

Ghosts and Monsters: Technology and Personality in Contemporary Music

In his infamous 1972 article "John Cage—Ghost or Monster?" Cornelius Cardew takes Cage to task on issues of political correctness. Inspired by Mao Tse-tung's 1942 essay "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art," Cardew surveys the state of new music, and Cage's work in particular, for signs of what Mao called "ghosts" ("myth, madness, magic and mysticism") and "monsters" ("anti-people ideas" having to do with technological futurism and political fascism). The avant-garde does not fare well under Cardew's hand, but if his histrionics seem quaintly dated in 1998, those two nightmarish pillars—slightly adjusted—still have relevance: ghosts and monsters still play critical, if often covert, roles in the creation of an individual composition, in the evolution of the body of a composer's work, and in the development of musical "schools" and scenes.

Sometime in the mid-1970s, I saw Dick Cavett interview American composer Ned Rorem on television. At one point Cavett asked Rorem to comment on a number of his contemporaries. When the name Pierre Boulez was mentioned, Rorem was ominously silent for a stage moment, and then replied, "Germany had Hitler, Russia had Stalin, and France has Pierre Boulez." A few years earlier, as a student, I had heard Alvin Lucier describe the trauma of his first encounter with the music of John Cage: "After that concert I stopped composing for a year and just ate pasta." (Lucier elaborates on this in his essay "Origins of a Form: Acoustical Exploration, Science and Incessancy," in this issue of *Leonardo Music Journal*.)

Rorem's vitriol contrasts sharply with Lucier's benign bamboozlement, but both illustrate the intensity of feeling engendered by powerful, influential musical figures. For centuries, composers have been buffeted by the ghosts of their predecessors and the monstrous visions of their revolutionary peers—why should things be any different today? And yet they are. Within recent pop music (especially the techno and ambient movements) and the avant-garde alike, the music of many of the more off-putting or controversial post-War composers is being rediscovered and re-evaluated on its own terms, removed from the previously looming presence of its controversial creators. Richard Barrett's diary entry in this issue ("not necessarily anything to do with Karlheinz Stockhausen") presents a re-assessment of the work of Karlheinz Stockhausen that is indicative of the responses of a younger generation of composers—responses that would have been impossible for their immediate predecessors. Ricardo Arias, in his article "From the Margins of the Periphery," discusses the cargo-cultish manner in which fragments of European and North American contemporary music entered the Latin American mainstream. He shows how the incompleteness of the received avant-garde canon, combined with the remoteness of its authors, imbued the European and North American music with a mythical, otherworldly status, quite divorced from the bickering of Darmstadt [1].

For composers of my generation—the students of the students of Cage—Boulez, Cage, Stockhausen and the titanic Dead White European Males who preceded them were just a few of a myriad of possible musical influences. Pop music was a vibrant part of our upbringing; post-Beatles and post-Monterey Pop, music of the Third World encroached on the ears of the First and Second; and composers from Lucier to Cage to Hovannes urged us to listen to the natural environment and its non-human inhabitants. Though Boulez still has a firm grip on the purse strings of French musical funding, and the ghost of Cage is still very much present in the profusion of post-mortem concerts, the "cult of personality" appears to be fading. Today a young Rorem might well substitute "Microsoft" for "Pierre Boulez" in his demonology. For many composers, technology has supplanted personality as the topic of conversation, the catalyst for change, the impediment to progress, the divisive force, the stylistic bellwether.

Many of the authors in this issue of the *Leonardo Music Journal* address pitfalls in the notion of technological progress. In Pauline Oliveros's and David Gamper's "Expanded Instrument System," contemporary software is enlisted to control a comparatively ancient signal-processor whose musical characteristics seem unavailable in any subsequent, theoretically "improved" model, in much the way one might drop a Porsche engine into a beloved old Volkswagen Beetle. Robert Poss discusses the curious mix of technological generations and standards of quality that make up the ideal signal chain from electric guitar to compact disc ("Distortion Is Truth").

Scott Gresham-Lancaster tells the history of the Hub, the world's first networked computer-music ensemble, with a focus on the intertwined relationship between technological "upgrades" and changes in musical methodology within the group ("Making Music in the Tides of Changing Technology"). David Behrman and Ron Kuivila discuss the relationship between personality and technology in the work of composer/performers who also design their own software or hardware, with particular attention to the influence of shared tools ("Composing with Shifting Sand").

Jonathan Impett presents an overview of the roles of instrumental technology in the performance practice of Early and contemporary music ("The Identification and Transposition of Authentic Instruments: Musical Practice and Technology"). My essay, "Ubiquitous Electronics," speculates on the influence of recording on changes in the methods of musical production and in the public's expectations of musical performance.

These essays are complemented by a compact disc (CD), produced by Matthias Osterwold. From Alexander Abramovitch Krejn's 1925 *Memorial Ode on the Death of Vladimir Illyich Lenin* and Paul De Marinis's processing of the *Lecture of Comrade Stalin at the Extraordinary 8th Plenary Congress about the Draft Concept of the Constitution of the Soviet Union on November 25, 1936*, through Cornelius Cardew's Maoist *There Is Only One Lie, There Is Only One Truth* and Alvin Lucier's reworking of John Lennon's *Strawberry Fields (Nothing Is Real)*, to John Cage's *Writings Through the Essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" (Henry David Thoreau)* and Markus Popp's George Orwell-lite brand of futurism (*Vario*)—Osterwold has assembled a CD that makes overt and covert, impassioned and tongue-in-cheek references to the rubric of "ghosts and monsters."

Long before Cardew, Cage or Mao, people were wrestling with the crisp "anti-people" potentials of technology and with the murky dangers of "myth and magic"; with the competing claims of politics and personality; and with the sweet seductions of cult loyalty. Perhaps the most interesting thing to emerge from the music and writing collected here is the sense that composers no longer see themselves as sailing between Scylla and Charybdis—monsters left, ghosts right—but have instead settled on the bridge over the abyss, hanging out the shingle: "Composers at Work, Ghosts and Monsters Welcome."

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Note

1. Arbeitstagung Darmstadt is a very influential, often controversial, annual summer symposium of new music that has taken place in the small German city of Darmstadt since the 1950s.