

Serialism and Revisionism:  
A Response to Straus

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Joseph Straus's discussion<sup>1</sup> of the much alleged tyranny of serialist practice is a valuable contribution to a reconstruction of the history of recent art music, not least because it reveals a disturbing, if unsurprising, level of ignorance of the practice of recent American composers among opinion makers in both the journalistic and academic sectors of the classical music establishment. A common fundamental misconception has to do with an unthinking conflation of a compositional method, serialism, and a perceptual attribute of pieces, namely, atonality. Confusion on this score has led to the mistaken impression that an overwhelming proportion of the music of the last half century has been serial. The fact, well known to anyone with a minimal familiarity with the literature of this period, is that comparatively few composers wrote serial music, at least with a degree of strictness that renders the technique analytically apparent. Straus's statistical analyses of the music of 468 composers from this period therefore tell most of us what we already know. These analyses are meant to go further, however. They indicate, according to Straus, that the bulk of the music composed, performed and studied in this period continued to be not only non-serial but tonal, and that this generalization cuts across all sectors of what he calls "the musical marketplace."<sup>2</sup>

If Straus is willing to recognize this point, however, a question intrudes with respect to his own previous work, specifically with the marketing and use of his text *An Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*. This is a book which the preface suggests is designed to serve, and frequently does serve, as a primary text for a "course in twentieth

century techniques and analysis."<sup>3</sup> What is significant is the absence of a qualifier: Straus is not suggesting that the book serve for the segment of the class concerned with atonal music, perhaps augmenting other texts dealing with tonal, or quasi-tonal, 20th-century techniques. Techniques for atonal and serial analysis are proposed as the exclusive means for coming to terms with the music of this century. If he continues to stand by this orientation, Straus cannot have it both ways: he cannot now claim that serialism is a relatively marginal technique and continue to have it a major focus of a primary text for 20th-century techniques and analysis. Nor can he claim that tonality (or quasi-tonality) in the 20th-century has not been a marginalized topic in the academy while being responsible for a work on 20th-century techniques which fails to mention a single work by Ravel, Sibelius, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Ives, Debussy<sup>4</sup> or Strauss.

While in no way reflecting the actual practice of composers, Straus's text does reflect the priorities of the field of music theory for the past quarter century in viewing the core of the canon of 20th century works as derived from the Second Viennese School.<sup>5</sup> Works from Second Viennese School comprise nearly half of all of the music discussed in *An Introduction of Post-Tonal Theory*. The choice is significant not just in relation to the question of the inordinate attention given to atonality, which Straus now claims is only one of "a healthy diversity of approaches." It also reflects on the more narrow question of the alleged "myth" of serial dominance in the academy which Straus is now attempting to debunk. All of

the Second Viennese School composers would, after all, eventually adopt serialist practice regarding it as a necessary rationalization and codification of what had been previously a purely intuitively guided atonal practice. Reflecting the view of serialism gradually triumphant throughout the century, the final third of Straus's text is devoted entirely to serial practice and the analysis of serial works.<sup>6</sup> That free atonality should be seen as a way station on the road to a serial future is the clear subtext of the progression of Straus's text, an impression confirmed by those works composed after 1950 cited by Straus. These are, with the only partial exception of Stravinsky's *Agon*, exclusively serial. Rather than a recent musical past in which "serialism was more than one possibility among many"<sup>7</sup> the picture which Straus's own text presents of the 50s is one in which serialism has virtually no competition.

In its selection of literature and its analytic approach Straus's text passes on to students two unchallenged assumptions. 1) dissonant atonality<sup>8</sup> constitutes the primary expressive realm of 20th-century music; 2) serialism, as a codification and rationalization of atonal practice constitutes increasingly a lingua franca for composers as the century progresses.<sup>9</sup> As Straus now points out, these assumptions were very quickly brought into question by composers and never widely accepted in concert music life. That they continue to remain very much in circulation in the design of college curricula is not only indicated by Straus's text but by those standard 20th-century histories such as those of Robert Morgan and Glenn Watkins which Straus cites in his article. The expert opinion of these sources

is passed on to generations of students, who not surprisingly assume the view of 20th-century music consistent with the works which have been presented to them as defining the period. Whatever the merits of this view, it should come as no surprise to Straus when he confronts it, albeit in a debased form, in the Sunday arts supplement.

To argue that these two assumptions, and the constitution of the 20th-century canon which derives from them, were not dominant in the academic sector of "the musical marketplace" for a significant period (albeit perhaps beginning somewhat later than the 50s, as has been pointed out) is untenable. It requires not only denying the evidence provided by Straus's own textbook, but also numerous manifestos, interviews, articles and university appointments emanating from the most authoritative and influential figures in contemporary music of the period. For Straus to claim that "(t)hroughout the 1950s and 1960s, it is virtually impossible to find a published description of a serial dominance currently in force,<sup>10</sup>" he is required to ignore Stefan Wolpe's now quaint seeming but at the time aggressively confident equation of "serial" and "serious" music in the same issue of the *Musical Quarterly* in which Straus's debunking appears. He must also ignore Roger Sessions writing in these pages in 1960 that "(t)he serial organization of tones must be, and for the most part is, today regarded as a settled fact.<sup>11</sup>" It requires ignoring that every junior faculty appointment to elite schools in the sixties (and seventies and eighties) wrote if not serial music then unmistakably atonal music often indistinguishable from

strict dodecaphonic compositions<sup>12</sup>. It requires ignoring that the pre-eminent journal of the period, *Perspectives of New Music*, would consist largely of analyses of serial practice. One could continue very easily for pages with an itemization of the indications of the dominant ideology of the period.

These, along with less easily documentable displays of approval and denigration, would create the climate under which composers were operating. To observe, as Straus does, that tonal music remained prevalent in many quarters of concert music, and would perhaps continue to constitute the majority of music composed during this period, is by no means unreasonable. However, to claim that unambiguous tonality was considered a viable option for those whom Charles Wuorinen referred to, in the notorious remark cited by Straus, as "serious composers of the mainstream" is to engage in flat-earthism, as it is, to a lesser degree, to argue that serialism was not, with varying degrees of strictness, a significant influence on the practice of "mainstream" composers of the period.

To refute the overwhelming evidence of serialism's inordinate prestige and influence in certain elite quarters of the musical establishment imposes a heavy burden of proof, a burden which is borne entirely by the numerical/statistical analysis of the list of composers amassed in the appendices of Straus's piece. Unlike Professor Botstein in his introductory essay, I do not accept that Straus's statistical methodology is a "powerful contribution" albeit one which fails to tell the whole story. The striking aspects of

Straus's piece are not the counter-intuitive (albeit familiar<sup>13</sup>) conclusions or his quantitative approach, but rather the numerous errors which infect the data from which Straus derives his impressive looking bar charts. It is necessary to accept the blunt instrument of Straus's taxonomy of serial (1), free-atonal (2), tonal (3) and experimental (4) composers for the moment, for only in accepting the relative descriptive adequacy of these categories does one discover that the numerical "objectivity" of Straus conclusions does not only "fail to explain history," the objectivity itself is a mere chimera. There is a single culprit behind these distortions: despite Straus's "confidence that his ascriptions of composers to categories are both meaningful and correct," this confidence turns out to be exceedingly poorly founded, a fact demonstrated in the (unfortunately) tedious but necessary exercise in positivism which follows:

The trouble begins in the A's. It is simply a matter of fact<sup>14</sup> that little of William Albright's music from the 60's can be described as tonal. Trouble continues into the B's with Albright's colleague (and near alter-ego) William Bolcom also being described as a tonal composer. The C's have Straus claiming Copland as an exclusively tonal composer in the fifties and sixties, despite the fact that the bulk of his output in this period was, as Straus well knows, serial. A mixed designation (tonal-atonal) of Chou Wen-chung's music as tonal would probably come as surprise to this inheritor of the uncompromising experimentalist tradition of Varese. In the D's, after describing David del Tredici as both a serial and tonal

composer<sup>15</sup> (his tonal works would not emerge until the mid 70s) a nadir of sorts is reached with when Straus designates Jacob Druckman as a tonal composer, (3). That Straus could have come to this conclusion after having done his graduate work at Yale where Druckman was for many years a distinguished faculty member almost surpasses belief, as does the fact that this gaffe escaped the editorial staff at the *Musical Quarterly*. Similarly egregious if less flamboyant gaffes pepper the remainder of Straus's database: to take a few more examples more or less at random, Donald Erb's sound mass textures from the 60s are sometimes serial sometimes not, but almost never tonal, nor is any of John Harbison's music from the 60s. Ralph Shapey, on the other hand, is definitely a (1) having used the same row for much of the last four decades-one which he happily shares with his students and audiences in his program notes. Finally, Henry Cowell, known pretty much universally as one of the founders of "the American experimentalist school" receives not the experimentalist designation, (4), but (3), tonal.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from these specific misattributions, also problematic is Straus's designation of the numerous composers of the Stravinsky school, Irving Fine, Alexis Haieff, John Lessard, Paul Des Marais, Ingolf Dahl, Louise Talma, Harold Shapero and Leo Smit among others as tonal composers. Stravinsky's works, however, including those from his neo-classical period, which would be most influential on Stravinsky's American followers, are discussed as representatives of "post-tonal" practice in Straus's *Introduction*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Straus

works sharing the same basic harmonic syntax become post-tonal, or more specifically "centric" according to Straus's terminology in Chapter 3 of his text, for the purpose of his textbook, but become tonal for the purposes of his database.

At a certain point, one begins to suspect that more than ignorance is involved in Straus's misattributions in that a large majority of the mistakes cited above (and many others I could mention) result in more or less unambiguously atonal composers being described as tonal and in some cases, serial composers being "downgraded" to "mere" atonalists. The resulting skewed statistics are what leads to Straus's claims for the "dominance of tonal composition" in the 50s, as well as his disavowal of the centrality of serialist practice.

Whether even these seemingly uncontroversial conclusions fail to be confirmed when Straus's data is corrected I will leave to others.<sup>18</sup> It is worth mentioning, however, that this task involves researching the music of the numerous composers who are unknown to me and to several composers of my acquaintance. Even in the unlikely event that Straus has identified all of these correctly as overwhelmingly tonal, that all of us failed to identify them is a clear indication that they probably were highly marginal and were thereby in no position to offer any resistance to a serial, or atonal, tyranny, if this did in fact, exist.<sup>19</sup>

Before leaving Straus's appendices, mention should be made of the supplement "composers of unknown stylistic orientation," not as an indication of Straus cooking the books again, but because these give

a more general indication of a lack of serious interest of American composers on Straus's part. These admissions of ignorance are not only problematic given Straus apparent desire to set himself up as an authority on the "healthy diversity of approaches" within the American scene, but for the simple reason that Straus in consigning these composers to obscurity manages to insult the reputations of several minor, but by no means insignificant composers. When considering the composer Miklos Rozsa, the question "unknown to who?" would be asked by millions of film goers, many of whom are familiar with Rozsa's Oscar winning scores from the films *Double Indemnity*, *Ben Hur*, *Spellbound* and many others. It is also somewhat hard to believe that if Straus's new found interests in American music of the fifties and sixties were genuine he has never encountered the name of, and was unable to research the works of Elliott Schwartz the prolific composer, Bowdoin College faculty member, and author of several books and articles on American composers which Straus would do well to consult.<sup>20</sup> Nor would it be difficult for Straus to determine the stylistic orientation of the music of Gordon Parks given his legendary status within New York's African American community. That Parks should be unknown to Straus indicates that the new inclusiveness of the academy has regrettable practical, if not theoretical limits. Finally, the absence of Phillip Glass, Steve Reich and Harry Partch from Straus's database, while probably no more than an oversight, also raises further questions about the acuity and representativeness of Straus's survey of the 50s and 60s.

I don't bring up Straus's failure to identify these names to engage in academic one-upmanship, but rather because they give the strong, though one hopes, incorrect impression, that Straus's relationship to the musical culture of this period is not that of an enthusiastic, sympathetic, or even minimally interested party but that of an unengaged or even uninterested academic. Even when Straus should be familiar with a name in the main body of the appendix, he has almost certainly not listened to the composer's music, or if so, he certainly hasn't heard it. How else can one account for his inability to recognize that David Del Tredici's compositions of sixties, of which *Syzygy* and *I Hear an Army* are the best known, are unambiguously atonal, and mostly fairly clearly serial. To hear Jacob Druckman's *Animus I, II or III* or *Valentine* or William Albright's *Pianogogo* as tonal is to admit to deafness. Can Straus's ear really be so insensitive as to lump the electronic works of Davidovsky into the same category, (4) "experimental," as those of one of Davidovsky's pre-eminent bete noires John Cage? Are the electronic textures of composer Bulent Arel so different in kind from others emanating from the Columbia-Princeton and later Yale studios that they should be classified as "tonal" rather than receiving the default designation "experimental"? If Gil Evans and James (Jimmy) Giuffre are included in the survey (and incidentally classified as exclusively "tonal"-- Straus has clearly never encountered Evans' collaboration with the free-jazz pianist Cecil Taylor on the recording "Into the Hot") on what grounds is Duke Ellington excluded?

None of these challenges to Straus's methodology is meant to dispute Straus's larger point, that "we need to rethink this period in American music and acknowledge not its monochromatic conformity but its astonishing variety." Rather, Straus's database gives a strong indication of a continuing myopia and absence of objectivity in the academy's relationship to music of the period. Consistent with this impression, and perhaps even more disturbing, is that the numerous misattributions failed to be detected by the referees to which the manuscript was presumably submitted. It is worth asking whether had Straus misattributed stylistic categories to say, minor composers of the early baroque these would have made it past the Musical Quarterly's fact checking apparatus.<sup>21</sup> Evidently contemporary composers have descended to a level of obscurity and marginalization that not even academic journals bother to apply normal scholarly standards when they and their works are cited. This is, of course, a thoroughly depressing notion. In any case, whether the "tyranny" of serialism existed, or was more or less oppressive than has been described by those who feel either victimized by or nostalgic for the climate of the fifties and the sixties, Straus's repeatedly careless attribution of clearly fallacious stylistic categories in his database as well as clear contradictions these create with his own work demonstrates that his database is no place to begin an investigation into these matters.

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<sup>21</sup>Thanks to Patrick McCreless and Richard Taruskin for comments on a preliminary version of this response.

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Straus, "The Myth of Serial 'Tyranny' in the 1950s and 1960s," *The Music Quarterly*, Fall, 1999, 301-343.

<sup>2</sup>Straus, "The Myth of Serial 'Tyranny' in the 1950s and 1960s," 302.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Straus, *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, (Englewood cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), v.

<sup>4</sup>A good indication of the Second Viennese School dominance of Straus' text is provided by the only exception: "The whole-tone collection, set class 6-32 (02468T), is a favorite of Debussy and can be found, *more subtly*, in some early works by Schoenberg. (my italics)" *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, 101.

<sup>5</sup>According to Patrick McCreless (p.c.), a survey of paper topics submitted to the Society for Music Theory revealed the most frequently cited composer of all periods to be Webern with Schoenberg a fairly distant second.

<sup>6</sup>Straus, *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, Chapters 5, Basic Twelve Tone Operations, and Chapter 6, More Twelve-Tone Operations.

<sup>7</sup>Straus, "The Myth of Serial 'Tyranny' in the 1950s and 1960s," 303.

<sup>8</sup>The absence of any discussion of relatively consonant forms of atonality such as that found in Debussy's Etudes or in later works of Bartok is indicative of this bias.

<sup>9</sup>A clear indication that Straus advocates a progressivist reading of the transition from free atonal to serial practice is Straus's claim that "for listeners more sensitive to the musical continuities underlying the stylistic change, (the embrace of twelve-tone serialism) came to seem a logical outgrowth of what had come before." *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, 143. The particular

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remark applies to Stravinsky, though Straus's text leaves little doubt that it would apply, a fortiori, to the Second Viennese School.

<sup>10</sup>Straus, "The Myth of Serial "Tyranny in the 1950s and 1960s," 332.

<sup>11</sup>Roger Sessions, quoted in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 514.

Originally published in *The Musical Quarterly*, XLVI, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Straus's claim that of the six junior faculty at Harvard "only (James MacIvor) Perkins can be considered a serial composer" is contradicted by the fact that at the time of his appointment David Del Tredici was a serial composer, as discussed below. Irving Fine would also follow his mentor Copland in employing serialist techniques from 1952 on. See *The New Grove Dictionary*, ed. Stanley Sadie, (London: Macmillan, 1980) vol. 6, 562. In addition, according to Martin Bresnick (p.c.), several works by Billy Jim Layton are serial. By this accounting, a full two-thirds of Harvard junior faculty are serialists.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Matthias Kriesberg, "The Musical God That Failed? Says Who?," *New York Times*, 16 April, 2000.

<sup>14</sup>Obviously, there is a significant subjective component to such designations. At a certain point, however, simple common sense intrudes. For example, it is simply bizarre to claim, as Straus does, that William Albright was an exclusively tonal composer in the 1960s. *Organbook 1* (1967) (see example 1) is typical of his music of

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this period. The other faulty designations which I refer to here are equally uncontroversial.

<sup>15</sup>The one non-serial work from the sixties, *Pop-pourri* (1968), is referred to by Del Tredici as "not really tonal. See Richard Dufallo, *Trackings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 161.

<sup>16</sup>While some of Cowell's later music would be arguably less overtly informed by experimentalist leanings, much of it would continue to make use of polyrhythmic and tone-cluster techniques. To designate Cowell as a unproblematic tonal composer is clearly less natural than to describe his practice in this period as a mixture of tonal, atonal, and experimental elements.

<sup>17</sup>*Symphony in C Major*, for example is, according to Strauss, "not tonal in the deepest sense." *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, 93.

<sup>18</sup>Other composers either probably or certainly incorrectly designated by Straus as either exclusively tonal or "mixed" include Samuel Adler, Stephen Albert, Edward Diemente, Donald Harris, Bernard Hermann, Karel Husa, Donald Jenni, Benjamin Lees, Edward Miller, Terry Riley, Max Schubel, and Stanley Silverman.

<sup>19</sup> It would be fairly difficult, for example, to argue that the works of Frederick Jacobi, (d. 1952), Mabel Daniels (b. 1878) and choral conductor Edward Tatnall Canby were a very visible presence in the musical mainstream.

<sup>20</sup>Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs with Jim Fox, eds., *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, New York : Da Capo Press, 1998. Also, Elliott Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey, *Music since 1945 : Issues, Materials, and Literature* (New York: Schirmer

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Books, 1996) and Elliott Schwartz, *Electronic Music: A Listener's Guide*, (New York: Praeger, 1975). The Yale collection includes twenty-seven published musical works by Schwartz going back to 1965. The title "Rows Garden" provides a hint concerning the stylistic orientation of several of these.

<sup>21</sup>Or, had Straus invented, as he does here, a non-existent composer (of "unknown stylistic orientation") named "Louis Clabro" as opposed to the very real "tonal" composer Louis Calabro.