

Contemporary Musical Art

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Contemporary Music and the Methods of its Analysis*

Tatiana V. Tsaregradskaya[✉]

*Gnesin Russian Academy of Music,
Moscow, Russian Federation,*

t.tsaregradskaya@gnesin-academy.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8436-712X>

Abstract. The article raises the question of what is considered to be contemporary music today. The author notes the variability of the interpretation of this concept, due to the change of the philosophical and aesthetic attitudes in recent art, emphasizing that the concept of “contemporaneity,” which has been developed in European culture, is now unable to reflect adequately the essence of what is happening. The article is devoted to the approaches of analysis of contemporary music that can be found in the Proceedings of the European Music Analysis Conferences (EuroMAC). Three conferences that took place in 2014, 2017 and 2021 were used as sources of information on analysis of contemporary music. A study of this body of texts shows that contemporary music analysis at the present moment has not demonstrated any fundamentally new means of study, but the present-day methods are numerous in their quantity, and the main process of their application is concentrated on the expansion of musical material.

Keywords: contemporary music, academic music, popular music, music analysis, corpus studies, conferences EuroMAC

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What is Contemporary Music?¹

Contemporary music for the Gnesin Academy's scholarly tradition is a significant phenomenon. In the early 1980s, at the end of the so-called "period of stagnation," the Gnesin Institute obtained in the person of Natalia Sergeevna Gulyanitskaya, a noteworthy and sagacious scholar who laid the foundation in musicological research of contemporary music. It was particularly at that time that the monograph *Vvedenie v sovremennuyu garmoniyu* [*Introduction to Contemporary Harmony*]² was written by her, at that same time in her class the dissertations by Vitaly Aleev, Tatiana Naumenko, Yuliya Panteleeva and many other musicologists who presently teach at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music were prepared and defended. All of us have been bestowed the honor to continue this direction, connected with comprehending the regular laws of the newest music. and today, as it seems to me, it becomes fit to ask the question: what is contemporary music?

During those years that passed since the moment Natalia Gulyanitskaya's monograph was published, many things have changed. The accents have shifted. And the question of what is "contemporary music" is interpreted today differently than it was even 20 years ago, when on one of our traditional conferences I made a presentation titled "A Course on Contemporary Music as a Pedagogical Issue" (2004). At that time, it was necessary to pay attention for the first time how the previously

unconnected trends of popular and academic classical music were coalescing together. Now even professionals have stopped being shocked by the study of the classical and popular traditional courses — as it is well known, in recent years the tutorial course for bachelor students "Music of the Second Half of the 20th Century and the Beginning of the 21st Century" has been developed and introduced into universities. As for the broader circle of students, more measured and tenacious interpretations have been developed for them. The authors of the textbook *Muzyka* [*Music*] write: "Folk, sacred and academic classical music — being at the forefront during the course of several centuries, — are at the present time hardly the sole exceptional forms of musical being. An immense amount of other kinds of music have invaded our lives which it is not possible to ignore — at least in virtue of the variety of its styles, as well as the demand for it on the part of a significant part of the audience of listeners. Jazz, rock, pop music, disco, author songs, rap, etc. — all of these are new and latest styles of music that live and develop themselves in accordance to their own laws. Correspondingly, the present-day musical life has become a more diverse and motley phenomenon than it has ever been up to now. Now it unites the most diverse musical spheres, directions, styles, genres, national traditions and even cultures in broad terms.

The very concept of contemporary music has changed. For example, in the milieu of professional music, the music labelled

¹ Author's note for the present edition. This article was prepared ten years ago and it means a lot for everybody who is interested in the topic. The text cannot be understood as a status quo for the present situation in music because of different and rapid changes in what can be considered as "contemporary" in music as well as in music analysis: today. Therefore, it may be useful only as a source of historical information: what was considered "contemporary" ten years ago by the author cannot be relevant for the situation in 2024.

² Gulyanitskaya N. S. *Vvedenie v sovremennuyu garmoniyu* [*Introduction to Contemporary Harmony*]. Moscow: Muzyka, 1984. 256 p.

as contemporary is frequently the academic music composed during the last few decades. At the same time, beyond the confines of this milieu, it is non-academic music that is considered to be contemporary. Even the direct contrast of ‘classical music vs. contemporary music’ is often found, where the place of the ‘classics’ is taken up by composers of bygone epochs, whereas modernity is associated exclusively with various youth directions. As a consequence of this, the artistic situation has been further complexified by the ambiguity in its definitions.” [1, pp. 5–6] In this particular case, the authors base themselves on a broad spectrum of opinions that the Internet demonstrates for us — both the Russian and the English.

Generally, the Internet, its collective consciousness is sometimes capable of delineating the situation very vividly. When typing the word combination “contemporary music” on the online search engine, we are confronted with a despairing wail: *“Help us write an article on the theme of ‘how I understand the concept of contemporary music,’ very urgently needed, write it pleeeeeeease!”*

And a very deserving answer to this (a pity that it has remained anonymous) is: *“By ‘contemporary music’ I understand that music which would for a certainly not be understood by the people of the past. People from the 19th century would never understand the music of such styles as punk rock, or noise, but they would find quite close kinship with the contemporary romance song, music written in the neoclassical style or contemporary folk music. ‘Contemporary music’ is the music that creates new styles and directions solely by its very existence, which changes the concept of ‘music’ itself. Even many contemporary people would not understand the greater part of electronic music, such styles as industrial music or death metal. This is neither good nor bad, but simply that this music is not meant*

for them. Our generation will also look at the new styles that very soon our children and grandchildren will invent, and similarly we will not understand, how it is possible to listen to such, and ‘why they are dancing to the sounds of the wound-up ‘Belarus’ tractor.’ This problem is relevant at all times.”

Here our attention is drawn to the following characterization: “Contemporary music” is the music that creates new styles and directions solely by its very existence, which changes the concept of “music” itself. And here it makes sense for us to ponder upon the fact that, in essence, one of the constituent parts of “contemporary music” has always been the understanding of music as something “new,” which had not existed before. In other words, the concept of “modernism,” comprehending the new as a principally important characterization of the present-day condition of artistic culture, and any other kind, has been firmly ingrained into the context of the word “contemporary.” And so it has been for the condition of art up until the late 1960s (see: [2]). The emergence of any given trend gave the feeling of forward motion, the sensation of the continuation of contemporaneity, its renewal and progress.

However, the situation in the 1980s, as we can see now, is characterized by something new. The art of music outside of Russia entered a new convolution, when post-structural philosophy and post-structural methodologies rapidly entered the spotlight, with their emphasis on decentralization and deconstruction.

The chief trait of development of music turns out to be the erasure of boundaries. The swiftly formed process of convergence of various directions also developed itself in popular music, as well, a striking example of which is the specific phenomenon of the crossover into classical academic music, too. After the adaptation of ethnic music within the frameworks of avant-garde music (in the works of La Monte Young, Terry

Riley and Philip Glass), after bringing in improvisational approaches in the works of Cornelius Cardew and Frederick Rzewski, onto the proscenium of history enter the composers who have done the same thing in the sphere of rock music: those are Laurie Anderson, Peter Gordon, Gene Tyranny, and Paul Dresher. As rock composer Rhys Chatham writes, “We continued to ask the question, ‘Can this too, be considered art music?’ This was not, of course, to imply that rock is not art. The question we were addressing was how far could we go in incorporating the rhythms, sounds, and working methods of rock into art music before turning it completely into rock.”³

Composers Muhal Richard Abrams and Leroy Jenkins tried to fit in the serial technique with improvisation, while some rock groups have held the course at the use of the noises of *musique concrète*. The destruction of the barriers between academic classical, improvised and rock music was becoming more complete. Rock musicians, such as Brian Eno, were doing the same thing that John Cage was, — they were creating sound installations. Terminologically this may be indicated as transgression, which, essentially, is defined as the overcoming of absolutely all boundaries. And then what comes out on the surface is the question of the context of music. As Rhys Chatham writes, “...art music made by art composers in a rock context was rock music; ...where improvised music made by rock composers in a jazz festival context was warmly welcomed by the jazz audience.”⁴ Which is what we see, when a musical composition becomes the object of even the slightest arrangement; little is required for even Bach or Mozart to

sound as jazz or rock composers. Minimalism or aleatory music overcome genre-related barriers even faster. The fall of hierarchies opens up maximally broad perspectives for the creators of music and make them deceptively accessible. And as a result, the composer, not being fettered by anything, may choose the style in which he writes, regardless of whether or not it is new. This is how “post-expressionism,” or “late modernism” has emerged in British music, for example, in the works of Harrison Birtwhistle or Mark-Anthony Turnage.

An Analysis of Contemporary Music: A Glance from 2014

Certain effects arise out of the described state of affairs. There is the theoretical-philosophical effect: the very notion of “contemporary” as a concept formed of the entire European history, from antiquity to modern times is gradually becoming inadequate to the essence of the phenomenon. Of all the humanitarian disciplines, philosophy comes closest to the comprehension of such a situation, since in the latter we are suggested to accept the perception of the so-called “new antiquity.” The practical effect poses the question: how should we analyze such compositions that combine the features not only of different styles, but different arts and different cultural paradigms? It is referred to the working-out of approaches capable of giving clue to such phenomena. In the present day, the analysis of such music presents the most acute problem. After all, a composition of a free-improvisational or a jazz direction exists not in the form of a fixed text, but more often than not possesses either a very conditionally symbolic form or simply a form not captioned

³ Chatham R. *Composer's Notebook 1990. Toward a Musical Agenda for the Nineties*.

URL: http://www.rhyschatham.net/nintiesRCwebsite/Essay_1970-90.html (accessed: 15.07.2024).

⁴ Ibid.

in notation. The search for different approaches is undergone by researchers. Some of them were demonstrated at the Eighth European Music Analysis Conference (EuroMAC 2014), which took place at the Catholic University in Leuven (Belgium).

The tone of the conference was set by the French Society for Music Theory, which in its proposal for the round table of the conference indicated in an extremely precise manner the main issue — what is music analysis today? Does it have to be structural or context-dependent, should we rely on the fixed notated musical text, as we have always done previously, or are there possibilities to do otherwise? Among the 28 sections comprising the basis of the conference, only 4 (!) were devoted entirely to analysis of music comprising the European musical heritage. The others were connected with the issues of 20th and 21st century music. The titles of some of the sections were quite expressive, for example “Analysis Beyond the Boundaries of Notation.” In this section, organized by our Italian colleagues, among other issues, the questions of analysis of popular songs expressed while not being written down were examined. Popular music, as we all perceive it, exists as the result of the superimposition of a certain musical idea, then its arrangement, then the convergence of the sound engineer — and this convergence reveals what previously Yuri Kholopov called “the third dimension of music,” which is what he considered its depth, i.e., its spaciousness. Without this, it becomes practically impossible in the present day to analyze popular music, whether it be art rock or ambient. Another question regarding the analysis of popular music, nonetheless, remains to be the question of its notation and the perfection of this notation, since many compositions presently have a very conditional appearance from the perspective of traditional musicology. Such is the perspective of the jazz standard (Example No. 1).

Example No. 1

Gerald Wilson. *Nancy Joe*

Another section, connected with analysis of contemporary music, was examining analysis of electronic music. Since an electroacoustic composition is essentially music presenting solely a computer sound (for example Xenakis *La légende d'eer* or Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*), analysis of such music is realized into written form through a peculiar “topographic analysis” of the particularities of the texture, their transmission into a picture or a sort of graphic notation (see Example No. 2).

The problems arising here are such: if we rely solely on aural impression, can it be considered adequate to the visual-auditory, when the text is both written down and may be perceived by an inner ear? Is there a possibility for such kind of symmetrical “inner sight,” when what has been heard acquires the form of visual notation capable of transmitting musical processes?

A different type of problem arises in the case of a mixed score possessing both an electronic line and a more traditional instrumental-vocal component: how can we analyze the dependence of these strata of the score? And here we already encounter absolutely different horizons of musicological analysis: the problem of analyzing the particular computer program with the aid of which the composition was created. Such kinds of examples of new musicological manufactured articles already exist: French scientists have published

Example No. 2

Karlheinz Stockhausen. *Expo für 3*

The image displays a complex musical score for three voices (I, II, III) from Karlheinz Stockhausen's 'Expo für 3'. The score is written on three staves and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is annotated with red brackets and green numbers 1 through 7, highlighting specific sections. There are also two green 'insert' labels with arrows pointing to specific parts of the score.

books titled *Contemporary Compositional Techniques and OpenMusic* [3] or *Unsayable Music: Six Reflections on Musical Semiotics, Electroacoustic and Digital Music* [4]. The principle of approach here remains quite comprehensible and very familiar — if you wish to find out how something is constructed, — replicate it, but this means that knowledge of computer compositional technologies must come into the life of the musicologist, and this requires great efforts and a qualitatively different preparation.

Several independent sections were devoted to analysis of popular music. Jazz harmony became the topic of a separate discussion, as did various approaches to the analysis of popular music, in general. What becomes especially significant is not only the incorporation of jazz harmony into the overall context (this has already been done in Kholopov’s textbook⁵), but the development of entire “grammar books” — individual harmonic systems intrinsic to any particular outstanding musician, whether it be Charlie Parker, or Wayne Shorter.

⁵ Kholopov Yu. N. *Garmoniia. Prakticheskii kurs: uchebnik dlya spetsial'nykh kursov konservatorii (muzykovedcheskie i kompozitorskie otdeleniia). V. 2 ch. Ch. 2. Garmoniia XX veka [Harmony. A Practical Course: A Textbook for Specialized Courses of Conservatories (Musicology and Composition Departments). In 2 Vols. Vol. 2. 20th Century Harmony]*. Moscow: Kompozitor, 2003. 624 p.

Traditional academic music was also not passed over. One of the questions was formulated the following way: what do we analyze? Naturally, the answer varied, depending on what musical direction was meant? While in the music of the super-sophisticated variety (such as the works of Ferneyhough, for example), the musical text proper could have been examined through “telescopic” optics, the works of the opposite trends (for example, minimalism) call for a closer proximity, similar to a microscope. The combination of such “optical” strata transform the analyst into a sort of “universal surgeon” capable of unclosing the regularities of both a micro- and a macro-level of a musical composition.

Contemporary Music and the Current State of Affairs

The subsequent steps regarding the questions of interpreting what comprises contemporary music and the methods of its analysis belong to the “cumulative sense” of the subsequent congresses of the Societies for Music Theory. Let us follow them in contour through published materials.

In 2017 EuroMAC was organized in Strasbourg: Le 9^{me} Congrès européen d’analyse musicale (EuroMAC 9). It started with a plenary presentation, where the directors of the French Society for Analysis, Marie-Noëlle Masson and Jean-Pierre Bartoli expressed their collective opinion concerning contemporary analysis, and also made the attempt of classifying the existent approaches. By the title of their plenary presentation “Is Analysis an Autonomous Subject? The Formal, Theoretical and Computer Models in the Analysis of Popular Music” they highlighted the vector of the development of this discipline — *corpus studies*, and also accentuated the means of action within the framework of this important direction — group research projects (both American

and French scholars worked together during the course of the aforementioned project). [5]

At the present day, the 10th European Music Analysis Conference, which took place in Moscow in 2021, has remained “at the forefront” in the research of analysis as a discipline. How was contemporary music presented at this grandiose musicological forum? To analyze this, let us make use of the published materials of the Congress. [6]

For the beginning, let us note that the “gigantism” intrinsic to all the EuroMacs was especially perceptible here. 55 sections — such a large quantity was not known to any of the congresses. Were there any sections devoted to analysis of contemporary music? Inevitably, they were there, and the modes of its research cause us to ponder about what direction is chosen by the present-day analyst along the way of study of the newest kinds of music? Here are several observations.

If we take as a basis the directedness of the plenary presentations as a vector in the development of Russian musicology, then in their enumeration we shall see the following:

- The Post-Scriptum as a Mode of Expression of a Composer (Alexander Sokolov, Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory; Society for Theory of Music, Russia);

- What Analysis Does to Musical Works (Moderator of the Round Table — Jean-Marc Chouvel, Sorbonne University; French Society for Music Analysis);

- Analyzing Fragmentary Evidence: Revealing the Remnants of a Medieval Motet Book in Stockholm (Catherine A. Bradley, University of Oslo; Society for Music Analysis, UK);

- L’abduction dans la pensée de Schenker [On the Impact of Schenker’s Musical Thinking] (Pedro Purroy (Zaragoza) and Josep Margarit, Barcelona; Associació de Teoria i Anàlisi Musicals [Association of Musical Theory and Analysis]);

– Nikša Gligo's Criteria of Evaluation of New Music of the 20th Century: A Retrospective (Sanja Kiš Žuvela, Academy of Music, University of Zagreb, Croatia; Croatian Society of Music Theorists);

– Li Bai, Set to Music by European Composers. On the Relations between Music, Words and the Cultivation of Strangeness (Gesine Schröder, Hochschule für Musik und Theater "Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," Leipzig, and Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst, Wien; The Society of German-Speaking Music Theory);

– Music Notation as Analysis (Nicolas Meeùs, Sorbonne University; Belgian Society for Music Analysis);

– Engaging Beethoven Today (Panel discussion, participants: John Koslovsky, Conservatorium van Amsterdam / Utrecht University; Cecilia Oinas, Sibelius Academy / University of the Arts Helsinki; Lea Fink, Max Planck 9 Institute for Empirical Aesthetics; Yannis Rammos, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland; Dutch-Flemish Society for Music Theory);

– The Dark Side of the Soul. A Topical Approach to Scriabin on the Example of the *Sixth Piano Sonata* (Marcin Trzęsiok, The Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice, Poland; Polish Society for Music Analysis);

– Analysis of Post-Dodecaphonic Languages. In Memoriam Bruno Maderna (1920–2020) (Mario Baroni, Università di Bologna; Italian Society for Music Analysis and Music Theory);

– Beyond the Pitch/Pitch-Class Dichotomy: Register, Altered Octaves and the Harmonic Imagination in Twentieth-Century Modernism (José Oliveira Martins, University of Coimbra; Sociedade Portuguesa de Investigação em Música [Portuguese Society for Music Research]);

– SATMUS: The First Year of Activities (Cristóbal García, Conservatorio Superior

de Málaga (High Conservatory of Malaga) and José Luis Besada, Complutense University of Madrid; Sociedad de Análisis y Teoría Musical [Society for Music Analysis and Theory]);

– Theoretical and Analytical Aspects of Musical Interpretation: Approach to Acoustic Dynamics (Zoran Bozanic, Faculty of Music in Belgrade; Srpsko društvo za muzičku teoriju [Serbian Society for Music Theory]);

– North-American Schenkeriana, Schoenbergiana, Stravinskiana, Riemanniana and Cageana (L. Poundie Burstein, Hunter College and CUNY; Severine Neff, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Pieter van den Toorn, University of California, Santa Barbara; Alexander Rehding, Harvard University; and David W. Bernstein, Mills College; plenary session moderators: Michael Beckerman, New York University, and Ildar Khannanov, Peabody Institute, Johns Hopkins University; North-American Theory Welcome Session).

From these directions indicated by the collective reasons of the various societies (14 presentations!) we can arrive at the conclusion that, on the one hand, the interest towards contemporary music remains at a constant level: this is testified by such "vectors" indicated at the plenary presentations as Schenker (one of the significant European publications about Schenker in recent years is an article by French researcher Nicolas Meeùs [7]), post-dodecaphony, topoi in contemporary music (among the latest works on this subject see James Donaldson's article: [8]), American corpus studies (among the recent works, see: [9]) in regard to a whole set of figures of 20th century music; most intriguing was the "entry" into the non-pitch realms of dynamics and registers, as well as into the sphere of evaluating music. But the sensation arises that notwithstanding the twenty-odd years that have passed since the advent of the 21st century, nothing principally new in music theory and analysis

has appeared, and on the surface of music theory scholarship there have not yet appeared any fundamental research works about the latest few decades or any breakthrough theories. Let us emphasize, however, the directive that is

essential for this thought — *on the surface*, and express the cautiously optimistic opinion: very likely, somewhere in the depths of our discipline there are processes unnoticed by us, and we are standing on the threshold of new discoveries...

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Information about the author:

Tatiana V. Tsaregradskaya — Dr.Sci. (Arts), Professor, Professor at the Department of Analytical Musicology, Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, Moscow, Russian Federation.

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