow modernism: Britten's operas and the great divide* (forthcoming).

4. Fabian Huss: *The music of Frank Bridge* (Woodbridge, 2015), p.146.

5. Materials provided by Joseph Phibbs.

dubbed neo-classical, neo-romantic, post-modern, experimental – even avant-garde, depending on the impressions it makes. The more categories which are devised, the greater their tendency to overlap, and the greater a reader's impatience with musico-critical hair-splitting becomes. Yet what cynics sometimes characterise as the value-free world of contemporary composition makes it difficult for thinking listeners not to turn comparison into categorisation, however provisional. That difficulty, and its possibly productive consequences, is the primary motivation – the 'constant driving force' – for this essay.

Before composing two numbered string quartets in 2014 and 2015, Joseph Phibbs made two smaller-scale contributions to the genre, the single-movement *Agea* (2007) and the three-movement *Quartettino* (2011). He has also used the quartet in two vocal works – *Canticle of the rose* (2005), *Silence at the song's end* (2008) – and the 28-bar 'Interlude' for quartet alone in *Canticle of the rose* is an exemplary demonstration of Phibbs's atmospheric way with slowly evolving and mainly soft repetitions which weave a gently insistent counterpoint. What starts out as if it might be an exercise in the minimalist latticing of short cells, following a predetermined metrical process and grounded by a sparingly repeated cello G, changes as it becomes clear that the first violin's reiterations are only part of a broader melodic shape, the whole effect creating a depth of expression unusual for such a simple and brief structure. The delicate balance struck here between similarity and difference, consistency and change, is carried over into the more active musical landscape charted in *Quartettino*, where a particular concern is to show how contrapuntal layering can move between convergence and divergence, the preparation and undermining of consonance as the ultimate embodiment of stability. Ex.1 shows the third movement's ending, where the possibility of a purely consonant A major conclusion (in bar 85) is contradicted by the first violin's G/C dyad, then by the transference of that dyad into the sustained 'G minor' pentachord (with A no longer suggesting a tonic identity) beneath which the cello, *pizzicato*, sounds an ostinato formed from alternating D $\flat$ s (notated as if to reinforce the cancellation of the earlier C $\sharp$ ) and E $\flat$ s.

The connections between such an explicitly stratified cadence and a modernist aesthetic are obvious enough: ending as resolution and integration is being called into question, and that aspect of Phibbs's work will reappear in the String Quartet no.1. But *Quartettino* followed *Agea*, and comes across as at least in part a contrast to that composition's more integrated impression. The pitch-class motto spelt out in the title (the word has no other meaning) takes G, A and D, three letters from the dedicatee George Vass's name (avoiding the R/Re/D and S/Es/E $\flat$  that would pull it closer to the 'Sacher' hexachord celebrated by Boulez and Carter<sup>6</sup>):

6. For more on the Sacher hexachord, see Arnold Whittall: *Serialism* (Cambridge, 2008), pp.146–48 & 205–09.

Ex.1: Joseph Phibbs: *Quartettino*, third movement, bars 85–89 (© Copyright G. Ricordi & Co. Ltd, London. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.)

The musical score consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The time signature is 3/4, and the tempo is marked as quarter note = 56. The score is divided into four measures. In the first measure, Violin I and II play triplets of eighth notes, with dynamics *pp* and *mp*. The Viola and Violoncello also play triplets of eighth notes, with dynamics *mp* and *pp*. The second measure features sustained notes in all parts, with dynamics *p* and *poco*. The third measure continues with sustained notes, marked *niente*. The fourth measure shows the Violoncello playing a triplet of eighth notes, marked *ppp*, while the other instruments remain silent.

and this provides a clear-cut modal as well as motivic base for the music's chromatically enriched harmonic world. The ways in which *Agea* gives A a certain priority and centrality – which nevertheless does not amount to a basis in diatonic scalar formations – offers a preview of different kinds of harmonic and textural thinking to those found in *Quartettino*. In 2015 these would serve to underscore some of the differences between the String Quartet no.2 and its immediate predecessor. On the face of it, this difference amounts to no.2 being less modernist. Would it then be too incautious to label it – along with *Agea* – as postmodernist?

### Competing terminologies

In 2005, at the end of the long 1990s – a period unusually rich in ambitious musicological forays – Richard Taruskin declared that ‘the term “postmodernism” is obviously unsatisfactory and temporary, a stopgap’, and went on to point out that Jonathan Kramer had been an early advocate of the argument that postmodernism, as then widely understood, ‘is merely the next stage in the history of modernism’.<sup>7</sup> Taruskin might also have had in mind the no-less questionable tendency of two then-recent symposia<sup>8</sup> to fuse postmodernism with experimentalism or avant-gardism, in keeping with the preferences of prominent critical theorists like Lyotard, Huyssen and Jameson. From this perspective, according to Joakim Tillman, it is postmodernism at its best, not some kind of extension or transformation of modernism, that ‘refines our sensibility to difference and reinforces our

7. Richard Taruskin: *Music in the late twentieth century* (New York, 2005), p.471.

8. *Postmodern music/post-modern thought*, edd. Judy Lochhead & Joseph Auner (New York & London, 2002); *Beyond structural listening? Postmodern modes of hearing?* ed. Andrew dell'Antonio (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 2004).

ability to tolerate the incommensurable', exhibiting 'excess and complexity far beyond that found in any other period in history', and exemplified by the music of Lachenmann and Ferneyhough.<sup>9</sup> Yet the inference of this interpretation – that the debts owed by Lachenmann and Ferneyhough to earlier modernists from Webern to Xenakis, Nono and Stockhausen are of little account compared to their most distinctive innovations – seems to mete out very rough justice to composers from whom Lachenmann and Ferneyhough might more plausibly be thought to have inherited the aesthetic if not the technical mantle of late modernism, even if their response to that inheritance was not exactly uncritical.

By 2012, with the appearance of Kenneth Gloag's *Postmodernism in music*, it was still possible to move from the critical-theoretical perspectives endorsed by those earlier symposia to the conclusion that while modernism 'proper' persisted with ideals involving unity and connectedness despite its technical, post-tonal radicalism, postmodernism celebrated plurality, of style as much as of texture. Gloag cited Charles Hamm's 1997 proclamation that postmodernism involved – among other things – 'fragmentation of style and structure within the art object' and 'the abandonment of narrative linearity', in order – as Gloag puts it later – 'to subvert that particular set of modernist beliefs around questions of originality and unity':<sup>10</sup> and the prominence in critical discourse of composers making dramatic and provocative use of stylistic disparity – Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight songs for a mad king*, Berio's *Sinfonia*, and various works by Rochberg and Schnittke from the 1960s to the 1980s were favoured points of reference – served to sharpen the debate. For some, such works were sufficiently different from the classics of early and high modernism (stretching from Schoenberg and Webern to Carter, Boulez and Birtwistle) to be thought of as – favourite word – subverting rather than intensifying modernist principles. For others, those modernist classics, despite their undeniable consistency of stylistic character, nevertheless involved the abandonment of the very particular unifying factors provided by the use of tonality. Whether atonal or, more properly, post-tonal, they were very far from unified in the tonal, classical fashion.

Around the time that Gloag's book appeared, the terminological whirlpool turned even more turbulent with two substantial contributions to the Oxford Studies in Music Theory series, by Dmitri Tymoczko and Richard Cohn. Tymoczko's vision of an 'extended common practice' with music that 'combines the intellectuality of Bach (or Debussy) with the raw energy of Coltrane (or The Pixies or Einstürzende Neubauten)' seemed to promise a potentially postmodern combination of – not confrontation between – something evoking the tonal baroque-to-impressionist tradition (perhaps bypassing the even more 'intellectual' classicism) and something more populist. Aiming to 'open new compositional doors, suggesting new

9. Joakim Tilman: 'Postmodernism and art music in the German debate', in Lochhead & Auner, edd.: *Postmodern music*, p.261.

10. Kenneth Gloag: *Postmodernism in music* (Cambridge, 2012), p.91.

ways in which we might transmute the basic materials of tonality into something rich and strange', Tymoczko plausibly suggests that 'atonality is neither so abrasive as to die out completely, nor so attractive as to achieve widespread acceptance': and the notion of new music that is 'rich and strange' rather than classically trim and straightforwardly integrated around prolonged consonant fundamentals, creatively continues what he regards as a 'genuine common practice, stretching from impressionism through jazz to contemporary postminimalism' – Debussy to John Adams, roughly speaking. Rather than taking the wrong direction offered by an early 'atonal' effort like Schoenberg's op.11 no.1 (1909), with its 'low degree of macroharmonic consistency',<sup>11</sup> this music would come closer to Bach-to-Brahms classicism in being unambiguously, though richly, prolongational, with no residue of modernism's deviation into the permutational routines of serialism and pitch-class-set technique. Such writing could be cognate with the 'extended tonality' of much 19th-century romantic, or 'early modernist' music, setting up the prospect of intriguing affinities between it and the world of Philip Rupprecht's 'triadic modernism',<sup>12</sup> or Richard Cohn's 'pan-triadic' music: 'any composition, or segment thereof, that consists exclusively or predominantly of major or minor triads without determining a tonal centre'. If pan-triadic music uses 'triads without diatonic scales', pan-diatonic music (a term apparently coined by Nicholas Slonimsky in 1937) 'uses diatonic scales without triads'.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps post-tonal, postmodern music is flexible and ambiguous enough to move connectedly between all these apparent alternatives? If so, the differences between it and classical diatonicism might justify an attribution like 'triadic' or '[pan-] triadic modernism', even when, as with Rupprecht's Britten examples, the process is to enrich and partly destabilise a single governing tonal centre.

The most revealing of Gloag's technical commentaries discuss works by two British composers, Nicholas Maw and Robin Holloway, which make 'explicit reference' to Mendelssohn and Schumann respectively. Yet just as Gloag finds in Maw's guitar piece *Music of memory* 'the attempted integration of two distinct musical contexts', and 'a sequence of connected events', so he also acknowledges the integrative impulses in Holloway's *Scenes from Schumann*, fulfilling the composer's declared aim 'not to distort but rather to amplify and intensify the originals'. Gloag suggests that both works exemplify a 'postmodernism' 'that escapes modernism in order to construct itself in relation to the premodernist movement that was romanticism'. In this way, he is able to draw on Holloway's own suggestion, in an essay first published in 1989, that far from seeking consistently to fracture and juxtapose, 'postmodernism in music "is putting the pieces together again"', and concluding that 'as time passes, there is a strong sense that the fragments want to join up again and form a coherent face'.<sup>14</sup>

11. Dmitri Tymoczko: *A geometry of music: harmony and counterpoint in the extended common practice* (New York, 2011), pp.392–95.

12. Philip Rupprecht: 'Among the ruined languages: Britten's triadic modernism, 1930–1940', in *Tonality 1900–1950: concept and practice*, edd. Felix Wörner, Ullrich Scheideler & Philip Rupprecht (Stuttgart, 2012), pp.223–45.

13. Richard Cohn: *Audacious euphony: chromaticism and the triad's second nature* (New York, 2012), p.xiv.

14. Gloag: *Postmodernism in music*, pp.70–74.

Such initiatives as those of Maw, Holloway and their successors have often been defined as a 'new romanticism', discounting the sense in which much older, 19th-century romantic music, especially in vocal genres, might be thought of as early modernist in its resistance to classical connectedness of the kind best shown by way of Schenkerian analysis. However, in the 21st century, joining up again to 'form a coherent face' now appears – as new music has less and less to do with the kind of stylistic disparities mentioned above – to be a more plausible exemplification of genuine postmodernism. Here, the impulse is to prioritise convergence over divergence, allowing those integrative tonal forces perfected in 18th-century classicism to reassert some if not all of the authority that composers did not entirely forget, even during the heady years of high and late modernism. If this is so, Taruskin's 'unsatisfactory [...] stopgap' might at last be finding a more appropriate place in the evolution of music and the periodisation of music history.

### Britten in the background

Tracing this evolution and this history in recent British music often focuses on the continuing impact of Benjamin Britten – an impact fruitful in provoking not only the resistance of high and late modernists following on from Alexander Goehr, Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies but also the degrees of continuity to be found in Maw, Holloway and such near-contemporaries as Gordon Crosse and David Matthews. In his Britten obituary, published early in 1977, Holloway described what he termed 'the malaise of music at large – the flight to the extremes that leaves the centre empty': and he went on as follows. 'I wouldn't want to say that Britten's style is in itself central, but I think it can show the way better than any other to a possible pulling-together. In particular, the combination of lucidity, emptiness and tightness in the latter works, can reveal common ground between the most unexpected and unrelated sources. This music has the power to connect the avant-garde with the lost paradise of tonality; it conserves and renovates in the boldest and simplest manner; it shows how old usages can be refreshed and remade, and how the new can be saved from mere rootlessness, etiolation, lack of connexion and communication.'<sup>15</sup>

Holloway's image of an 'empty centre' is probably not to be taken literally; it is rather that the kind of composers who seemed to be most comfortably 'middle of the road' in 1977 – Malcolm Arnold, Alun Hoddinott, Kenneth Leighton, John McCabe, William Mathias, even William Walton – wrote (by Holloway's standards) empty music. But Holloway's programme for a renovated mainstream is still quite striking if tendencies in British composition between 1977 and the present are interpreted as involving an increasing resistance to the relative extremes represented by the atonal

15. Robin Holloway: 'Benjamin Britten: tributes and memories', in *Tempo* 120 (March 1977), pp.5–6.

avant-garde on the one hand and the purest minimalism or experimentalism on the other: and at the same time an openness to the possibilities for genuine postmodernism.

In 1977, music by British composers born between 1930 and 1950 was already notably diverse – Maw as well as Maxwell Davies, Bryars as well as Birtwistle, Crosse as well as Cardew, McCabe as well as Harvey, Tavener as well as Ferneyhough, Nyman as well as Finnis: and while later generations, born between 1950 and 1980, have proved to be no less diverse, there are grounds for concluding that the strengths of high or late modernism, as manifested particularly in Birtwistle, are being less eagerly pursued than was the case before the year 2000. For example, of the composers born around 1960, who began to emerge into the limelight soon after Britten's death, James MacMillan and George Benjamin are less radically modernist than James Clarke, Simon Holt and Richard Barrett, while Jonathan Dove and Mark-Anthony Turnage have also evolved in ways which suggest that the Britten heritage is not something to be shunned at all costs.

There is a particularly close connection between community-based operas like Jonathan Dove's *Tobias and the angel* (1999) and the aspect of Britten's work which, in Philip Brett's judgement, created a satisfying balance along that 'knife-edge [...] between the genuine and the sentimental, between honesty about life's difficulties and a longing for resolution and comfort.'<sup>16</sup> The gently chiming, C-rooted higher consonances that end *Tobias and the angel* are all of a piece with the work's postmodern reliance on extended tonality: and Dove finds a way of signifying the sacred sublime without 'New Age' blandness, evoking the communal cohesion so powerfully portrayed at the end of Stravinsky's *The wedding*, along with qualities of freshness and accessibility similar to those found in John Adams's nativity oratorio *El Niño* (also 1999). By contrast, Dove's close contemporary Turnage has had rather less to do with any 'longing for resolution and comfort'. Starting with unBritten-like abrasiveness in works like *Greek* (1986–88) and *Three screaming popes* (1988–89), he has retained a harder edge while using his affinity for jazz and popular music to facilitate the kind of harmonic and textural continuities that fit with the postmodern ethos: and concert works by Turnage with an essentially optimistic message like *Speranza* (2013) seem better judged to avoid inflated sentimentality and grossness than a 'big house' opera like *Anna Nicole* (2010).

16. Philip Brett: 'Britten's dream', in *Musicology and difference: gender and sexuality in music*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, 1993), p.276. See also Peter Wiegold & Ghislaine Kenyon, ed.: *Beyond Britten: the composer and the community* (Woodbridge, 2015).

### Framing an advance

Holloway's injunction to conserve and renovate 'in the boldest and simplest manner' might stand as a motto for present-day postmodernism, implying as it does the need to avoid anything tentative or etiolated. Since Tippett's

attempts in works like *The knot garden* and *The ice break* to use urbanised brashness as an antidote to pastoral or psychological pieties British post-modernists have been wary of getting too close to those aspects of naivety and poor literary judgement that Tippett himself put up with. But in Joseph Phibbs's case the attraction of non-English contexts and more exotic domains, as found in the writings of Sarah Teasdale or Malcolm Lowry, has not prevented him from taking a new look at the kind of writers, and the kind of musical routines, that helped to form the young Britten's cultural world: writers like Hilaire Belloc, Louis MacNiece, Edith Sitwell, and musical images that are as evocative of city life as of tranquil or stormy coastal vistas.

Phibbs belongs to a generation of British composers who have found it satisfying to work within a 'mainstream' that has less to do with the high or late modernist, minimalist or experimental imperatives of such prominent predecessors as Birtwistle, Ferneyhough, Cardew, Bryars or Tavener. The example provided by (among others) Colin Matthews, Oliver Knussen, Judith Weir and James MacMillan (born between 1946 and 1959) confirmed that avoiding radical extremes need not be a recipe for blandness: and as well as Phibbs, other composers born between 1967 and 1978 – including Julian Anderson, Thomas Adès, Richard Causton, Huw Watkins and Luke Bedford – have reinforced the lesson that distinctive and well-characterised music can emerge from ways of thinking that come closer to revising (while also reinterpreting) aspects of tradition than most high or late modernists of earlier generations have done.

But this vein of lofty generality begs some crucial questions. For example, if Phibbs's works for string quartet are not firmly in the modernist tradition, how can they be understood? And if, by virtue of its particular harmonic practices, modernist music tends also to be post-tonal, does that invalidate the application of that label to Phibbs and others of his generation? Moving from generalities to particulars provides some possible answers, and my first particular comprises bars 1 to 18 of Phibbs's String Quartet [no.1] composed in 2014 (ex.2). Here the homophonic music for the three lower instruments is uniformly consonant, using only major triads until the dissonant 'non-cadence' in bars 15–16. But despite the repetitions of the initial A major triad (bar 18 marks the beginning of varied repetition of the chordal sequence, with a different 'descant') the music is not in a diatonic A major. Instead, its alignment with hexatonic or octatonic modality – the three different chords in bars 1–4 deploy an octatonic scale with one 'missing' note: A, B $\flat$ , C, C $\sharp$ , E $\flat$ , E $\sharp$ , [F $\sharp$ ], G – evokes the technical feature of Britten works like *Les illuminations* and *Seven sonnets of Michelangelo* which (as noted earlier) Philip Rupprecht has dubbed 'triadic modernism'. That Phibbs might also be using major triads to modernist ends – to undermine the



Knowledge that Phibbs has worked on Britten's music – editing some early songs, and also researching the compositional processes of *A boy was born* – might be used to make the case for dubbing him a triadic modernist. The 'loss' of triadic consonance at bar 16 of the first quartet could be seen to create a 'classic' moment of modernist disconnection, and the ambiguity of the quiet, open-string first violin A, physically joining the two segments yet drawing attention to the disparities between the ending of the first and the beginning of the second, returns in the work's final stages. As ex.3 shows,

Ex. 3: Joseph Phibbs: String Quartet no.1, fifth movement, bars 44–57 (© Copyright G. Ricordi & Co. Ltd, London. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.)

[Largo ♩ = c.58]

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

*f* < < *f* 3 5 6 *mp* < *f*

*pp* *pp* *pp* *pp*

*lunga* *lunga* *lunga* *lunga*

*dolce e espress.* *pizz.* *arco*

*p* *mp* *p* *p* *pp*

the most sustained element at the end of the first quartet is the five-note chord in the two violins and viola that begins as a G major triad with added A and replaces A with C# in bar 51. Both these sonorities can be thought of as diatonic tetrachords, though the latter, with its minor second, is inherently more dissonant than the first, and any A-focused narrative for the work as a whole is undermined by the absence of this pitch-class from the second chord. But A comes back into the picture with the observation of its use as a connecting device between the statements of the G-based chord that begins this final phase of the quartet (bars 35–38): and that A in turn has been prepared by the second violin's melodic material from bar 26 that cadences on rhetorically-stressed As. From bar 38 the cello has an elaborated version of this melody which, when it reaches the emphasised A, continues down to F# (bar 50), returning to the A above middle C as its very last pitch within the much more stable and sustained G-based chord from bar 51. As with the end of the first movement, therefore (ex.4), A is absorbed into the centre and remains central while no longer exercising a traditional tonal role as actual root and potential tonic that the work's beginning (see ex.2) has firmly planted in the ear.

As with Britten, modality seeps into tonality to render both diatonicism and chordal functionality ambiguous. But Phibbs is working 40 years after Britten's death, and what is notable in the move from his first quartet to his second, written only a year later in 2015, is a shift of balance away from any precisely comparable ambiguity. The C-ness of the second quartet is more overt than the A-(or G-)ness of the first, and the possible associations

Ex.4: Joseph Phibbs: String Quartet no.1, first movement, bars 92–99 (© Copyright G. Ricordi & Co. Ltd, London. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.)

Poco meno mosso

[♩ = c.92]

The musical score consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked 'Poco meno mosso' with a metronome marking of approximately 92 beats per minute. The score shows a complex interplay of melodic lines and sustained chords across the instruments. Dynamic markings include *p*, *mf*, *f*, and *mp*. The Viola part starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, while the Violoncello part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score is reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.

with Britten are even clearer. Britten's own second quartet celebrates C major not only by drawing consonance out of dissonance but by almost brashly emphasising diatonic essentials as a way of resolving and dissolving chromatic complexities, with their potential to promote modernist anguish and melancholia. Phibbs's long association as pupil and teacher with the Purcell School might make him no less inclined than Britten to celebrate that composer's baroque Englishness, if only as a spur to appropriately distinctive reworkings of the kind of unforced dramatic spontaneity that are Purcell's and Britten's most fruitful legacy to later British (and not only British) composers. At its most basic, that drama requires a persistent sense of connection and continuity, in the classical tradition, to be tested and enhanced rather than downgraded and disrupted: and it is in this respect that (to a distinctly greater extent than its predecessor) Phibbs's second quartet becomes a product of postmodern patterns of invention. It is not simply a matter of placing C (major) in a position of potential centrality at the start, and recovering it significantly, but with ambiguous effect, at the end. Rooted C-ness, whether triadic or by way of more complex chords, is exuberantly asserted and sustained at both points, and regularly returned to during the quartet's course.

The differences between the two quartets are especially apparent when the second seems to engage in dialogue with the first. The material of the later stages of the second's first movement echoes no.1's initial texture of melody with major-triadic accompaniment, as with the G, A, Db, Ab, C progression preceding an extended coda in which C-rootedness ultimately disappears (ex.5), a strong contrast to its sustained emphasis at the beginning. The first movement's evolution from fast toccata to slower lyricism is then matched and expanded by the scherzo-like second movement and lento finale, whose principal theme evolves from the first movement's melodic ending. Scherzo and finale are separated by an Interlude marked 'Chitarra' that generates its own fierce toccata texture, a version of which will re-emerge at the end of the finale. This ending is striking for the intensity with which it jettisons all melodic material in favour of the toccata's patterns, the harmony finally restricted to what amounts to a Lydian mode on C (ex.6). The challenge confronted here is that of the oft-perceived anonymity of post-modern patterning – its susceptibility for lapsing into minimalist chugging à la (later) Philip Glass, and the consequent endorsement of La Monte Young's intransigent proclamation that 'contrast is for people who can't write music' (1992).<sup>17</sup>

Now that the high modernism (and occasional atonality) of post-tonal expressionism has been in evidence for more than a century, there is no reason why music made in the image of those principles should seem any more original than music closer to pre-modernist principles. It

17. 'Comment to the author, 1992', in Kyle Gann: 'A technically definable stream of postminimalism, its characteristics and its meaning', in *The Ashgate research companion to minimalist and postminimalist music*, edd. Keith Potter, Kyle Gann & Pwyll ap Siôn (Farnham, 2013), p.59.

Ex. 5: Joseph Phibbs: String Quartet no. 2, first movement, bars 326–40 (© Copyright G. Ricordi & Co. Ltd, London. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.)

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. A tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 60$  is shown at the beginning. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and dynamic markings such as *p*, *pp*, *p cant.*, and *p cantabile*. The time signature changes from 2/4 to 3/4 and back to 2/4. The second system continues the musical material with similar dynamics and rhythmic complexity.

might still be easier to achieve an unsentimental dramatic force by way of modernist expressionism: yet it is probably as difficult today to bring genuine clarity to high or late modernism as it is to bring genuine energy and intensity to postmodernism. The progression in the finale of Phibbs's

Ex.6: Joseph Phibbs: String Quartet no.2, third movement, bars 126–32 (© Copyright G. Ricordi & Co. Ltd, London. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.)

[♩ = c.144]

Violin I  
*sfz* *sfz* *sfz* *fff*

Violin II  
*sfz* *sfz* *sfz* *fff*

Viola  
*sfz* *sfz* *sfz* *fff*

Violoncello  
*ff* *ff* *ff* *fff*

Violin I  
*fff*

Violin II  
*fff*

Viola  
*fff*

Violoncello  
*fff*

second quartet from uneasy, at times lamenting eloquence to economical exuberance is an instance of such genuineness. The initial diatonicism is darkened by dissonance that hints at bitonal stratification at the point of maximum tension (bar 45, ex.7): this bitonal potential is then made part of the concluding cadential build-up as non-diatonic elements are gradually erased by the persistent assertion of more basic fundamentals. This process carries conviction in the way it reinforces and clarifies fundamentals present throughout – a ‘unification of contrasts’ underlining the aesthetic and technical affinities between postmodernism and classicism.

### Epilogue

On 11 December 2015 *The Times* reviewed the London premiere of the Violin Concerto no.2 by Magnus Lindberg (b.1958). The seasoned critic in attendance, Neil Fisher, wrote that ‘the new piece makes you think most of a clutch of composers from the 1930s and 1940s. Here’s a dash of Bartók, more than a few spoonfuls of American-era Rachmaninov, and – most incongruously of all – Hollywood’s Erich Korngold swooning all over the orchestral climaxes. From the trumpets and trombones, meanwhile, come the stentorian blasts that signal Sibelius in the largest of capital letters.’

For anyone who has followed Lindberg’s music since the late 1980s, such allusions will come as no surprise, and will not exactly appear incongruous. But after these associational specifics Fisher went on to ask – and not to answer – a very general question: ‘is this mimicry, ironic pastiche or something else?’ A possible answer – ‘none of these, but rather a very contemporary brand of postmodernism’ – would be one way of indicating that those hints of Bartók, Rachmaninov and Korngold were not literal quotations juxtaposed to highlight their differences, but part of a Lindbergian continuum governed by consistent harmonic principles whose most essential affinities were with tonal classicism and romanticism rather than post-tonal modernism.

A very different kind of recent writing proposes a ‘modernist perspective’ on capitalism as ‘a system doomed to decline and collapse under the weight of its own conflicts and contradictions’, and described John Maynard Keynes, in his *General theory of employment, interest and money* (1936) as ‘obsessed [...] with the problem of stability and disruption. In contrast to the classical economists and their neoclassical heirs’ Keynes ‘was convinced that conditions of uncertainty – with the attendant social and political insecurity – should be treated as the norm rather than the exception in capitalist economies’: whereas ‘we once thought everything was stable, now we know that all is in flux’.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, to aestheticise this discourse by equating ‘stable’ with ‘classical’ and ‘flux’ with ‘modernist’ would be a very simplistic strategy. In music, at

18. Tony Judt with Timothy Snyder: *Thinking the twentieth century* (New York & London, 2012) pp.26–27; see also p.340.

Ex.7: Joseph Phibbs: String Quartet no.2, third movement, bars 41–48 (© Copyright G. Ricordi & Co. Ltd, London. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard MGB Srl - Milano.)

$\text{♩} = 56$

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

*mf* *mp*

*colla parte*  
II

*mp*

*colla parte*  
(*mp*)

*colla parte*  
*mp*

*solo*

*mf*

*mf*

any rate, to argue that classicism requires the exclusion of all ‘conditions of uncertainty’ would be as absurd as to declare that modernism demands the total absence of stability. Moreover, musical classicism can scarcely be said to have collapsed, like capitalism might, ‘under the weight of its own conflicts and contradictions’ – although it was arguably classicism’s tendency to

19. 'I do not attach so much importance to being a musical boggy-man as to being a natural continuer of properly understood good old tradition.' *Arnold Schoenberg letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins & Ernst Kaiser (London, 1974), p.100 (Letter to Werner Reinhart, 9 July 1923).

marginalise 'conflicts and contradictions' that stimulated the exploration of compositional procedures more open to their positive effects. Meanwhile, the allusive resources of Phibbs-like postmodernism include moments of affectionate, concerned scepticism about the certainties and singularities of what Schoenberg referred to, just at the time in 1923 when he was finalising his 12-tone method, as 'good old tradition'.<sup>19</sup> Such postmodernism is not so much wallowing in a warm bath of nostalgia as ruefully acknowledging how tempting such wallowing might be, if only it could be given a plausible musical identity.

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