
1989 AND AFTER

BEGINNINGS

It begins with a string quartet: two violins, a viola, and a cello pumping notes up and down like pistons. An image of the American machine age, hallucinated through the sound of the European Enlightenment. The image is strengthened as a voice—mature, female, American—intones an itinerary: “From Chicago . . . to New York.” The sound is prerecorded, digitally sampled and amplified through speakers beside the ensemble. More samples are added: more voices; the whistles and bells of trains; one, two, three, or even more string quartets. Rapidly the musical space far exceeds what we see on stage. This is a string quartet for the media age, as much recordings and amplification as it is the four musicians in front of us. Yet everything extends from it and back into it, whether the quartet of quartets, which mirror and echo each other; the voices, which seem to blend seamlessly with the instrumental rhythms and melodies; or the whistles, which mesh so clearly with the harmonic changes that it seems certain they come from an unseen wind instrument and not a concrete recording.

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It begins with thumping and hammering, small clusters struck on the piano keyboard with the side of the palm or with three fingers pressed together, jabbing like a beak. The sound recalls a malevolent dinosaur or perhaps a furious child, but it isn't random; a melody of sorts, or an identifiable series of pitches at least, hangs over the tumult. After twenty seconds or so the thunder halts abruptly for a two-note rising motif played by the right hand, which is then imitated (slightly altered)

by the left. It is a simple gesture, refusing, with that delicate variation on the repeat, to do as expected, and expressed with the utmost clarity and efficiency. We have jumped from breezeblocks to water, but the expressive force remains. At every turn the music—on paper just a short sonata for piano—seems about to burst its own edges. Distortion is applied in every dimension, from the blurring of the melodic line with those cluster chords, to the extremities of force and volume required from instrument and performer (for the majority of the piece, every note is marked to be played very loud, except those marked even louder), to the extremes of range, from the very highest to the very lowest notes of the piano that stretch any sense of sonic unity or middle ground to its limit. Even at just seven minutes long, it is a shattering experience for both performer and listener, only heightened by the few moments of quiet contemplation that occur toward the end of the piece.

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It begins with water, gently lapping, close miked. In the distance, the hum of a city. The occasional calls of a gull suggest we are on the coast. A woman's voice enters, softly describing the location and where she is standing, where we are listening: "It's a calm morning. I'm on Kits Beach in Vancouver. It's slightly overcast—and very mild for January." She is very close, almost *inside* our ears, but the place she describes and what we can hear is far away. An aircraft passes overhead. A car sounds its horn in the distance, and it echoes against buildings and around the bay. This is Kitsilano Beach, on the south shore of Vancouver's English Bay, a popular spot in summer for sunbathing and beach sports. The narration is straightforward at first, but it soon moves from describing the sounds to reflecting on their acoustic properties: "The tiny clicking sounds that you hear are the meeting of the water and the barnacles. It trickles and clicks and sucks and . . . The city is roaring around these tiny sounds. But it's not masking them." Just as we start to internalize those sounds, hearing them in the same abstract headspace as the narrator's voice, the recording levels are suddenly turned up: "I could shock you or fool you by saying that the soundscape is this loud." And then: "The view is beautiful—in fact it is spectacular. So the sound level seems more like this." The levels drop again, now quieter than they were before, and our perceptions of what is real and what is artificial, out in the world and inside the recording, are completely subverted. "It doesn't seem that loud."

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It is loud, and it begins instantly. We hear what is probably feedback, controlled in some way to create different pitches. Blank, artificial, but somehow also animal (fleshy at least)—overdriven and very distorted. After a few seconds it is intercut with something like the sound of tape spooling backward—high-pitched, an

almost glistening sound. Then sudden, violent splices of what sound like fragments of orchestral music. Again, lots of distortion, electric screams. Sounds continue to snap in and out of the frame. Passing connections can be made as some noises return, but really the only constant is change. There is something concrete, something like material underneath it all, but it is crushed by layer upon layer of distortion, warping, splicing, and reconstitution. It's not that this isn't music, it's that it seems opposed to form itself, as anything resembling the sort of patterning and resemblance that creates meaning is smashed into oblivion.

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It begins with a percussive crash. For an instant it is unnamable, then a brief flurry of woodwind and a dissonant string chord set us firmly in the sound of the twentieth-century orchestra. The winds cut short, accelerating slashes over the strings, before xylophone and double basses strike a menacing three-note motif. The strings shiver in response. As fragments from the rest of the orchestra coalesce into larger and larger stabs, the strings swell dissonantly and cinematically. Decades of Hollywood film scores have imbued the language of midcentury modernism with unmistakable meaning, and now that is being projected back into the concert hall with clear and forceful intent.

DIVERSITY

These five pieces are *Different Trains*, by Steve Reich (b. 1936); Piano Sonata No. 6, by Galina Ustvolskaya (1919–2006); *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, by Hildegard Westerkamp (b. 1946); “Brain Forest—For Acoustic Metal Concrete” from the album *Cloud Cock OO Grand*, by Merzbow (Masami Akita, b. 1956); and *H'un (Lacerations)*, by Bright Sheng (b. 1955). With the possible exception of “Brain Forest,” they were all created within what we might (for now) call the contemporary Western art music tradition. That is, they are all pieces that were composed or pre-planned reflectively, fixed in some sort of notation for a performer or creator to interpret or execute, and intended to be listened to by an attentive, informed, and critical audience. We might add that it is a style of music that traces its primary lineage back to the courts and churches of pre-Renaissance Europe, and although those courts and churches are today mostly long defunct or culturally marginal, contemporary art music maintains an important relationship with their modern-day descendants and the structures of production and listening that they represent.

Yet even this definition, as broad as it is, barely captures the range of artistic production in these five examples. We might intuitively group most or all of these pieces according to some set of “contemporary art music” family resemblances, but each represents a distinct set of challenges to that model. In many important

respects—style, technique, materials, media, and even audience—they are utterly remote from one another. *Different Trains*, for example, may on the surface be a conventionally “classical” work, yet its reception history depends far more on late twentieth-century models of patronage such as the entrepreneurial ensemble and the recording company than it does on the old institutions of church and court. The piece was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet (formed in 1973), one of the world’s leading contemporary music groups, and is exemplary of a form of entrepreneurial new music practice that relies on the creation, identification, and fostering of market niches, as well as a media-conscious reinvention of the image and of the function of the string quartet itself.

Ustvol’skaya’s sonata looks and feels quite like conventional classical music. It even aligns itself with that tradition in its choice of title. Yet in codifying or enacting pain as a compositional parameter—the very real physical pain of the pianist, who is required to contort his or her hands awkwardly and strike the keyboard with punishing, repetitive force—Ustvol’skaya disturbs the conventional image of the performer as a more or less impassive transmitter of the composer’s vision, instead having him or her dramatize the work in an act of physical theater that is as close to the performance art of Antonin Artaud or Marina Abramović as it is to a classical piano sonata.

As works of electroacoustic music, both Westerkamp’s *Kits Beach Soundwalk* and Merzbow’s “Brain Forest” fundamentally challenge the score-based requirement of my outline definition of contemporary Western art music. The Reich and Ustvol’skaya pieces may be said to exist as much in their scores as in their recordings (although Reich’s use of tape stretches this definition), but no scores for the Westerkamp or Merzbow works exist, except perhaps as private studio notes by their creators. Yet this does not make the two pieces alike in how they were created. *Kits Beach Soundwalk* was produced in the studio over a period of time through a painstaking and reflexive period of composition, with Westerkamp selecting, manipulating, and organizing materials with extraordinary skill and technical finesse in much the same way as one would go about creating a conventionally notated piece of music. (Note the way in which features such as bird calls or swishes of water always counterpoint or fall between spaces in the narration rather than masking each other.) “Brain Forest,” however, while executed with no less skill in terms of the selection, arrangement, and manipulation of materials, was created primarily in a live, semi-improvised setting and subjected to further postproduction manipulation during mastering.

Sheng’s *H’un* is, in many respects, the most conventional of all the works presented, as it was written for a typical orchestra, fully notated, and intended for performance in the live setting of a concert hall. It is a work that audibly traces its lineage back to the European Renaissance, through Bartók, Shostakovich, and the Romantic symphonic tradition. And yet Sheng’s biography as a Chinese-

American, who studied Western music at the Beijing Conservatory before moving to New York in 1982, renders this analysis problematic: this journey is one marked by patterns of adoption, negotiation, and accommodation within a series of colonial and postcolonial frameworks. Moreover, as I intimated above, geography is not the only mediating factor involved in the creation of Sheng's musical language: the repertory of affect from Hollywood cinema, itself derived from late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century orchestral music, has also played its part.

These five works were all composed within a year or so of each other, between 1988 and 1990. Capturing and explaining this sort of diversity presents obvious difficulties for the historian. Yet it also presents an opportunity. If we want to be able to discuss recent music history in any sort of collective sense (and let's assume that some of us still find it useful to do so), many of the usual ways of writing such a history fall short. This book hopes, in a small way, to contribute to that historical analysis by reconsidering how we tell the history of late twentieth-century music and by looking ahead to what the twenty-first century holds.

UNITY

Histories of contemporary Western art music usually begin in 1945. Its story has been told enough times, with expeditious changes of emphasis along the way, to be familiar: at the end of the Second World War, Europe, the home of post-Enlightenment Western culture, was devastated and in desperate need of reconstruction.¹ America had finally achieved the financial dominance that had been expected of it since the 1920s, thus initiating its dominance over the second half of the century. The postwar settlements with Soviet Russia had set the stage for the Cold War. New technologies and sciences, many of which had been developed in wartime, such as tape recording and information theory, were finding wide peacetime application, and the postwar industrial boom—as well as the increasing importance of cultural soft power as a weapon in the Cold War—began to fuel a rise in the public's consumption of the arts.

This story helps us understand how and why the musical innovations of the postwar decades, from *musique concrète* to minimalism, came about. However, by the end of the century this narrative begins to unravel, not least because of the rapidly changing scope of what "art music" could be. These histories struggle to accommodate the diversity of musical activity at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Worse still, they cannot set the music of that period within the same contextual depth as, say, the serial music composed in the early 1950s (a product of wartime technologies, postwar rebuilding efforts, and the desires of a young generation to start again) or the early minimalist music of the mid-1960s (a product of jazz and non-Western influences, counterculture, and influences from the visual arts).

The first contention of this book, then, is that to understand the music of our present day and recent years, we need to reboot that story, to begin from a new date. Many of the precepts on which the post-1945 narrative is based were no longer applicable by the start of the twenty-first century: Europe had rebuilt itself and emerged as the European Union, becoming one of the world's largest economies; the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union had brought an end to the Cold War; and even the United States' claim to global dominance had begun to be threatened after China's opening to the global trading market at the end of the 1970s, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed, and the global financial crisis of 2008. By the end of the century the social democratic consensus that had steered the West through postwar reconstruction had been replaced by market-led neoliberalism. Finally, the birth of the Internet and World Wide Web in the early 1990s, as well as the widespread popularization of digital technologies, transformed the production and consumption of culture in every sphere.

Admittedly, slicing history up like this is a somewhat arbitrary exercise. Any date, once it has been chosen, starts to look important simply from receiving special attention: enough events happen in any given year to make all years look significant. The wider the international focus, the more arbitrary a choice becomes. Most events have only a local significance; very few are truly global in importance. Even then, how can we claim that they are significant across all spheres of human activity? Nevertheless, lines are still useful, no matter how fuzzy, shallow, and semipermeable. They are useful in a teaching sense, in that they help frame, structure, and limit the period of study. From the point of view of relating history to today, divisions also enable us to present a sense of before and after, and therefore a sense of *now*, and how it is different from *then*.

There are several dates where a division could be made. The year 2000 is numerically neat, although relatively undistinguished in terms of global events. The year 2001, particularly after September 11, is a more obvious choice, and it seems likely that historians, in the near future at least, will often date the true beginning of the twenty-first century to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Both dates, however, are too recent to leave room for historical depth or an exploration of patterns of continuity and change. They also arguably leave too much of a gap between the petering out of the post-1945 narrative and the beginning of the narrative that encompasses today.

Looking further back, 1968 presents itself as a strong candidate, and indeed several recent studies have taken this year of revolutions and protest as a starting or focal point.² The late 1970s were possibly even more significant for music, including as they did not only the rise and fall of punk, the pinnacle of disco, and the birth of hip-hop but also the premieres of Philip Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts*, Steve Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, and Gérard Grisey's *Partiels*; the start

of Karlheinz Stockhausen's work on *LICHT*; and the founding of IRCAM in Paris. As has been argued elsewhere, the events of 1979—the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in Great Britain, the beginning of market reforms in China, and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan—had a major effect on the realities of the twenty-first century.³ The events of 1968 can be read as a hangover from the war years, the reaction of the first postwar generation to the legacy of their parents' generation, but a decade later there was the sense of a clear distance from the midcentury, of events that were projecting into the future rather responding to the past.

A music history that began with either of these dates would certainly shine a light on aspects of late twentieth-century music that are often overlooked, such as the role of ensembles like *L'Itinéraire* in Paris and Stockhausen's ensemble in Cologne and important collectives like Feedback in Germany, ONCE in the United States, and the New Music Studio in Budapest, Hungary. However, despite the appeal and strong credentials of these dates, they are both trumped by a third, which signaled global changes of significance not seen since 1945, and which is the point where this book begins its survey.

Clearly, 1989 was a momentous year. Not only because of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9 and the events across Central and Eastern Europe and Russia that followed but also because of the pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in China and the state-sponsored massacre that ensued and the beginning of a process that would see an end to apartheid in South Africa. The subsequent rapid ascent of a neoliberal political and economic orthodoxy across much of the globe in the 1990s was not a direct consequence of the fall of the wall; many of neoliberalism's structures had been in place for a decade or more. Lots of the geopolitical changes across Europe that came after were neither anticipated nor expected—the protesters in East Berlin were calling for more open borders, not for the end of the GDR. The descent of Russia into asset-stripping oligarchy could not have been predicted in 1989 (although it may have been feared), and neither could the extent to which China would embrace the markets of the West. Nevertheless, 1989 was the tipping point for the forces that shaped much of the economics, politics, and, one might say, psychology of our modern world.

The late 1980s and early 1990s also saw other important developments. The World Wide Web was first proposed by British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee in March 1989 in the paper "Information Management: A Proposal"⁴ and officially launched in 1991. Although initially the preserve of science institutions, the Web rapidly grew in significance and reach, and within a decade it had around half a billion users. At the same time as Berners-Lee was considering his proposal for a web of interlinked hypertext documents, Mark Weiser coined the term "ubiquitous computing" to describe what he believed would be the immediate future for computers; that is, that they would become highly networked devices that would

be “so imbedded, so fitting, so natural”⁵—and so common—that we would hardly think of them as computers at all but simply as part of the environment. With the creation of the Internet and the development of wireless, mobile technologies, that prediction has pretty much proved true.

Taken together, the Internet and the rise of neoliberal global politics enabled a new phase of cultural and economic globalization. This in turn became the driver for many of the more significant events around the world in the years to come, from 9/11 to the 2008 credit crunch. Music, like any art form, is not immune to events around it, and although one cannot precisely key developments in culture to changes in the wider world, the past twenty-five years seem interestingly different enough to what has gone before to deserve examination.

CHANGE: ENABLEMENT AND INSPIRATION

What might unite the five examples given above, then, apart from the coincidence of when they were created? Does their diversity tell us something about the end of the 1980s, or does the turn of the decade provide clues as to how to consider all five works alongside each other? A bit of both, I think. This is not meant to be the fudge it sounds like. Cultural history works in two directions: works of music, or any other art, are both products of their time and contributions toward it. That is to say, artists invent new things as much as they respond to existing ones.

The late 1980s were a period of dramatic change across many fields, and these five works reflect and respond to changes of different kinds in different ways. Many of these shifts are personal, technical, or aesthetic developments in the individual composers’ lives or ways of working, but just as the personal and the creative cannot always be easily teased apart from one another, so the changes articulated in these works cannot be separated completely from external influences.

The samples of speech that run through *Different Trains* mark the entry of a new element in Reich’s style: speech melody. Although speech had been an important component of Reich’s music from his earliest tape pieces—most notably *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966)—with *Different Trains* it enters the musical discourse as an equal partner with the instruments and not as an element in isolation. What made this possible was the digital sampler, versions of which had been commercially available since the mid-1970s, but which rose greatly in popularity from the mid-1980s. For the first time, Reich could arrange and collage his speech recordings with metrical precision to create a layer of speech that meshed perfectly with the performing instruments. In later works (such as *City Life*, 1994), Reich would use keyboards to trigger samples live, but in *Different Trains* they were all recorded to tape.

Reich noted the significance of this new element to his music in the following terms: “The piece thus presents both a documentary and a musical reality, and

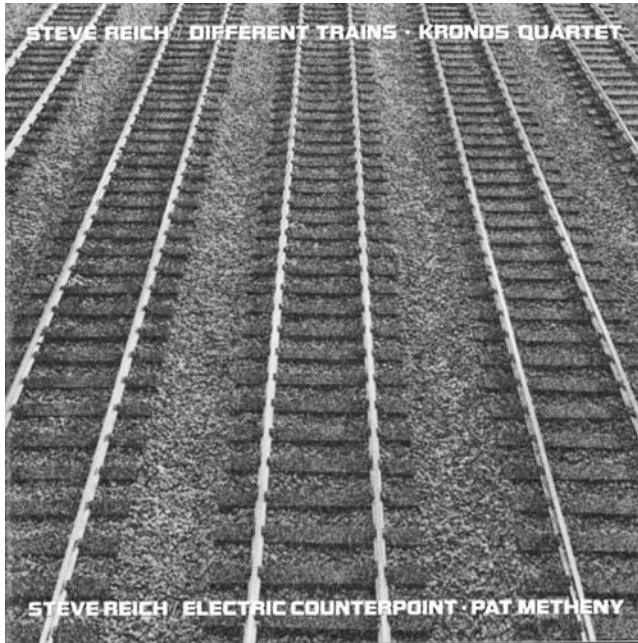


FIGURE 1. CD cover for Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, 1989. Elektra Nonesuch 79176–2.

begins a new musical direction. It is a direction that I expect will lead to a new kind of documentary music video theater in the not too distant future.”⁶ *Different Trains* is documentary music not only in the sense that it tells a story that is based on real events—the transporting of European Jews by train during the Holocaust—but also in the particular way in which it tells that story. The speech samples don’t tell a continuous story, like the libretto of an opera, but jump quickly between times and points of view, as in a film. As they accumulate, it becomes possible to imagine how the parts all relate.

Different Trains is unmistakably a product of the late twentieth-century media age, and in particular the cultural form of the television documentary, a mode that Reich developed after *Different Trains* in the video operas *The Cave* (1990–93) and *Three Tales* (1997–2001). It is also music that works well in recordings: Reich’s strategy of overlaying live musicians with multiple prerecorded versions of themselves puts the works closer in aesthetic to pop studio productions, in which a solo artist will often sing over a prerecorded backing track, than concert hall shows.

Elektra Nonesuch’s recording of *Different Trains* (see figure 1) reaches beyond the classical sphere in other ways too. It was another label, ECM, that in the late 1970s accidentally discovered a new music audience when it released Reich’s *Music*

for *18 Musicians*, one that was educated, curious, young(er), and spiritually and/or socially conscious—not necessarily the same as the audience for the staple eighteenth- and nineteenth-century repertory. This new audience—if it may be said to exist as a homogenous unit—was attracted to influences from pop and rock, world music, and exotica, as well as minimalism and noise: the vestiges of the avant garde, but in a digestible format. By the time of *Different Trains*, Nonesuch had been catering to this audience for several years, releasing recordings of the Kronos Quartet, John Zorn, David Fanshawe, and others, as well as putting out pioneering recordings of world music on the Nonesuch Explorer series.⁷ Works that challenged a “stuffy” modernist and/or classical hegemony through the use of formal simplicity, emotional directness, amplification, multimedia, and non-Western elements were valued. *Different Trains* was something of a breakthrough in this respect, and it marked the arrival not only of a new direction in Reich’s music but also of the viability of a new intersection of classical prestige, emotional profundity, and pop appeal. As Christopher Fox noted:

The combination of [Reich’s] (so called) “crossover” credentials with those of the Kronos (and the pairing on record of *Different Trains* with Reich’s *Electric Counterpoint*, written for the equally cultish Pat Metheny) is the stuff of record company executives’ wilder dreams. If one assumes that the meaning of any musical work owes as much to the means of production and dissemination as to the sounds themselves, then *Different Trains* is a contemporary cultural phenomenon whose significance is quite different from that of most new music and almost certainly unique amongst new works for string quartet.⁸

Different Trains speaks of and to America in the 1990s: it is redeemed, technologically ascendant, media friendly, culturally dehierarchized, and postmodernistically optimistic. The world of Ustvolskaya’s Piano Sonata No. 6 could not be more different. Written during the years of glasnost, the gradual opening up of government institutions in the Soviet Union initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, it marks an ending much more than a beginning, not just politically but also personally: although Ustvolskaya went on to live for another seventeen years, physical debilitation meant that she wrote only one more piece, her equally bleak and magnificent Symphony No. 5, “Amen” (1989–90).

Ustvolskaya was a remarkable and unique figure within late twentieth-century composition. She is often remembered first for the relationship she had in her youth with her teacher Dmitri Shostakovich, but she firmly rejected that association and considered herself a follower of her own path. Although she began composing in the 1940s, and despite the admiration of her former teacher, who occasionally quoted her work in his own, she languished in obscurity until the late 1980s, and she lived in poverty until her last days. She led a hermetic life and rarely ventured outside of St. Petersburg. By chance, her music was heard in concert by

Jürgen Köchel, the director of the Sikorski publishing house, and the Dutch musicologist Elmer Schönberger. They introduced Ustvolskaya's work to the wider world, and in the second half of the 1980s it began to receive occasional performances in Europe. Yet even as her recognition grew, she firmly dismissed suggestions that she should emigrate from Russia, which in its late-Soviet years had become stagnant.

The Piano Sonata No. 6 is the last of a series of pieces that goes back to 1947. All six are blunt and bald, but none more than this. Indeed, the first is playful in its evocations of Bach, featuring two-voice counterpoint, a walking melody, cadential trill figures, and a structure made from terraced changes in tempo and texture. And if, in the later sonatas, this archetypal vocabulary is further distilled—into short scales, unrelieved quarter-note rhythms, pedal tones, alternating chords, and so on—it is always accompanied by a kind of (controlled? frustrated?) lyricism effected by Ustvolskaya's masterful use of light and shade. Yet not even listening to the sonatas in sequence really prepares the listener for the visceral force of the sixth.

And for the performer, it really is visceral. The clusters used and the work's exceedingly loud volume, requiring uncomfortable hand positions and extreme physical force, make learning and performing the work a genuinely painful experience. Most musical performance demands a certain level of physical discomfort, due to awkward hand positions, repetitive stress injuries, and the like, but Ustvolskaya's sonata intensifies this to the extent that pain, embodied and enacted, becomes part of the work's expressive language.⁹ The fact that such a work was written under glasnost is not insignificant. The glasnost reforms were gradually making possible public discussion of traumatic events in Russia's recent past, and by creating a space where pain can be enacted, Ustvolskaya's piece explicitly engages with that conversation, which includes "the redemptive possibilities of addressing pain; and the struggle to express and know another's suffering."¹⁰

Discomfort and pain also feature in Merzbow's music, although generally in a more ecstatic and/or erotic context. His early works, released in small runs of homemade cassettes, were wrapped in pages from pornographic magazines, and bondage—particularly the rope-based erotic art of *kinbaku*—has continued to inform his aesthetic. The music itself, with its extremes of volume and harsh sounds, is frequently uncomfortable to listen to, although this discomfort is laced with an ecstatic/erotic charge rather than suffering.

Merzbow's output is enormous, numbering more than four hundred releases.¹¹ Such an exceptional, even surreal, prolixity makes it almost impossible to identify turning points.¹² And what would a turning point even look like? Do oceans turn? In many ways, *Cloud Cock OO Grand* can stand in for dozens of other Merzbow albums, and the same points about aesthetic and method might be made. However, the consensus is that it was soon after the release of this album that the genre *Japanoise* (Japanese noise music) broke out of the local underground and figured

on the international scene. Noise music, whether in a general sense or its Japanese species, predated 1989, but it is only after this point that it began to have a significant impact on the aesthetics of global contemporary music.

Cloud Cock OO Grand is special because it marks the arrival of digital technology in Merzbow's output; it is the first of his records to be recorded to DAT (digital audio tape), and, after more than a decade of releases on cassette and vinyl, it was the first Merzbow album to be issued on CD. Although the initial outlay was expensive, the ease of recording onto and duplicating CDs undoubtedly helped with the logistics of distribution, facilitating the massive growth of his output. When the composer John Zorn and influential alternative rock artists like Nirvana's Kurt Cobain and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore began drawing attention to Japanese, Merzbow's international profile was raised dramatically. He toured the United States for the first time in 1990, shortly after *Cloud Cock OO Grand*'s release, and he began to release albums straight to the US market in 1994, starting with *Venereology*, by which time his name was well established among audiences for experimental music on both sides of the Pacific. Since the early 1990s, noise music has been characterized as an underground globalized network, operating in resistance to the dominant transnationalism of global corporations and a homogenized global culture that is largely Anglo-American in origin. The models of circulation, reception, and feedback that began shortly after the release of *Cloud Cock OO Grand* are a substantial contributor to this alternative positioning.¹³

Merzbow toured Europe for the first time in 1989, and his experiences there fed into the making of *Cloud Cock OO Grand*. On the track "Modular," recordings from those live shows were used as raw material. Until this point, Merzbow had worked extensively with tape recordings and a variety of sound sources to create complex, many-layered collages. However, the practicalities of flying outside Japan necessitated a reduction in the amount of gear he could travel with and, in turn, a switch to more portable electronic tools such as simple mixer consoles and guitar effects pedals (and, later, laptops) (see figure 2). This change in method had a profound effect on Merzbow's style, leading to the development of what came to be known as a "harsh noise" aesthetic, characterized by high frequencies and abrasive, highly distorted sounds. The switch to CDs had artistic benefits too, removing the unwanted background noise of tape and extending the playing time of vinyl. These two benefits allowed for a fuller, more immersive experience. On later releases, Merzbow exploited the conditions of CD mastering as a further opportunity for noise and distortion, pushing the levels right up to maximize the sound's "presence."¹⁴ "Masami Akita was, it seems," writes Paul Hegarty, "just waiting for CD to come along to expand the range and potential for loudness that he felt records lacked."¹⁵

Merzbow's sound and his overproduction both share a principle of excess, an aesthetic of saturation. Yet this is not excess in the creation of the fantastical or the ornate, but rather as a model of obsessive and empty consumption, an endless



FIGURE 2. Merzbow on stage at the Boiler Room, Tokyo, June 24, 2014. Still from performance video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fR_8gpJCT4I.

pursuit of meaning that undoes itself with every new step. Each new release adds volume or mass to Merzbow's body of work, like the piles of rubbish in Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau house, from which the musician takes his name. But the proliferation of recordings makes it impossible to grasp the whole, to make sense of any of it. The same is true of the music itself, in its endless displacements of repetition and structure, its perpetual dismantling of meaning. It is, as Hegarty vividly describes Japanese in general, "noise all the way down."¹⁶

Japanese challenged the established relationship between the listener and what they were listening to. Yet it wasn't the only branch of experimental music to do so around the turn of the decade. Until the late 1980s, Hildegard Westerkamp's music had been motivated by a resistance to noise pollution and might be thought of as standing in complete opposition to Merzbow's noisy interventions. Born in Osnabrück, Germany, in 1946, Westerkamp immigrated to Vancouver in 1968 with her partner, Norbert Ruebsaat. She studied at Simon Fraser University, where she met R. Murray Schafer, inventor of the discipline of "acoustic ecology" and founder of the World Soundscape Project (WSP), and her interest in noise abatement began. After completing her degree, she joined the WSP as a research assistant.

Acoustic ecology and the WSP were reactions to the intrusion of man-made noise into the everyday soundscape, and a distaste for manufactured and artificial sonic ambiances continued to inform Westerkamp's work through the 1980s. One early piece, *A Walk through the City* (1981), is based around a text written and read by Ruebsaat and describes urban noise in terms of violence, fear, and threat—a world away from Merzbow's ecstatic digitalism. In 1988 Westerkamp completed a

master's degree at Simon Fraser University with a thesis entitled "Listening and Soundmaking: A Study of Music-as-Environment," a critical investigation of the role of Muzak within the urban soundscape.

Yet within that thesis are the seeds of a new, more complex relationship to noise. In 1989 Westerkamp composed *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, the first indication of a new direction in her music, and one of her best-known works. Soundwalking is a genre of music making, or participative listening, that Westerkamp would come to develop very much as her own, and which, as early as 1974, she described as "any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment."¹⁷ *Kits Beach Soundwalk* is different from soundwalking as normally conceived, however, in that the journey is recorded to tape; the listener is not required to leave her seat or do any aural exploration of her own. (The idea grew out of a radio program, called *Soundwalking*, that Westerkamp hosted on Vancouver Co-operative Radio, in which she "took the listener to different locations in and around the city and explored them acoustically."¹⁸) The idea of a walk, or a journey, encoded and articulated purely through sound, structures the piece, and one of its key effects is the tension created between the fixed physical location of the listener and the dynamic aural space of the music. This is captured in the description at the start of this chapter of the work's opening minute or so, but it is expanded throughout the work as the listening location becomes increasingly fabricated. Immediately after the point described above, Westerkamp confirms the mediated, fabricated nature of what we are hearing: "I'm trying to listen to those tiny sounds in more detail now. Suddenly the background sound of the city seems louder again. . . . Luckily we have bandpass filters and equalizers. We can just go into the studio and get rid of the city, pretend it's not there. Pretend we are somewhere far away." At this point, Westerkamp's accompanying tape does exactly that: the city's low roar is filtered away, leaving only the click and suck of the barnacles. This is the key moment in the piece: until now, everything we heard seemed believable. Those sounds could be heard, like that, on Kits Beach (see figure 3). Westerkamp could have been there, exactly as she described. Now, she takes us on a fantastical journey through dreams and memories (of insects and tinkling bullets and Xenakis and Mozart) before returning us to the beach.

From her study of Muzak, Westerkamp reached the conclusion that, since music designed not to be listened to was an agent of commerce, then listening itself must be a political act. Moreover, the self-actualization that comes about through listening could be tied to (feminist) arguments for the politicization of the personal:

I found the courage for self-analysis, as well as for *articulating and expressing* my experiences, making the personal public. With this I joined with many other women who had to learn to understand that our concerns—which have always seemed "too" personal and private, and therefore not fit for public exposure—are *shared* concerns



FIGURE 3. Kits Beach, Vancouver, December 2008. Photo by James Sherrett.

and must therefore be voiced. It is this voicing of the personal (the “inner world”) which constitutes a political act, the raising of a voice that traditionally has not been raised, has been shrouded in silence.¹⁹

After *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, Westerkamp’s construction of the political within the activity of listening became explicit in *Breathing Room* (1990) and, especially, *École Polytechnique* (1990), a response to the mass shooting of fourteen women at the École Polytechnique in Montreal, Canada, by a gunman motivated by misogynistic revenge at what he perceived as the unfair advancement of women at the college.²⁰ In Westerkamp’s work, listening is no longer an act of passive consumption but one of politically active production—a site of resistance, if a radically private one. Environmentalism and industrial critique align with the creation of a modern subjectivity that is aware of its endlessly fluid relationship to perceived reality.

A very different kind of environmentally formed subjectivity is expressed in Bright Sheng’s *H’un (Lacerations): In memoriam 1966–1976*. Sheng (born Sheng Zong Liang) was a teenager during the years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. As a middle-class, urban youth, he was sent via the so-called Down to the Countryside initiative from his home in Shanghai to live with and learn from rural

workers in Qinghai, on the Tibetan border. A talented musician, he was saved from compulsory farm labor and was instead allowed to perform with a local folk music and dance troupe. When China's universities reopened in 1978, he passed the entrance exam for the Shanghai Conservatory. In 1982 he immigrated to New York to study at Columbia University with fellow émigré Chou Wen-chung, and in 1985 he became a student of and assistant to Leonard Bernstein. Sheng has since figured prominently as a de facto cultural ambassador for Chinese–American relations: in 1999 he was commissioned by President Clinton to compose a work to honor the state visit of the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, and in 2008 he was invited to compose for the Beijing Olympics.

H'un was Sheng's first major orchestral work and one of the first pieces to establish his reputation in the West. Coincidentally, its first performance, by the New York Chamber Symphony, took place a few months before the Tiananmen Square massacre. Composed in memory of the victims of the Cultural Revolution, it evoked one of modern China's darkest periods, just as the country was about to enter a new one.

H'un is a powerful and evocative work, but it is striking how un-Chinese—or, at least, how *Western*—it sounds. Sheng's orchestra incorporates a few Chinese percussion instruments (Chinese tom-toms, a temple block, a Peking Opera gong) but makes few other concessions toward Chinese music. At the Shanghai Conservatory, Sheng was instructed in Western models of classical composition before being taught in the United States by Chou and Bernstein. If that instruction was relatively conservative, it shows in Sheng's own descriptions of composing the piece:

Perhaps the most challenging aspect in this composition for the composer is that there is no melodic line (or "tune"). Instead, it is built upon a spare two-note motive of a semitone. . . . Yet thematic melody remains one of the most crucial elements (if not *the* most crucial) for the construction of a musical composition. A work without a melody therefore must take full advantage of other musical elements in order for the listener to perceive the logic of the structure—beginning, development, climax, and end.²¹

Toward the end of the same analysis, Sheng emphasizes the mimetic quality of his work in a brief description of the second half of the piece, intended as a solemn meditation on the lives lost during the Cultural Revolution:

The entire section has a very subdued manner, as if the world has just gone through a devastating catastrophe and everyone is too exhausted even to weep or to make a sound. Gradually, through a circuitous line of crescendo and an expansion toward the extreme registers of the string orchestra, it reaches a passage of tutti *fff*, where the upper three strings are against the lower two. The strings remain muted, however, to produce a sound evoking the painful crying out of millions of people when strangled.²²

If we consider Sheng's piece in terms of the global context from which it emerged, we can see quite clearly the power and influence of a common, transnational aesthetic that is based on a Western model of taste, prestige, and meaning-making.

. . .

In their different ways, all five of these works connect with the wider political, social, economic, and technological changes of the time, whether late Cold War geopolitics, the emergence of digital technology, the conditions of modern-day globalization, or the politicization of the personal. Associations like these suggest the first component of my methodological framework: enablement and inspiration.

Technological, social, and political developments can and do influence developments in art in two ways: they either enable them, or they inspire them. That is, a new development can make certain artistic aims possible (through the creation of new technical means, for example), or it can inspire new aesthetic propositions, not necessarily by making use of the new technology, but by pursuing some of its wider implications. In the Reich example, digital sampling enabled the development of speech melody as a technical device; in the Westerkamp, the possibilities of recording inspired a new conception of sound as a means of creating private narratives. Often both forces are present. This can be seen in the example of Merzbow: digitization was initially of practical value to Merzbow, as it enabled greater portability of his on-stage setup. What it inspired, however, was the creation of the harsh noise aesthetic.

The architectural critic Douglas Murphy has drawn a similar division with respect to the impact of digitization on architectural practice since the 1980s, which serves as an example for the wider distinction that I am making.²³ Initially, Murphy writes, architects saw the computer as a tool for achieving greater efficiency and accuracy. The slow and imprecise paper, pen, and set square were replaced by the keyboard, mouse, and screen. By the late 1980s, however, we can identify "a genuine methodological shift in the way architecture is produced,"²⁴ exemplified by the deconstructivist (or "decon") buildings of Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, and others (see figure 4). In Murphy's description, digital modeling allowed Gehry (using software from the aerospace industry) to create engineering solutions for the warped and twisted architectural shapes that he was already imagining; this is my paradigm of *enabling*. The resulting buildings may have been radical in design, but still, the computer remained a tool. Eisenman, however, took a more "'theoretical' approach" that was "far more experimental and self-consciously avant-garde,"²⁵ drawing on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in particular to reimagine the possibilities of architectural space. Although computers were still used, it was the new concepts of knowledge, connection, and transformation to which digitization gave rise that inspired Eisenman's designs.

A similar trajectory can be traced in music. On the most pragmatic level, computers have functioned as a tool for composers. Digital draftsmanship, in theory, enables



FIGURE 4. Weisman Art Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, 1993. Photo by Joel Nilsson, www.flickr.com/photos/joel_nilsson/15209464949/, licensed under CC Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0.

greater productivity (removing the need, for example, for external copyists to create individual instrumental parts from a complete score). It has transformed the way in which scores are disseminated, and its most significant impact may yet prove to be enabling patterns of self-publication and self-promotion, indeed a new ecosystem of composition and performance, outside the traditional institutions of production, promotion, and distribution. Digitization, in the form of sound sampling, also enabled the creation of works like *Different Trains*, which in these terms is perhaps the musical equivalent of a Gehry building. And of course digitization created whole new kinds of material and ways of working in electronic music, for which the architectural parallel might be more akin to the invention of reinforced concrete, for example. However, digitization also had a profound impact on the aesthetics of music, as it gave rise to new ways of thinking about material, process, and form.

CONNECTIONS: FORCES THAT CAN ENABLE OR INSPIRE

External forces may enable or inspire changes in musical aesthetics, but what in fact are those forces? Looking back to our five examples, they might all be described in relation to trauma. In the Reich and Ustvolskaya pieces, this relationship is

clear: in *Different Trains*, a large-scale historical trauma is approached and to some extent assuaged (through aesthetics, technical intervention, and the narrative of the work); in Ustvolskaya's sonata, a more personal trauma, the relationship of the individual to the totalitarian state, is presented raw through genuine pain and discomfort. In Sheng's *H'un*, another historical trauma is described and partially resolved, similarly to the Reich, although by different stylistic means. *Kits Beach Soundwalk* is less specifically about trauma, although it does stem from a personal sense of anguish about the dehumanizing impact of the modern sound environment. However, the work did define a mode of musical subjectivity that enabled Westerkamp, a year later, to tackle the much more harrowing topic of the École Polytechnique killings. Merzbow's work (at least at the time of *Cloud Cock OO Grand*) does not thematize trauma in the same way as these other pieces do, and it emphatically renounces any programmatic connection to real world events.²⁶ Nevertheless, the experience of listening to the music, in its harshness, its disorienting, dizzying formlessness, and the aggression of its surrounding discourse, at least imitates trauma, if only to sublimate it or subvert it. This shared ground may suggest a connecting force.

Trauma is certainly a common theme in contemporary art and has grown particularly in response to the increased presence of groups in mainstream culture that had hitherto been marginalized (and hence traumatized) on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class. Yet it may also be argued that trauma is not a force in itself but rather a symptom of external forces, such as, for example, gender or race discrimination, globalization, technological alienation, and economic inequality. Already, some of the forces that shape contemporary culture, the status of individuals within it, and the ways in which they might respond through music, are starting to surface.

With all this in mind, I suggest that the main developments of the last twenty-five years that might enable or inspire the stylistic development of new music are social liberalization, globalization, digitization, the Internet, late capitalist economics, and the green movement. There may be others, of course, and some will appear at points in this book. But these six provide a useful set of vectors along which much of the musical activity of the last twenty-five years, to say nothing of the wider cultural and political landscape, might be understood.

None of them stand in isolation, and some have themselves been enabled or inspired by others. The form taken by modern-day globalization, for example, is unthinkable without the Internet; so too is the virtuality of late capitalist finance. Green politics, in turn, acquire their urgency because of the necessity of consumption demanded by late capitalism and the energy demands created by the Internet and our increasingly electronic way of life. Some vectors, such as environmentalism or social liberalism, have origins that predate 1989. However, it is clear that the new world order precipitated by the fall of the Berlin Wall brought many of them into

the cultural forefront and created the particular pattern of intersections between them that characterizes and shapes much of our contemporary lives. The emergence of a neoliberal political consensus that emerged after the “victory” of capitalism in 1989–91 itself stands in complex relation to each of the six forces listed above.

That said, these forces do not serve as simple chapter headings. Instead, I have taken a further step toward abstraction, at least on the highest organizational level, and chosen a series of quasi-psychological states that reflect the intersections between these techno-socioeconomic axes. There are five of these: permission, fluidity, mobility, excess, and loss. After this introduction and a second chapter describing some of the structural changes that have taken place around new music after 1989, these make up the largest part of this book. A final chapter focuses on what I am calling “afterness,” that is, the approaches to the past (or pasts) that emerge from the changed conditions of the post-1989 world.

My initial reason for this layout was straightforward: I wanted to avoid any single composer who might be listed under a heading such as “the green movement” or “social liberalization” coming to be understood and labeled as, solely, a “green” or “liberal” composer. This is not because I think that politics and music do not mix—quite the opposite—but because such a categorization would force composers’ works to be understood as a series of thematically connected slogans rather than as artistically and aesthetically nuanced statements in their own right. As much as I have talked about the need to read new music through its social context, it is important also to consider its aesthetics. Not to do so means to fall into the simplistic, marketing-led instrumentalization of musical works that I and some of the composers I discuss critique at various points in this book.

A second reason emerged as a consequence of my early experiments with such an organization. I found that it allowed me to discuss in close proximity music by composers very remote from one another stylistically. This does not just allow me the pleasure of overturning expectations but it also better reflects the reality of how musicians actually operate. They talk to one another, they have respect for each other’s work, they attend each other’s concerts, they discuss professional and aesthetic matters, and they disagree. A history that can reflect such friendships and conversations will better capture the reality of the contemporary music ecosystem than one that is organized by artificially determined technical correspondences (which sometimes conceal personal antagonisms), such as minimalism or New Complexity. It will also, I suggest, lead to a more interesting analysis of the works themselves that is based on comparison and difference rather than similarity and taxonomy.

LIMITS: THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

However, as we have already seen, any examination of what might qualify as Western art music in the twenty-first century shows that the borders of this definition

have become highly permeable and fuzzy. Clearly it can accommodate scored works for (predominantly) acoustic performers, like the Ustvolskaya and Reich examples. But what about Japanese, which is created for recording and employs many of the facts of recording, such as overload and distortion, as part of its aesthetic? Can it include Westerkamp's soundwalks, which involve no performers at all and do not take place in anything we might recognize as a conventional concert space? What about Richard Barrett's (b. 1959) *Codex* series (2001–), which is a set of guided instructions for group improvisation, or Amnon Wolman's (b. 1955) text pieces, which do away with the performer-audience divide and even raise questions as to the way in which they are listened to. And what about Ludovico Einaudi (b. 1955), who, in albums such as *Le Onde* (1996) and *Nightbook* (2009), combines aspects of eighteenth-century classical style with minimalism and sentimental pop balladry to appeal to a mass audience?

So much for the "art" and "music" elements of the term. But what about the "Western"? As globalization is one of the main forces to have influenced music of the last two and half decades, what is meant by the "Western" in Western art music deserves some consideration. First of all, it no longer means quite what it used to. At one time, before the Internet, before satellite communications, before the explosion in commercial recording, before global organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations, the West of Western art music was much the same as the West of geography: Europe and North America. Now, as can be seen in the examples of Bright Sheng and Merzbow presented in this chapter, as well as many hundreds of other composers from South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, it is something more complicated than that. One can compose Western art music without necessarily coming from or living in the geographical West.

Here, "Western" is as much a historical construct as it is a geographical or geopolitical one. It refers to a kind of music making that belongs to a tradition originating in the West (and propagating many of its values) and maintains certain continuities with that tradition (especially in its modes of production and consumption, and perhaps also in some of its formal properties), but it need not be physically situated there. Those who write Western art music enter a particular sphere of connected approaches, styles, chains of prestige, and flows of cultural and financial capital, just as an Algerian rapper enters the different sphere of approaches, styles, chains of prestige, and flows of cultural and financial capital that define hip-hop. Likewise, to be accepted into that sphere, musicians must meet certain conditions. Regrettably, Western art music's close associations in the past with colonial power and aristocratic patronage have meant that those conditions have included tightly policed definitions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Those legacies are still, slowly, being cleared out today. Yet even as they are, something indefinable about Western art music remains that goes beyond this and continues to attract musicians from all over the world.

In this book, I am choosing to deal with a set of familial resemblances rather than a single, hard and fast definition. So while the core of my repertory is notated composition for some form of concert-like realization, examples from the fringes of this definition—where it shades into pop, improvisation, sound art, and electronic music—are included throughout to give an idea of the overall fluid situation and nature of cross-pollination. Merzbow, for example, lies at an extreme edge of this field; but Westerkamp is not far behind, even though we might more easily recognize her work as belonging to the “classical tradition.” Even the pieces by Ustvolskaya and Reich, self-identifying composers in the most old-fashioned sense of the term, raise issues about our conventional understanding of what a work of musical composition actually is.

In spite of all this, this book is not a definitive or comprehensive history of Western art music since 1989. Such a book would be much longer, for a start. Nor is it an attempt to establish a canon of the “best” works composed since that date. Even if we are prepared to accept canons as a necessary evil for making sense of the world, it is too early for much of the music discussed here to be considered in such a way. In any case, the rationales that I use here—based as they are not on chains of influence and accumulations of prestige but on responses to questions from outside the world of musical exchange value—challenge the very idea of a canon. This book provides a few useful routes into the appreciation and study of contemporary music, but it is no substitute for listening to and exploring that world for oneself.

New music has something of an image problem, to say the least. For whatever reason—whether the radicalism of the postwar modernists or the conservatism of their more reactionary counterparts—a wedge was driven between the Western art music audience and its contemporary manifestations. Since roughly the early 1970s, composers and institutions have sought ways to mitigate this situation, each taking an approach of their own. Some have devised musical aesthetics—like minimalism—that explicitly set out to simplify the listening experience. Others have devised means of greater audience participation or have incorporated spectacular elements like site specificity or multimedia to relieve the burden of interpretation from the ears alone. Others have more or less accepted the status quo and have written within an identifiable if updated extension of late-Romantic idioms. Others have turned away from the concert hall and set out to find an entirely new audience. Still others have chosen not to concentrate on audiences at all but rather to focus their attention on creating communities and collectives in which the boundaries between listeners, performers, and composers are less well defined.

A history of contemporary music could be written around approaches to this challenge alone. What those approaches have led to is a fragmentation of musical styles, a diversity that is extremely difficult to contain within a single narrative. This book doesn't attempt to describe every one of those approaches or to offer a comprehensive catalogue of the most important works or composers of the period.

However, it does attempt to show the full spectrum. My aim is to present a map of the forest and (some of) its outermost edges rather than portraits of every tree.

More useful than a complete survey or a genealogy of techniques and styles, I believe, are suggestions for how to read contemporary music. Composers and their works are important to this book's story, but so too are performers, promoters, publishers, record executives, and even listeners. *Music after the Fall* looks at the whole ecosystem of new music within the technological, social, and political technological conditions of its time and, from there, suggests a few ways to proceed.