Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf
Second Modernity—An Attempted Assessment

The term "second modernity" refers, however provisionally, to what follows postmodernity—"following" both in the sense of temporal succession and in the sense of drawing aesthetic conclusions. To speak of a second modernity implies that one of postmodernity's main theses, namely that history had reached its end and postmodernism had overcome modernism once and for all, is false. In music, second modernity is an approach that breaks with fundamental aesthetic convictions of postmodernity. These are primarily the belief that a modern, new, innovative musical material is no longer possible and that therefore all manner of material, regardless of its historical, stylistic and functional context, is equally usable, and that for this reason a self-consistent style defined with reference to the present is not possible, and indeed not desirable.

One of the hallmarks of the second modernity is the fact that it shares neither of these tenets. It is concerned with cohesive styles—i.e., styles that are coherent in terms of technique, material and semantics—using modern material, elements that have developed in recent times. The second modernity does not define itself merely negatively as a rejection of postmodernism, however, but also positively, by expressing solidarity with the tenets of classical modernism and the avant-garde. These are above all the belief in experimentation and innovation, and the conviction that construction, i.e., the technical validation of the musical discourse, is indispensable.

For second modernity is not simply the negational counter-movement to postmodernism and solidarity with high modernism; to the extent that it develops, it will bring forth new aesthetic characteristics which, one hopes, have a future. Second modernity means working on the project of a future that is open and which artists can aim for productively.

If one casts a glance at composers up to the age of ca. 50 today, one can observe a plural panorama of numerous and divergent positions that can be considered to belong to second modernity. Providing an overview of these would only be possible for someone who subjected the work of such composers to precise examination with empathy and meticulousness. One would have to take into account those composers who are already considered part of second modernity, for example (in alphabetical order), Mark André, Richard Barrett, Pierluigi Billone, Chaya Czernowin, Sebastian Claren, Frank Cox, Liza Lim, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Chris Mercer, Brice Pauset, Enno Poppe, Wolfram Schurig, Steven Kazuo Takasugi, Franck Yeznikian, and others who also deserve to be mentioned under the same heading. Whoever wishes to embark on such a study must take into account the individuality of each approach as a unique constellation of aesthetics, technique, material and semantics.

With a view of the overall situation, one can say that the aforementioned composers, for all their differences, are connected by a collection of characteristics—one could almost say: through a common catalogue of values.

1. They compose works, and do so in conjunction with a critical engagement with the work concept. "Work" means a constructed, through-composed entity with clear internal and external boundaries, not an experimental setup with uncertain results. The avant-garde's experience that the work is *also* problematic does not enter the form itself, but rather the resistant, dissonant expression of the music.

2. They construct their material as an autonomous material. The difference here between second and first modernity is that now the progress of material, material innovation, and the fixation on—as well as reduction to—a personal style are no longer central concerns. It is taken for granted that the material is modern; but it can, depending on the work—Harry Lehman[1] would say the work's substance—vary. The aesthetic success of a work is not least dependent on an agreement between the chosen material (or materials) and the conception of the work, and it is the conception that governs the construction of the material. This ensures that the material is not—as in postmodernism—dealt with arbitrarily.

3. The composers of second modernity assume a critical stance towards contemporary culture, and are hence not motivated primarily by careerism. They are interested in the development of their personal style, their poetics and their life's work, not—or at least not primarily—in satisfying modish needs. As today's culture continues to be postmodern, and thus "plays the game of irony with pleasure" and is geared towards "entertainment," the art of second modernity stands in opposition to this in its emphasis on seriousness and artistic truth.

4. The composers of the second modernity are aesthetically enlightened in their thinking and aware in their compositional technique. The former means that they work on the unsolved *aporiae* of postmodernism (but also classical modernism and the avant-garde) *as* problems, the latter that this occurs not only in terms of the own artistic philosophy, so to speak as a declaration of intent, but rather in the process of going through the rationality of the compositional act.

It is not difficult to tell from these four characteristics that not all younger composers—not even the majority—should automatically be considered part of second modernity. Second modernity is not simply a period, a temporal division, a particular generation, but rather a qualitative concept (leaving aside the fact that some composers wish to have no part in second modernity, or

---

1   See footnote 5.

at least the discussion thereof.) It should not be forgotten that postmodern, avant-garde, anti-modern and modern (in the sense of first modernity) attitudes will continue to exist, and do so independently of the age of those who display them.

It would seem indispensable to point out that the second modernity is as multi-faceted and internally differentiated—as plural, one could say—as all art and all times have been. The different aesthetic emphases and characters, different cultural contexts and sensitivities naturally affect the approaches of the individual artists. One can thus distinguish between positivist and negativist, secular and religious, optimistic and resignatory, expressionist and impressionist, sound-oriented and discourse-oriented, constructivist and deconstructivist, holistic and dislocatory, centered and multi-perspectival, formalist and narrativist tendencies. Evidently one finds a recurrence of the whole spectrum of expressive types that developed throughout modernity.

<div align="center">*</div>

As so often, art theory was quickest off the mark: in 1994, Heinrich Klotz published a book with the tripartite chronological form whose temporal scheme naturally has a systematic core: *Moderne—Postmoderne—Zweite Moderne*.[2] Among other things, Klotz discovered a second modernity in architecture (the very same field in which the postmodernism debate in art had been carried out most vehemently, and probably also most convincingly), namely in deconstructivist architecture, represented by such figures as Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenman, Frank O. Gehry, Rem Kohlhaas and Coop Himmelblau. Just as postmodernism in architecture transpired once an approach that had become sterile and formalistically cold (and therefore offered little potential for creative expansion)—a prominent example would be Gropius—had run its course, a subsequent counter-movement with conscious references to classical modernism, a new aesthetic that broke with postmodernism. As the parallels to music are not only numerous, but also highly evident[3], it is certainly no futile undertaking to apply this tripartite scheme also to art music.[4]

---

2   Heinrich Klotz, *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert. Moderne—Postmoderne—Zweite Moderne* (Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1994).

3   See Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, "Architektur und neue Musik," in *Musik und Architektur*, ed. Christoph Metzger (Saarbrücken: Pfau Verlag, 2003).

4   This is reinforced by Josef Häusler's characterization of Ferneyhough as the "harbinger of a 'second modernity'" (*Spiegel der neuen Musik: Donaueschingen. Chronik—Tendenzen— Werkbesprechungen* [Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1996], p. 354). See also Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, "Neue Musik am Beginn der Zweiten Moderne," in *Merkur* 594/595 (1998); "Thesen zur Zweiten Moderne," in *Musik & Ästhetik* 36 (2005); "Die Zweite Moderne als kompositorische Praxis. Oder: Was mich mit Steven Kazuo Takasugi verbindet," in *Orientierungen. Wege im Pluralismus der Gegenwartsmusik*, ed. Jörn Peter Hiekel (= Veröffentlichungen des Instituts

We would argue that it is only meaningful to speak of second modernity if it is viewed as a reaction, response or result of the postmodern situation. Second modernity in music is the attempt to approach the unsolved problems of post-modernity—including those by necessity left unsolved—productively, taking up aesthetic principles from the time before postmodernity in different ways and opening the door to the future. Second modernity is thus not a denial of postmodernity—which, surprisingly, is validated precisely from the perspective of second modernity—nor a neurotic defense reaction or willful ignorance. Second modernity can only be plausible, not least in our increasingly anti-artistic and anti-intellectual times, if it addresses factual issues with all its power.

In this context it is beneficial to outline one of the most productive theoretical approaches for aesthetic modernity, one that treats this as actually extending to the present(!). Harry Lehmann[5] reconstructs the history of modern art, which gained systemic autonomy in the Italian Renaissance, when the distinction was made between art and non-art and artistic beauty was discussed for the first time, as a history of progressive differentiation processed through its three fundamental components: work (the individual artistic product), medium (the "material" [in the case of music: sound, pitches, rhythms, temporal organization]) and reflection (semantics). In classical modernity the work and the medium were separated—tonality was abandoned—and replaced by new media in each instance, while reflection remained tied to an underlying philosophy, creating the possibility of becoming the heir to Classicism. Whereas classical modernity negated the medium, the avant-garde negated the work, which it separated from reflection; it did this through non-works in order to bring reflection to a state of autonomy, which is particularly evident in concept art.

These stages form the parts of first modernity, which postmodernity rejected after it had seemingly led to the much-vaunted and oft-discussed end of art history. For if the medium is present as an everlasting problem and reflection is freed by the abolition of the work, this explains why certain composers became specialists for different areas of material—Cage for chance, Boulez for structure, Stockhausen for formula, Grisey for spectrum, Xenakis for stochastic processes, Scelsi for one-note music, Nono for sound and silence, Lachenmann for noises, Ferneyhough for parameters—and music repeatedly broke out of the boundaries of its own self-identity time and again: from Fluxus, aleatoricism, musical theater to installations, crossover attempts, even private ontologies à la Stockhausen. Up until the dubious emancipation that came with postmoder-

---

für neue Musik und Musikerziehung Darmstadt, vol. 47) (Mainz: Schott Verlag, 2007). See also the article "Zweite Moderne und Musiktheater" in *Musik & Ästhetik* 30 (2004) by Peter Ruzicka, who made "Second Modernity" the theme of the New Music section of the Salzburger Festspiele in 2005.

5   Harry Lehmann, "Avant-Garde Today. A Theoretical Model of Aesthetic Modernity," in Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, ed., *Critical Composition Today* (= New Music and Aesthetics in the 21st Century, vol. 5), (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2006).

nity, first modernity therefore worked through a rigorous process of research into material, structure, form and concept, which, having arrived at a certain point, inevitably reached a phase of exhaustion.

There is a complementary relationship between aesthetic modernity and the avant-garde: while the former sought to explore and expand the immanent range of musical possibilities, the latter attempted to revolutionize the performative character, world-relation and social standing of music; its outside, so to speak. We know that the two cannot be reconciled, and, as long as the world's evolution maintains its directional logic, we must live with this. If postmodernism, with its mischievous, playful, Siegfried-like and untroubled, pragmatic and worldly, anti-metaphysical—but at times simply reactionary—nature had not appeared on the scene, one would have to ask oneself what would have become of modern art. At some point the material would have been fully explored, and those who sought to change the world would inevitably have despaired at the world. Innovation and rupture would have imploded. Remarkably, however, there is an autopoiesis of human creativity that develops its cunning at specific moments in history.

Postmodernism, according to Lehmann, rebels against the orientation towards negation, problems and impossibility and breaks with these taboos; it negates the negation of the medium by making all media—all states of material, i.e., all historically and globally available musical styles—possible. It is concerned with these contingent possibilities "without problems." Work and medium are thus reunited, but as difference; for both can be chosen freely, as it were non-committally, without the internal mediation present in the metaphysical idea of classical modernism, for example the Second Viennese School. The historical achievement of postmodernity is hence that of breaking out of a modernity that had become orthodox—blind, stubborn and unproductive—and, Lehmann argues, the retrieval of the medium, this time even in its autonomy.

The extent of the breach becomes clear through a comparison with the two most important characteristics of "first" modernity: *reductionism* is the aesthetic program of basing an *œuvre* on a particular musical quality, usually the specialty of the respective composer. Though following a particular "sound design" assists the recognizability of the works (and thus also their comprehensibility), it also restricts the internal complexity of a life's work. *Centrism* is related to this: insistence on a "strong thought" that aims for unity, self-identity and inner systematicity.

In musical postmodernity, on the other hand, one finds categorially different aesthetic and composition-technical premises.[6] On the whole the following applies: 1. The postmodern musical work is hedonistic; it shows an enjoyment of its own combinatorial imagination with a certain frivolous air unique to

---

6   See Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, "Theorie der musikalischen Postmoderne," in *Musik & Ästhetik* 46 (2008).

music; its reception occurs in the mode of pleasure. 2. The postmodern musical work is narrative; it presents a musical narrative, not a composition of sounds or structures. 3. The postmodern musical work is formally heteronomous, i.e., the difficult problem of form is solved, and this is achieved through a strong connection to previously existing and functioning forms. 4. The postmodern musical work refers outside of itself; its material is taken from other music. 5. The postmodern musical work is ironic, and thus pushes artistic truth towards a distortion of the truth and shows that what is presented is not intended in the way it is presented. Between these five characteristics one naturally finds different combinations and emphases.

In terms of the work, however, the material autonomy gained—in Lehmann's sense—in postmodernity is not in fact autonomy, for the material is heteronomous, and thus heteronomous in relation to the form and the semantics. This is precisely the central problem that second modernity does not accept. The fact that it is a foreign material, and can at best only be combined ironically or playfully, now has grave consequences for the construction of the music. It remains meta-music, a work alongside the genuine work; its semantics is superficial, and it essentially takes its conceptual approach from the avant-garde, as one needs to know that the musical styles exhibited are not "really" meant, that they are saying something different. A music that is comprehensible on its own terms is impossible. And thus a music that says something genuinely new is also impossible. Postmodernity, for all its joy in trying things out, is not especially productive. This is one reason why it only flourished for such a short time (in stark contrast to its own declarations, in which it heralded a period of New Testament proportions).

For a range of very different reasons, a certain resistance to musical postmodernism developed. For in the 1980s a movement that had not previously existed emerged: complex composition, New Complexity, complexism—all names that seek to formulate the new quality. Ferneyhough, despite coming from the time before postmodernity, may have played a mediating part here, having abandoned reductionist thinking at the start of the 1980s (consider the compositional modes of Nono, Feldman and the gradually aging Lachenmann at the same time) in favor of a multi-perspectival style—albeit retaining the aspect of centrism in the form of "personal style."

Though complexism is probably not the only manifestation of second modernity, it can be used to illustrate its essential attributes. As far as the material is concerned, progress has a decisive role once again: microtonality, complex rhythms, nested formal constructions, poly-works, live electronics, computer-assisted composition, the whole spectrum of pitch and noise, hybrid playing techniques. As for the style, its aim is an autonomous, personal language that is cohesive within itself rather than combining foreign styles as collages. As far as its artistic self-image is concerned, it aims for a music that is relevant to our times, that has a character of its own and does not follow audience taste, which

is by nature conservative. Second modernity is thus anti-careerist, oppositional and autonomous.

It is almost a defining characteristic of second modernity that one recognizes it by the compositional techniques it employs—or by the fact that it rehabilitates compositional technique per se. For it returns to the question (necessarily) avoided by postmodernism, namely how musical form can result from a material that must first be produced for this formal genesis—or, to put it differently: how material and form can be connected *internally*, not simply meta-linguistically. That was and still is the great question of modern music as a whole, which took the loss of metaphysical givens upon itself because it had no other choice, and because it is precisely in this work that it sees a possibility of writing truly new music (not merely second-hand music).

In Harry Lehmann's theoretical model, this means that the work, negated by the avant-garde, is now reinstated, as was the case for material in postmodernity. Second modernity negates the negation of the work. Its striving to create works again is an expression of precisely that technical aim: that material and form should form a cohesive unity once more, that is to say be adapted to each other, or, to put it differently: that this unity is to be constructed. The work is no more and no less than a form-fulfilling, autonomous application of material in musical time. This explains why works are being written once more—and not only by postmodernists.

Second modernity does not, however, constitute a regression to a state before the negation of the work; it does not seek to forget what happened. But it also knows that the non-work cannot simply be glorified for all eternity; this non-work ages and is taken for granted as part of music (like everything else), but this takes away the very sting intended by the avant-garde. What, then, is so special about second modernity that it can claim to offer genuine innovation, not simply a perfected version of the "classical" construction ideal? Second modernity strives to create multi-perspectival, i.e., non-reductionistic works (which has been almost impossible *at a modern standard* since the Second World War) and cultivates the ideal of integral styles. But it has learned from classical modernity, the avant-garde, and—amazing as it may seem—also from postmodernity: the three dimensions of differentiation examined by Lehmann—work, medium and reflection—no longer form a unity, as Schönberg in particular had hoped, but rather exist in a differential, one might say deconstructive relationship with one another. Each area can gain partial dominance depending on emphasis, intention, tradition and taste. Admittedly—and this is what sets it fundamentally apart from postmodernity—these differences must be substantial, i.e., constructive and constructed; differences that can identify themselves technically. Second modernity is thus not simply a second version of something familiar.[7]

---

7   Once one has adopted the perspective of second modernity (and thus emancipated one-

self both from first modernity and postmodernity), new epistemological possibilities arise: firstly, one can ask whether earlier figures perhaps anticipated certain characteristics of second modernity. Then Nono, who at times seemed to have taken on postmodern traits, could suddenly become a forerunner of second modernity. Secondly, overcoming postmodernity's absurd philosophy of history enables us to see that every way of thinking about art is deeply historical, and that for every question raised here one must take into account when it is asked and within which historical horizon the person presuming to answer it is located. I would therefore argue for a radical return to an internally historic thinking. This is decisive for second modernity's own self-enlightenment; as it is still in the process of becoming, it makes a considerable difference whether it is formulated in 2000, 2005 or 2010.