built around the tritone,” Sondheim offered, “which is nonsense since half the score was taken from other shows and ballets” (p. 81). Simeone provides a succinct and insightful twenty-page analysis of the numbers in the show, during which he has what might be, or ought to be, the final word on the show as opera. Discussing the act 1 “Quintet,” a number that nearly all writers on the show from as early as the Washington previews have singled out as operatic—Simeone quotes Richard Coe’s early review from the *Washington Post*, for instance—Simeone comments that it is “operatic urgency rather than operatic excess” that is at work in this number. He continues, “There is no sense whatsoever of Bernstein falling into an ‘opera trap’; instead he has created a Broadway reinterpretation of a model that was the ideal fit for this critical moment in the drama” (p. 106).

Each of these works stands distinctly apart from many of the more general considerations of the genre as well as from studies of particular works for the musical stage. Wells’s multidisciplinary approach, for instance, which embraces the collaborative nature of the genre, demonstrates an impressively broad sample of primary sources and archival materials. Especially useful in both works are the extensive observations of some of the work’s original creators—the comments of Kostal and Ramin are rare and valuable, for example—and the contemporary interviews with gang members that Wells provides richly contextualize the work as a mid-twentieth-century social critique. And although Simeone focuses specifically on Bernstein’s score, he, like Wells, is very forthcoming in describing what he is doing as part of a necessarily larger picture involving co-creators and various other artists. In short, Wells and Simeone have joined the still short but growing list of scholars who are defining musical theater studies, and each has joined that list with an insightful and skilled monograph about one of the genre’s most problematic yet successful works.

JIM LOVENSHEIMER


Like its subject, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* is a hybrid: a sourcebook/anthology fused with a case study in musical polemics. Nested within, the book contains its own strong plea: it generates a sense of moral purpose by treating its eponymous subject as if it were an injured class, analogous to a marginalized social group, whose rights and dignities warrant protection. Straus suggests a link between respect for diverse musical kinds, cultural (and human) diversity, and human dignity in his refutation of one of the many fictions circulating about twelve-tone methods, what he calls the “Myth of Unnaturalness”:
If a significant number of people, including people with incontrovertible musical skills and abilities (i.e., people like Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Copland), find twelve-tone music comprehensible, meaningful, and enjoyable then I think we may take as a given that this music is, in fact, under some circumstances and for some people, comprehensible, meaningful, and enjoyable. And, unless we want to think that these people are themselves abnormal or unnatural, not fully human in some way, we can also safely conclude that the constraints of human cognition must be flexible enough to encompass twelve-tone music. (p. 225)

Overall, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* comes to resemble a legal brief for a class action suit, with American twelve-tone music as plaintiff. Straus’s language turns explicitly juridical near the end of the book’s text, when he promotes a virtue that might seem to require no special pleading: telling the truth. Speaking in a sober tone, he all but escorts us to the witness stand and reads out an oath.

As we write the history of American music since 1925, and account for the position of twelve-tone music within that history, we have two principal obligations that have too often not been met. First, we have the obligation to tell the truth about this music, to describe it accurately. . . . Second, we have an obligation to tell not only the truth, but the whole truth about musical life in a given period. (p. 212)

The truth, the whole truth, and, indeed, nothing but: In the case of American twelve-tone music vs. its detractors, there are multiple crimes of critical misprision to prosecute, sins of commission as well as omission. The second part of the book refutes no less than nineteen distinct myths circulating about the injured class, and Straus enters more than a hundred extracts from the pertinent literature into the evidence. Generally hostile and tilted toward the shrill end of the spectrum, the quotations of part 2 may remind readers of a certain age of Nicolas Slonimsky’s *Lexicon of Musical Invective*.1 “[I]t would be hard to think of another repertoire so widely discussed (or so harshly attacked) and so little and so poorly misunderstood,” Straus suggests in the book’s preface. “I will try to set the record straight . . . ” (p. xxiv). To set the record straight, the prosecution must pierce a thick hive of critical indictments, woven around a few paltry shards of evidence: “Too often historians and critics have often [sic] seemed more interested in reading the composers’ prose than in attending to their music. As a result, a small number of texts (mostly by Schoenberg and Babbitt) have been allowed to stand for not only their music but, what is even worse, for a highly varied musical repertoire produced by a remarkably diverse group of composers” (p. xxi). To remedy this situation, and as supporting evidence for the nineteen refutations of part 2, Straus produces thirty-seven “analytical vignettes” in part 1. Combining new analy-
ses and synopses of previous studies, these describe the particular tenor of the
twelve-tone thinking in excerpts taken from American pieces, including those
of immigrant composers (Krenek, Mamlok, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Weiss,
and Wolpe), written between 1927 and 2008.

The targeting of critical rage at twelve-tone music (or other such broad tar-
gets: “modernism,” “atonality,” etc.) is by now a time-honored phenomenon.
There are pundits at both ends of the anti-twelve-tone spectrum, those who
see it as an affront to God, Gemeinschaft, and country, and those (still smart-
ing at Schoenberg’s and Webern’s boasts about historical necessity and
German supremacy) who view it as an emblem of cultural hegemony, neo-
nationalism, and metaphysical pretense. Positing that the attack on serialism is a
rich and complicated subject, one that warrants study, Straus makes a strong
move. He models his method of scholarly activism in the aesthetic realm on
principles of social justice theory. Redressing the injustices done to American
twelve-tone music orient him toward liberal, Rawlsian first principles aimed at
soliciting consensus while safeguarding autonomy and diversity in a pluralistic
society. Offering tolerance as an overarching social value, truthfulness as a
transcendent analytical criterion, and music theory as a technology of unbiased
investigation, he rallies us to a common cause while placing himself largely
above the ideological and interpretive fray.

His case proceeds mostly through accretion of evidence rather than devel-
opment of argument (and, in part 2, generally through the negation of falla-
cies). It boils down to a few broad (and virtually irrefutable) points: the
twelve-tone method has proven a flexible heuristic for American composers;
twelve-tone music written in the Americas has been expressively and struc-
turally varied; and twelve-tone thinking has been alive and well in the hearts
and minds of a wide variety of American composers since Schoenberg’s stu-
dent, Adolph Weiss, set foot on American shores in 1927. The book’s non-
heirarchical, episodic structure permits Straus to make some subtle points
about the circulation of twelve-tone ideas and the ephemeral networks of
compositional affinity that twelve-tone thinking has affected over the last
eight decades—for example, the relationship between Weiss and the “ultra-
modernists,” e.g., Ruggles and Crawford.

When ambiguous questions of interpretation arise, however, Straus tends
to fall back to the solid ground of generic metavalues (creative and critical di-
versity, the whole truth) rather than wading into the hermeneutic swamp.
Reviewing critical perspectives on twelve-tone music in relation to political
and sexual identity (when refuting “The Myth of Autonomy”), he rehearses
some of the arguments that have been made about the engendering of sub-
jectivity, musical personae, naturalizing discourses, etc. Rather than attempt-
ing to unpack the contradictory claims in play, however, he heads for higher
ground: “[T]he gender/sexual polarity of twelve-tone music would appear
to be entirely up for grabs. Either twelve-tone music is coded as oppressively
masculine and straight ([Nadine] Hubbs) or it is coded as marginally

Reviews 293
feminized and queer ([Fred] Maus). . . . [O]ne can point to prominent gay and straight, male and female, composers working on both the tonal and twelve-tone sides of the fence” (p. 235).

Elsewhere, the impulse to represent diverse perspectives seems to run afoul of Straus’s own first principles. Discussing Leonard Rosenman’s twelve-tone score to the Vincente Minnelli film *The Cobweb*, he becomes entangled in questions of musical/cinematic idiom and expression. He quotes Rosenman saying that he wrote “expressionistic music” in a film about a mental asylum because “I [Rosenman] wanted more neurosis” (pp. 150–51). Nonetheless (and without signaling the composer’s implicit equation of “expressionism” and “twelve-tone”) he offers a dubious gloss to reinforce one of his own background mantras, about the expressive subtlety and range of twelve-tone music: “The film is set in a mental asylum and Rosenman turned to the twelve-tone method not so much because of any association with insanity (or other disordered mental states) as for its suitability for representing a complex interior emotional life” (p. 150). Citing other opinions only further blurs the question and multiplies the categories. “[David] Schiff suggests that modernist musical styles are particularly well suited for violent situations and mental disturbances, and Rosenman would appear to agree” (pp. 151, 153), but “[Arved] Ashby . . . argues that modernism is not intrinsically suited to horror. Rather, in its resistance to traditional, socially encoded meanings, modernism is well suited to film in general—it is amenable to narrative in a way that tonal music, already replete with its own inner meaning, is not” (p. 153). Straus abjures the opportunity to sort out the relationship between the broad terms (“modernism,” “expressionism,” “twelve-tone,” or for that matter, “neurosis,” “mental state,” “horror”), flag the mischievous qualifier (“intrinsically”), or stand up for the semiotic efficacy of tonality. Scholars with a dog in these fights, however grateful they may be for the summaries and references, are likely to be frustrated by the posture of equanimity.

And what of the general reader? Complementing the book’s juridical stance, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* offers a pedagogical intervention of great promise. The analyses of part 1 challenge the assumption that the literature of twelve-tone theory is too specialized to reach beyond a small, highly committed professional cohort. I imagine that there are listeners drawn (say) to Donald Martino’s stunning piece *Notturno*, but not eager to wade into his canonical study “The Source Set and Its Aggregate Formations”—and yet who would be grateful for a little help in understanding the relevant techniques in play in the piece.² For this audience, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* will bridge the gap. Drawing on an extensive review of the technical literature, Straus shows us how thirty-seven beautiful bits of music individualistically interpret the twelve-tone apparatus.

The book begins with an elegant heuristic: “Twelve-tone serial music in America, as varied as it is stylistically and expressively, generally shares two structural features: (1) the aggregate of all twelve tones as a referential harmonic unit; and (2) an ordered succession of tones as a source of motives, melodies, and harmonies” (p. xviii). This formulation invites us to explore a conceptual orientation and a few taxonomic categories rather than to follow rules. It befuddles critics who want to denounce twelve-tone methods for one or another crime against humanity (e.g., threatening the composer’s sovereign agency by promoting mechanistic algorithms for musical structures). Straus’s criteria allow him to make a compelling claim for an expansive list of American twelve-toners, including diverse outliers. He admits Elliott Carter, whose “rows” take an unusual shape: intermittent all-interval chords that are spatially rather than temporally ordered; and Stefan Wolpe, who fancied the twelve-pitch-class set as a kind of Hegelian idea and projected rows in temporally distended, incessantly interrupted ways, locating their realization near the vanishing point.

In encouraging us to extend the network of twelve-tone thinking, Straus’s approach raises a fundamental question: where, exactly, to stop? What of Mario Davidovsky, a composer who is ever sensitive to the dynamics of aggregate completion and whose music spews out enigmatic twelve-pitch-class tunes at portentous moments? What of the jazz composer/improvisers (Cecil Taylor or George Russell, for example) who have produced densely atonal music with a fine sensitivity to aggregate completion and an interest in playing with ordered sets? Straus’s definition may even undermine the idea that “twelve-tone music in America” can be understood as a fixed “kind” at all, whether by structural, geographical, or cultural criteria. His view of twelve-tone thinking might inspire multiple maps of modernism and its musical affinities, rifts, and genealogies.

Here too, however, Straus favors adjudication over interpretation. He repeatedly conjures a binary relation between the injured class and its adversarial Others in lieu of a more complicated geography. Among the enemies, the European postwar avant-garde plays a special role, functioning as an inverted mirror image to a salutary, American paradigm. He contrasts the European “‘Zero-Hour’ mentality” with American twelve-tone music, which “conveys a deep sense of historical connection” (p. 46). And elsewhere: “In rejecting the desirability or even the possibility of European-style ‘integral serialism,’ Mel Powell spoke for all American twelve-tone composers” (p. 197). Nurtured by a culture of tolerance, the American serialists seem ever a practical, nondogmatic lot. “[I]t would be impossible to apply the principle of non-repetition even if one wanted to (and no American twelve-tone composer has ever given any indication of wanting to)” (p. 184). “American twelve-tone music has never been remotely pure, nor has it seemed to strive toward purity” (p. 113). By contrast, when Straus quotes Europeans younger than Schoenberg, what they have to say tends to be uniformly daft. Pierre Boulez
and André Hodeir take place of pride (e.g., this, from Hodeir’s 1961 book *Since Debussy*: “[O]nce we agree that Hindemith’s music is a lamentable error, we must go on to dismiss neoclassicism as a whole and, with it, nearly all of American music . . .” [quoted on p. 181]). But the Gallic rants that Straus cites beg for contextualization as much as the comments of their American twelve-tone counterparts. Like those of their American colleagues, the long careers and political peregrinations of Boulez and Hodeir are not easily summarized. As Mark Carroll has shown in *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe*, the cultural/aesthetic anti-Americanism of the post–World War II decade, especially in Paris, was a dense rhizome. A quick peek at the heavily American staff list of IRCAM twenty years later would suggest that attitudes had changed.

Although Straus aims to keep his ideological liability to a minimum, his repeated evocation of an idealized, collective Pan-American cultural identity reminds us that tolerance itself is a cultural construction and that a juridical/pedagogical posture does not place us above the ideological fray. Even the admirable endeavor to build bridges between audiences and speak the truth inevitably exposes the limits of factuality, reason, and consensus in sorting the affairs of art. *Twelve-Tone Music in America* is not a fully operational textbook, and it sometimes seems to be prompting an imaginary instructor to fill in the blanks, rather than offering a strong argument to the specialist or a sufficient explanation to the neophyte. In describing the set structure of the String Quartet No. 3 by the Canadian composer Barbara Pentland, for example, Straus curtly informs the reader that “I-combinatoriality [is] a Schoenbergian, not a Webernian procedure” (p. 87). This observation signals a didactic opportunity (to compare Schoenberg’s and Webern’s approach to row structure and use). But without a referee to sort things out, the telegraphic pronouncement may well spark Talmudic squabbling among mavens (properties of rows vs. procedures of composers/pieces, etc.) and head scratching among new recruits. Moreover, justice is not blind; Straus’s pedagogical/juridical demeanor sometimes masks his own polemic. He suggests, for example, that “the evolution of [Stravinsky’s] music during this [the twelve-tone] period, including his adoption of rotational arrays and four-part arrays, can be understood, at least in part, in terms of evolving solutions to the problem of writing serial harmony” (p. 39). The repeated accent on evolution functions to normalize one of Stravinsky’s more enigmatic innovations, and in turn to stabilize one of Straus’s more arguable characterizations: that the older generation of American immigrant twelve-toners, like their younger American successors, was a temperate, nondoctrinaire cohort, unscathed by the ideological-intoxication of postwar European serialism.


Twelve-Tone Music in America is a generous contribution to the study of modernism and its discontents. In his critique of perceptual studies of twelve-tone structures (“The Myth of Imperceptibility”), however, Straus plants a clue about the limits of a liberal justice model in addressing current questions of musical experience and cultural analysis.

People without an aesthetic connection or affinity with the music are inherently less likely to be able to make sense of it. . . . Twelve-tone works are far more self-referential than traditional tonal works. . . . To a significant extent, then, a “competent listener” in a study of twelve-tone music would be someone who has some knowledge of and affinity with a particular work. . . . (pp. 216–17)

Thinking of musical structures as self-referential (or “contextual,” to use the term Babbitt borrowed from Schoenberg), leads to radical questions about specialized knowledge, incommensurate discourses, ontological/cultural difference, and the institutional structures and ideological apparatuses involved in shaping artistic experience. Justice matters—but a metatheory focused on adjudication will need to be balanced by an ever-alert sensitivity to the multiple layers of particularity and difference involved in aesthetic encounters, from the un-innocent ontologies of structural entities to the ephemeral nuances of subcultural meanings. A “contextualist” rather than competence-based ethics of listening will turn us all into unstable subjects and nomadic cultural explorers. From this point of view, the history of controversy around twelve-tone music, and contextualist music in general, might be seen as a kind of early warning system for a cultural condition that is becoming pervasive. Thinking in terms of planetary contextuality, we might come to see twelve-tone music in America less as an artistic “kind,” worthy of protection in a subcultural microcosm of a liberal utopia, or even a fixed set of techniques, attitude, or place— but rather a kind of virtual heterotopia, an ephemeral environment of disquieting reinvention and always morphing cultural boundaries. As we continue to explore this milieu, however, we would be well advised to heed Straus’s call for truth and tolerance, to follow his example of breadth and erudition, and to keep a copy of his book close at hand.

MARTIN BRODY