

## 5 Sharing a stage

### *The growing proximity between modernism and popular music*

David Metzger

New York City. Merkin Concert Hall. 21 February 2013. I have been to countless new music concerts, but none like this one. I expressly went to the concert because I knew that it would be different, yet the differences were more striking than I had anticipated. In the lobby before the show, it seemed as if this was a typical new music concert. There was a familiar cast of characters: the guy in his sixties with a forlorn ponytail who had chronicled more new music than I probably ever will and the young composition student looking around for student friends. But then I noticed the hipsters, guys with manicured beards and stovepipe jeans. That there were hipsters there was not surprising. What caught me off guard was how many were chatting away in the lobby. At one moment, I was in Merkin Concert Hall, the next it seemed as if I was in a Brooklyn club.

The concert was a little bit of both. The first half of the show was devoted to the music of the young Brazilian composer Marcos Balter, performed by the new music group Ensemble Dal Niente. This could have been the beginning of any new music concert, and an especially engaging opening with Balter's imaginative works. The second half brought to the stage the indie rock group Deerhoof – the draw for the hipsters in the lobby. Merkin Concert Hall became a club, although the acoustics were a little too alive for an amplified rock group, especially one that juxtaposes blasts of noise and heavy drumming with pop sing-songy vocals. How to finish the concert? Perhaps the only way was to bring everyone together on stage with a piece for both ensembles by Balter.

So, yes, a different type of new music concert, but, it turns out, far from a unique one. In this and other concerts, the Ecstatic Music Festival has put down bridges between the new music and indie rock worlds. So too have other festivals and new music groups. Several composers also travel back and forth between the two worlds. Then there is me, the musicologist. As much as I enjoyed the music of Balter and Deerhoof, I did not go to the concert specifically to hear either one. I instead went to experience first-hand an idea that I had been contemplating, an idea that the concert captured.

That idea is a growing proximity between modernist music and popular idioms. The two were nothing but proximate in the Ecstatic Music Festival concert – sharing the same stage. They, however, are not always so pressed up against each other. The closeness between the two takes different forms. In my book *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, I discussed one such form: the interest in certain musical and aesthetic ideals shared by musicians in both idioms. My references to this proximity, though, were brief, quickly closed off with a remark that this could be a topic for another book.<sup>1</sup> The topic is indeed large enough to warrant a book. In regard to popular styles, it covers a range of music, from 1960s groups like the Beatles and The Velvet Underground to present-day indie bands. It is also a largely unexplored topic. While connections between the two musical realms have been touched upon here and there in discussions of individual bands or composers, the increased closeness between new music and popular styles has not been identified as a larger historical development.<sup>2</sup> Once ascertained as such, questions quickly arise. What does that nearness say about the contemporary musical scene? How does it fit into the history of modernism?

These are pertinent questions for a collection entitled *Transformations of Musical Modernism*. The proximity between modernist and popular idioms not only reveals a modernism that has been transformed but it also transforms our conceptions of modernism. To appreciate the extent of those transformations and to answer the above questions, I will approach the topic from two contrasting perspectives. The first is a theoretical perspective that focuses on mutual interests in musical material and aesthetic ideals. To get at those affinities, I will discuss the lines of inquiry that have crossed the two idioms. The second approach looks at what is happening on the ground, that is, at concerts like the Ecstatic Music Festival show at Merkin Concert Hall. I will examine the infrastructure of festivals, clubs, record labels and magazines that has emerged to support the connections between new music and popular styles and consider the types of musical and cultural connections that those organizations are making between the two.

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My studies of modernism build upon a conventional understanding of the concept, that of the far-reaching departures in musical language that took

<sup>1</sup> David Metzger, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 245.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Ballantine has recently offered an illuminating discussion of the intersections between modernist and popular idioms. Ballantine, 'Modernism and Popular Music', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 139/1 (2014), 200–4.

place around the beginning of the twentieth century. I, however, depart from that standard view by focusing on what I call lines of inquiry. The inquiries are into compositional and aesthetic ideals of modernism, and the lines are formed by works that explore those ideals over the course of decades. The inquiries deal with such states as sonic flux, fragmentation, purity, density and simultaneity. Let's look at the first of these, sonic flux, which is the conception of sound as a restless realm of constant transformation in which sounds are always changing in terms of colour, density and volume. Modernist works of different types have inquired into the mutability of sound. In my book, I pursued a line of that inquiry that extends from the 1920s works of Varèse to recent pieces by Kaija Saariaho, Helmut Lachenmann and Olga Neuwirth. All three composers expand Varèse's vision of sound as existing in a state of perpetual metamorphosis by shaping sound masses that significantly change over the course of a work.<sup>3</sup>

The moulding of sound masses evokes what has been called musical material, the stuff not only of works but also of theories of modernism. Adorno, for example, described modernist pieces as capturing advanced material, the most challenging sounds and ideas existing at a particular historical moment.<sup>4</sup> In the visual arts, Clement Greenberg described the history of modernism as the gradual stripping away of the extraneous to get at the 'pure' material of painting, which consists of line, colour and texture.<sup>5</sup> The concept of lines of inquiry has similarities with these older theories of material but also important differences. A key difference is that of stylistic range. For both Adorno and Greenberg, 'modernism' and 'material' are synonymous. Advanced or pure materials are the stock of modernism, and modernism is the way of accessing advanced material or achieving pure forms of it. Neither type of material could ever appear in popular genres. If anything, they would be inimical to popular styles. Adorno and Greenberg would most likely find a closeness between the two absurd. More than that, the two critics used modernism as a refuge from the kitsch of mass culture.

<sup>3</sup> Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, pp. 175–237.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 31–4. For discussions of Adorno's concept of advanced material, see Carl Dahlhaus, 'Adornos Begriff des musikalischen Materials' in *Schönberg und andere: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Neuen Musik* (Mainz: Schott, 1978), pp. 336–9; Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 88–9 and p. 149; and Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, p. 5 and p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in John O'Brien (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Modernism with a Vengeance (1957–1969)*, 4 vols. (University of Chicago Press, 1993), vol. IV, pp. 83–93.

My theory of lines of inquiry, in contrast, opens up to popular genres, or I should say that the inquiries that I have followed have done so. Inquiry is a concept foreign to Adorno and Greenberg's ideas of material. Adorno, for example, describes advanced material as rarefied elements that a small number of innovative works can catch only particles of, while Greenberg presents modernism as an independent and inevitable historical process. Inquiries, on the other hand, are open, broad and unpredictable, guided by musicians' curiosity rather than a set historical path. The results can be advanced and pure as well as simplistic and dead end. With curiosity as the guide and rich ideas as the field, the inquiries that I have discussed cannot be confined to any one genre. They may have begun in modernist idioms, but they have long since been taken up by musicians working in popular genres. I would like to present three brief examples of these inquiries and compare how popular musicians have pursued them to the explorations conducted by modernist composers. In particular, I would like to show what popular musicians, far from merely copying modernist precedents, have added to those inquiries.

The first to be discussed is the inquiry into sonic flux, and the first group is Sonic Youth. The pairing is far from a surprising choice. The band is one of the seminal noise rock groups and known for the swelling, mercurial sounds they create from the standard rock setup of guitars, bass and drums.<sup>6</sup> In their first press release in 1981, guitarist Thurston Moore described the band's sound in this way: 'Crashing mashing intensified dense rhythms juxtaposed with filmic, mood pieces. Evoking an atmosphere that could only be described as expressive fucked-up modernism. And so forth.'<sup>7</sup> Of course, the word 'modernism' sticks out in that blare of rich adjectives and nouns. This would be far from last time that the word has found its way into descriptions of the group, be it those by the band members or press.

What is so 'expressive' about the group's brand of modernism can be heard in the song 'Silver Rocket' (1988). Typical of many songs in the post-punk scene of New York, it has its punk bearings. In particular, 'Silver Rocket' is similar to the amphetamine versions of older rock styles perfected by New York punk groups like the Ramones. As with that group's aphoristic blasts, it is fast, raucous and short, and keeps to a basic verse/chorus form. Sonic Youth, though, add their own touches to these punk trappings. The chord choices (A minor/F major in the verse and C major/E<sup>b</sup> major in the chorus) are not the staples of the 'one-chord wonders'

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the sonic qualities of the band's music, see Caroline O'Meara, 'Clarity and Order in Sonic Youth's Early Noise Rock', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 25 (2013), 13–30.

<sup>7</sup> Alec Foege, *Confusion Is Next: The Sonic Youth Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 71.

mockingly prized in punk, nor are the group's characteristic alternate tunings.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the poetic snarls – 'nymphoid clamor' and 'psycho helmet' – are out of place in the blunt crassness of punk lyrics.<sup>9</sup>

What especially separates 'Silver Rocket' from its punk forebears is Sonic Youth's 'modernism'. After only a minute and a half, the tune falls into a sonic storm created by feedback miasmas, swirling high guitar lines and drum barrages. Varèse's depiction of sound as a realm of colliding and repelling sound masses does not seem so far off here, as heard in the clash between the rumbling guitars and drums and high swirling lines; nor does the modernist line of inquiry into sound as a state of flux. The guitar sonorities constantly change in terms of colour, register and density, and the feedback forms wafting, drifting sonic clouds. This is a space where sounds exist in a state of unrelenting fluidity. It is also a state of disintegration, as, after a minute (a third of the overall length of the song), the streams of sound dwindle, which is typical of modernist works using sound masses. To take the example of two seminal sound mass compositions, the sonorities in Ligeti's *Atmospheres* and Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* build into dense, swelling clouds, but they eventually diminish to traces. As the mass in 'Silver Rocket' crumbles, the alternating chords of the verse come in as an underpinning and lead back to the song we knew before this spell of sonic flux began.

There are several popular music precedents for 'Silver Rocket' – like the feedback-infused solos of Jimi Hendrix – but, I believe, that placing the song in the inquiry into sonic flux brings out how multidimensional and volatile the sound worlds created by the group in this and other songs can be. It also reveals what the group adds to that inquiry, what is so unique about what it has to say about sonic instability. One striking feature of 'Silver Rocket' is the compressed juxtaposition between the hard-driving, motor-like rock song and the suspended welter of the middle section. Modernist works exploring sonic flux, or Hendrix's songs, for that matter, do not contrast the two – regularity and flux – so abruptly or severely. With such a sharp juxtaposition, sound comes across as all the more unstable and changeable.<sup>10</sup>

Let's stick with inquiries into sound and stay in late 1980s New York, but we will move from rock to hip hop. Public Enemy's CDs *It Takes a Nation*

<sup>8</sup> The Adverts built a song around that idea, 'One Chord Wonders', which includes more than one chord.

<sup>9</sup> Punk, of course, had its poetic lyricists, notably Patti Smith and Richard Hell.

<sup>10</sup> The connections with modernism are directly made in Sonic Youth's recording *Goodbye Twentieth Century*, which includes performances of works by John Cage, Christian Wolff, Cornelius Cardew and Steve Reich, among others.

of *Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988) and *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) have attained the status of classics. The accolades typically single out the sound of the albums, particularly the thick mixes of samples, beats and rap. In his review of *Fear of a Black Planet*, Simon Reynolds called the recording a 'work of unprecedented density for hip hop'.<sup>11</sup> Writing almost twenty years later, Alex Ross accorded the CD a broader historical significance, holding it up as 'one of most densely packed sonic assemblages in music history'.<sup>12</sup> As for the group, MC Chuck D referred to the album as 'probably the most elaborate smorgasbord of sound that we did' and added that it was 'completely an album of found sounds'.<sup>13</sup> Just how packed and elaborate the mix of found sounds is can be heard in 'Night of the Living Baseheads' (1988), which rap historian Tricia Brown, writing in the early 1990s, called 'one of the most dense and cacophonous raps to date'. She estimated that there are around forty-five sampled tracks in the recording.<sup>14</sup> On the mix of samples and original music tracks in the recording, rap producer Eric Sadler came up with this vivid description: 'You got stuff darting in and out absolutely everywhere. It's like somebody throwing rice at you. You have to grab every little piece and put it in the right place like in a puzzle. Very complicated.'<sup>15</sup>

The above comments draw attention to two inquiries: those into sonic density and the use of found sounds. Earlier modernist idioms twinned the two inquiries, particularly *musique concrète*. Pierre Schaefer's works, for example, capture the hectic clamour of modern life by using and piling on bits of real-world sounds, including voices, trains and sirens. Public Enemy stands out in the history of these inquiries, not only by pairing them but also by pushing them to extremes. At such extremes, one inquiry could diminish the other. The denser the mix, the less likely that individual found sounds can be spotted and recognized. The clearer the individual sounds, the less thick the mix is likely to be. Public Enemy, though, pulls off those extremes. In the crowded mix of 'Night of the Living Baseheads', samples emerge here and there, bits of political speeches, horn lines, wails and street noise. The samples are often fleeting, but they can be recognized. Some come across as a general type of sound – a political speech, horn line – or a general style of song, like funk or soul. Other samples can be identified as a

<sup>11</sup> Simon Reynolds, 'Review: Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet*,' *Melody Maker* (April 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Alex Ross, *Listen to This* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 80. For a list of individual samples, see the website 'whosampled.com', which lists around twenty-four samples.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 80.

specific sound – a particular political speech (like the samples of speeches by Jesse Jackson and Khalid Abdul Muhammad) or horn line (the abrasive two-note riff from The J.B.'s' 'The Grunt') or a specific song, like those by James Brown and Public Enemy itself.

Rather than cancelling each other out, the inquiries combine to make incisive cultural commentary about racial injustice in American society and the potential for violence.<sup>16</sup> The dense mix, for example, captures the unstable, threatening qualities of noise. As if the group's name was not menacing enough, it brandished the word 'noise' in tracks like 'Bring the Noise' (sampled in 'Night of the Living Baseheads') and took pride in their music being dismissed as noise, which, for them, was a powerful and powerfully disruptive sound.<sup>17</sup> The noise made from found sounds could also be political. Many of the samples in 'Night of the Living Baseheads' have strong political associations. Public Enemy draws upon songs with connections to the 1960s and 1970s Civil Rights and Black Power movements, including James Brown's 'Soul Power' and 'Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved' and Sly and the Family Stone's 'You Can Make It If You Try'.<sup>18</sup> The songs preached self-empowerment and reliance, beliefs upheld as necessary in overturning centuries of racial injustice. 'Night of the Living Baseheads' asserts that that message needed to be heard again in contending with the crack cocaine epidemic afflicting urban black neighbourhoods in the late 1980s. One way of hearing it again – and a way very much of that time and not the 1960s – was to place samples of those songs in a vibrant, ever-changing mix, in which their messages join and fortify a new attack on racial inequality.<sup>19</sup>

For my final example of modernist inquiries taken up in popular music, I will jump across genre lines to electronic dance music and into the twenty-first century. That electronic dance music would appear in this discussion should not come as a surprise. Many DJs have settled into what one critic has called the 'shadowy divide between electronic and modernist

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the social commentary made by the song and video, see Rose, *Black Noise*, pp. 115–23.

<sup>17</sup> In the video for 'Night of the Living Baseheads', the group mocks those who call their music 'noise'.

<sup>18</sup> Some of these samples appear in the group's 'Anti-High Blood Pressure Encounter Mix' version of the song.

<sup>19</sup> Public Enemy's recordings could also be placed in another modernist context, that of African American modernism. The musical lineage of that tradition would include Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra and Anthony Braxton. In particular, connections can be drawn between the sonic density in Public Enemy's recordings and those of free jazz musicians like Coleman, Sun Ra and Braxton. On the general concept of an African American modernism, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

contemporary classical'.<sup>20</sup> Why that divide is so shadowy is that DJs have taken up the inquiry into sonic flux, as to be expected for musicians who assemble, combine and shape electronic sounds. One of those DJs is Richard David James, better known as Aphex Twin. Rather than discussing his mutable, fascinating sound worlds, I will focus on his participation in another modernist inquiry. His 'Cock/Ver10' (2001) joins the inquiry into simultaneity, that is, of superimposing highly contrasting layers. Charles Ives, Conlon Nancarrow and Elliott Carter are three modernist composers who took up this inquiry. They created dense textures by overlaying strands separated by metre, tempo or style, among other elements. Aphex Twin creates similar contrasts. 'Cock/Ver10' has two basic layers. One is the fast-tempo line made up of percussive blips that does not follow any regular, let alone discernible, metre or phrase structure. This layer unfolds throughout the whole song, but never once repeats a particular pattern. The second layer is the opposite of the first. It is a repeated slow-tempo melodic line harmonized in B minor and that follows a set metre and falls into a four-measure phrase. For electronic dance music fans, there is also a stylistic contrast. The first layer evokes the fractured, askew breakbeats of hard-driving dance styles like drum 'n' bass, while the second one suggests more relaxed, chill or ambient tracks that are often used to conjure moments of emotional reflection, like the 'melancholy' that Aphex Twin said fills the album featuring 'Cock/Ver10'.<sup>21</sup> The two styles had certainly been mixed before, notably in the works of Goldie and other DJs from the mid-1990s as well as in early recordings by Aphex Twin, but rarely is the juxtaposition between them so severe.

Set apart by tempo, rhythm and style, the two layers appear as if on distant planes, an impression reinforced by there being no type of interlocking between them, like shared accented notes. Nor does the slower layer return at any predictable moments within the jittery percussive stream. With 'Cock/Ver 10', listeners of Aphex Twin's music enjoy an experience that those of Ives, Nancarrow and Carter's works know well, that is, the experience of being between two or more separate planes and never being able to tie them together for any one moment.<sup>22</sup>

So what to make of these examples? First, I should be clear about what *not* to make of them. I am not saying that these three songs are modernist.

<sup>20</sup> Kafka Garden, 'Press Quotes', <http://www.kafkagarden.com/quotes.html> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Lester, 'Tank Boy', *The Guardian* (5 October 2001), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2001/oct/05/artsfeatures3> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>22</sup> For his part, Aphex Twin has not drawn a connection between his music and that of Ives, Nancarrow and Carter. He has, though, made some linkages with new music. In particular, he collaborated with Philip Glass in creating a new version of his 'Tcct Hedra'.



They remain part of their own genres. Nor do I want to give the impression that these genres have been ‘colonized’ by modernism, that they have come under the influence of a distant modernist power. Far from being a power (distant or not), modernism has little acknowledged presence in such works for most popular musicians, and listeners of that music would not identify those elements as modernist – different and experimental perhaps, but not modernist. The unawareness of a modernist connection results in part from a lack of familiarity with modernist works. It also shows how integrated the ideas in modernist lines of inquiry have become in popular genres, so much so that they do not seem to have come from some remote stylistic land. Finally, I do not want to suggest that what I am describing is yet another case of the mixing of genres, say a bit of modernist collage in a hip hop track. Consistent with the idea of lines of inquiry, the affinities between modernist idioms and popular genres come more from the mutual interests of musicians in both categories, interests that are most often explored independently.

As to my question of what to make of these examples, it would be best to answer it from the perspectives of both a historian of modernism and one of popular music. For the former, the examples show the range of modernist inquiries. So broad has that range become that the inquiries can no longer be considered exclusively modernist. They may have originated in modernism and have become strongly linked to that music, but they are now part of the rich and vital kinds of musical creativity being carried on today across genres. Once revealed, these cross-genre inquiries can significantly transform our conceptions of modernism. Rather than being the withdrawn and dwindling, if not dead, music that it has been made out to be, modernism emerges as an enduring wellspring of ideas and a music interacting with other genres. This is a new view of modernism, and one that enhances larger arguments made by me and others that modernism was not supplanted by a postmodern movement or period in the 1960s and 1970s but rather that it continues to be a force in contemporary arts.<sup>23</sup>

There may be no such grand historical conclusions for popular music scholars, but nonetheless these cross-genre inquiries can offer them new perspectives. In particular, the inquiries can inspire different ways of understanding aspects of popular music idioms. For example, we can be aware of the fascination with the idea of sound as a state of constant flux

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Klotz, *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert: Moderne-Postmoderne-Zweite Moderne* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994); Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The ‘New’ Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox and Wolfram Schurig, *Facets of the Second Modernity. New Music and Aesthetics in the 21st Century* (Hofheim: Volke Verlag, 2008).

and examine the similar and different ways musicians in diverse genres have realized that idea.

I also believe that these cross-genre inquiries offer a way of dealing with one of the biggest critical challenges facing us today, that is, pluralism. We are frequently told that we live in a time of unprecedented stylistic plurality. That may be the case, but we need to come to terms with that diversity, to figure out what is going on in the stylistic sprawl. There has been theoretical wrestling with pluralism, notably theories of postmodernism that concentrate on the binding of stylistic and historical fragments in the arts and architecture that become prominent in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>24</sup> Such theories, though, rest upon the ideas that modernism has been depleted, being, at best, another historical element in these combinations. That conclusion obviously misses how energizing modernist elements continue to be in contemporary arts.<sup>25</sup> One approach to dealing with pluralism is by drawing connections, to reveal the links, say, between Varèse and Sonic Youth. Only by doing such basic mapping can we detect larger patterns and groupings in that plurality. We can also perceive historical shifts occurring within it, like the growing proximity between modernism and popular genres.

So this is my grand critical call. It sounds like I have taken a page from E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*: connect – 'only connect'. My call may also come across as idealistic, if not naïve. All we have to do is to connect the pieces, to put together the seemingly distant and random, and all will be revealed. The plural realm will become a beautiful mosaic in which we can see fascinating patterns and shapes. We might not ever get that mosaic, but we can see patterns and groupings, as I have shown in this chapter and in my work on contemporary modernist music. These groupings, for example, can lead us to question some of the lines that have been firmly drawn in histories of post-1945 music, like that between modernism and postmodernism. Instead of that boundary, we can start to see new larger patterns. The best example of such a pattern is the increasing closeness between modernist idioms and popular genres. This mapping, though, needs to be aware of questions of balance and influence that arise between the connected pieces, as I was earlier in discussing how to understand the role of modernist idioms in the growing adjacency with popular styles. The drawing of lines of connection is part of the basic work that historians need to do in confronting the pluralist expanse surrounding us.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-Modernism?* (New York and London: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Kenneth Gloag, *Postmodernism in Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> For more on my questioning of the rise of a postmodern movement or culture, see Metzger, *Musical Modernism*, pp. 101–3, 137–43 and 241–7.

Musicians, though, are busy doing that work. No better example can be found than the transcription of 'Cock/Ver10' by the new music ensemble Alarm Will Sound. The scattershot electronic blips are now played by strings and winds as well as through the heroically hyperactive efforts of the trap drum kit player. Alarm Will Sound has a repertoire that includes works by Varèse, Stockhausen and Nancarrow. Drawing upon their deep familiarity with modernist idioms, they apparently heard the modernist affinities in Aphex Twin's music; in other words, they, like me, made a connection between the two, a link that they brought out by recording a whole album of Aphex Twin transcriptions.

### **A new infrastructure**

With Alarm Will Sound, I would like to turn my attention to the infrastructure of ensembles, festivals and magazines mentioned above, to see how it has constructed the relationship between modernism and popular genres. The infrastructure supports a new creative space that has emerged over the last decade. The space welcomes listeners and musicians of new music and popular genres and smoothes over the once imposing lines that separated the two. What is distinctively new about this space is not the mixing of the two categories, which had been going on well before the space appeared, but rather how easily new music and individual pop genres coexist. In this space, new music, hip hop, indie rock and electronic dance music are all considered to be part of the search for the new and different. A hip hop mix can be regarded as innovative and noteworthy as a string quartet or electronic dance music track. Rarely has the new sheltered a creative space as broad and inclusive as the one being shaped by these ensembles, composers, magazines and clubs. That there has been so much activity over such a short period of time in that space shows how inspiring it is and how much larger and more important it is likely to become.

To get to know this space, I will first turn to the various participants in it. They are part of what I will be calling a new scene that is largely based in New York City, although similar activities are occurring throughout North America and Europe. A good place to begin is with some of the ensembles active in this scene. Although I will be focusing on ensembles that have formed in recent years, I should mention Bang On A Can, a group founded in 1987 and that, through its links with rock styles and the festivals that it has staged, has laid the foundation for these younger ensembles. To return to a group that I have mentioned a few times so far, Alarm Will Sound claims that its album of Aphex Twin transcriptions gave them 'an important platform from which to pursue a wide-ranging artistic vision that

doesn't worry too much about genre – electronic vs. acoustic, high-modernist vs. pop-influenced'.<sup>26</sup> As we will see, not many other participants in this scene 'worry much about genre'. They move freely between genres, and that freedom has become a mandate, if not mantra, for the scene. For example, in its mission statement, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble declares that it 'does not subscribe to one stylistic movement or genre'.<sup>27</sup> The string quartet ETHEL bills itself as 'a leading force in concert music's reengagement with musical vernaculars, fusing diverse traditions into a vibrant sound that resonates with audiences the world over'.<sup>28</sup> As with Alarm Will Sound, the wide-ranging repertoires of both groups support their claims.

Turning to composers, Judd Greenstein claims that he and like-minded colleagues do not so much cross genres but have instead moved beyond them, what he calls 'post-genre'.<sup>29</sup> He has even gone so far as to describe 'the absence of genre in a genuinely post-genre world', an observation that he says is so obvious as to no longer be 'interesting'.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to such assertions, the composers in this scene have been placed in a new genre, what has been called 'alt-classical' or 'indie-classical'.<sup>31</sup> Many of them, though, have shunned the terms. None other than Nico Muhly, the poster boy of indie-classical, has argued that the term is a trendy name of use only to 'PR people' and that it says little about the musicians and works that it purports to describe.<sup>32</sup> Other composers, however, have used the term. Both 'indie-classical' and 'post-genre', for example, appear in Greenstein's promotional materials for his New Amsterdam Records, a label devoted to the music of composers involved in this new scene.<sup>33</sup> So who are the composers who have willingly or unwillingly been put in these categories? Some are classically trained composers who have connections with the indie rock scene, including Muhly, Missy Mazzoli and Owen Pallett. Others are electronic dance music or indie rock musicians making their

<sup>26</sup> Alarm Will Sound, 'About', <http://www.alarmwillsound.com/about.php> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>27</sup> American Contemporary Music Ensemble, 'About', <http://www.acmemusic.org/about.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Ethel Quartet, 'About', <http://www.ethelcentral.org/about/band/> (accessed 28 June 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Judd Greenstein, 'Why?' <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/why.html> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Kaufman Music Center, 'News', 22 January 2013, <http://www.kaufmanmusiccenter.org/kc/article/ecstatic-music-festival-curator-judd-greenstein-introduces-the-2013-festiva> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Greg Sandow claims to have coined the label 'alt-classical'. 'Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music – Rebirth and Resistance', <http://www.gregsandow.com/BookBlog/RevisedCh1Riffs.pdf> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Nico Muhly, 'Hindi Classical', <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2012/hindi-classical/> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>33</sup> New Amsterdam Records, 'Judd Greenstein', <http://newamrecords.com/judd-greenstein> (accessed 24 March 2015).

way into concert music, like Dan Deacon, Bryce Dessner and Sufjan Stevens. The coming-and-goings between the two worlds are getting to the point that as a *Pitchfork* article put it: ‘Lately, it is hard to even tell an indie rock musician and a composer apart.’<sup>34</sup>

Many of these composers appear in a group of festivals that are an important part of the infrastructure of this new scene, including the Ecstatic Music Festival (curated by Greenstein), MusicNOW and Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. Then there are clubs that programme both new music and innovative stripes of popular genres. The flagship club is Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village, in which during the course of a week you could hear Xenakis, indie rock and underground hip hop. According to co-founder David Handler, the club caters to the ‘curious listener who wants to push their palette’ and ‘inhabit a different musical space than they are typically used to’.<sup>35</sup> Finally, I would like to mention the UK-based magazine *The Wire*, which offers readers ‘adventures in sound and music’. Adventurous is perhaps the best way to describe the coverage of genres in the magazine, which can jump between modernist idioms, noise rock, micro house, drone music, early computer music and sound art.

So there is a quick tour of this new musical scene. Much of what has been written about it comes from journalists, blogs and social media. These sources largely parrot the line about being post-genre. A few writers have upheld indie-classical as saving classical music or being the future of classical music.<sup>36</sup> This new scene demands a more critical look than that provided by catchy slogans like ‘post-genre’ or ‘indie-classical’, although, as we will see, an examination of both concepts does offer insights into the new scene. A critical perspective can be gained by taking up two topics key to my theoretical approach, those of material and pluralism, as well as a concept central to the new scene, that is, genre. Another relevant topic is that of separation, the degree to which new music is removed from or integrated into public musical life.

Regarding ‘material’, musicians and writers in the new scene have little to say about it. The term itself is rarely mentioned, although there are references to elements that could be considered as material, like beats,

<sup>34</sup> Jayson Greene, ‘Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical’, *Pitchfork* (28 February 2012), <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8778-indie-classical/> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Joonbug, ‘Joonbug Interview: David Handler, Founder of Le Poisson Rouge’, 1 October 2010, <http://joonbug.com/newyork/frequency/Joonbug-Interview-David-Handler-Founder-of-Le-Poisson-Rouge/nC7t9xdE94w> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Sandow sees alt or indie classical as a promising development for the future of classical music. Greg Sandow, ‘Long overdue’, 16 November 2009, [http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2009/11/long\\_overdue.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2009/11/long_overdue.html) (accessed 24 March 2015) and ‘Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music – Rebirth and Resistance’.

mixes and types of electronic sounds. What these musicians and writers do have much to say about is genre. Adorno and Greenberg, in contrast, emphasize material over genre. For them, individual genres – opera and string quartet or painting and sculpture – were not as important as the larger modernist project in which both critics placed them. In the new scene, there are several different genres, with musicians freely travelling between them and mixing them. With all that travelling, it is no wonder that musicians and writers in the new scene have emphasized genre. Regarding material, it is the common currency that makes the exchange between genres possible, so common as to go unidentified as such.

In talking about genre, I will consult, to paraphrase Derrida, the ‘law’ of genre, particularly what have emerged to be the old and new laws of genre.<sup>37</sup> The old law is one of taxonomic purity that upholds genres as discrete categories and depicts works as comfortably fitting into those boxes. Codified into critical theory over the last fifty years, the new law presents genres as fluid, open-ended, promiscuous and hybrid, among other qualities. This view, as Hayden White has remarked, has become the ‘rule’ for discussing genre today.<sup>38</sup> The rule, though, has become so broadly accepted and unquestioningly applied that genre is in danger of becoming a genre, in the sense of the old and supposedly superseded law. In that past edict, works neatly belonged to genres and little attention was paid to what was going on outside of a genre box or how unstable genre categories actually were. Now genres neatly fit the new standard definitions of genre and those definitions give little idea of what is happening to genres in the larger, broader field surrounding a genre.

The scene in which modernist and popular idioms converge, however, gives us plenty to think about in considering not just the connection between those two idioms but also the status of genre in contemporary arts and our theoretical approaches to genre. The scene, for example, makes us aware of the pluralist space in which genres circulate. Recent theories of genre, on the other hand, do not look out at that space. Pluralism, a reality of contemporary artistic life, is rarely mentioned in genre theory. Nor does that theory account for the types of genre behaviour typical of pluralist spaces. With its emphasis on hybridity, genre theory does capture the mixing of genres that is to be expected in spaces where genres crowd up against each other. It does not, though, describe the connections established between genres that do not blend but that rather stand near to each other and share mutual interests, like those into lines of

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 55–81.

<sup>38</sup> Hayden White, ‘Anomalies of Genre: The Utility of Theory and History for the Study of Literary Genres’, *New Literary History*, 34 (2003), 597–615, p. 602.

inquiry. Proximity and affinity have little currency in contemporary genre theory, unlike hybridity and promiscuity. Also neglected is the expanse of the pluralist realm occupied by genres. The hybrids praised by theories of genre typically involve genres that are close to each other and that can easily fit together, such as romance and comedy with the romantic comedy in film. There is little idea of distant genres, like new music and rock, coming closer together but yet standing apart and therefore no sense of the stretches traversed by those genres in the process of meeting.

So focused are theories of genre on a particular concept of genre, that they disregard what happens to those categories in their larger surroundings. In a pluralist space, genres are both weakened and reinforced. Weakened in the sense that the cluster of defining characteristics of a genre becomes less concentrated and distinct when a genre is continuously interacting with other ones, be it actual mixing or the increased proximity described in this chapter. The critical ideal of hybridity does not let on to that effacement. It instead upholds blending as the defining characteristic of genres. If anything, mixing makes genres stronger, much like cross-breeding supposedly creates healthy and resilient mutts. Yet with either thick mixtures or increased adjacency, the identities of the individual genres involved in these connections become less clear. We have less sense of what those categories mean in the blur of pluralism.

In a pluralist realm, genres may be weakened from within, but they are also strengthened from without. They are reinforced by the need for known categories, that is, to have contexts in which to group works. Genres are born from that need, and it is more fundamental than any law of genre, old or new. The need is especially pressing in a pluralist environment, where there are myriad categories and the lines between them are obscured. So although the defining features within a genre may have become less clear, the constant references to and reliance on genres give them a firm presence. They serve as landmarks around which listeners orient themselves. The larger and more diverse the terrain, the more important the landmarks. Genres play that part throughout the new scene. The club *Le Poisson Rouge* and the magazine *The Wire*, for example, emphasize genre in describing either the line-up for a week's concerts or categories for CD reviews. Given the different types of music that they cover, the club and magazine have to offer patrons and readers a quick and clear idea of what they will be encountering. A mere mention of rock, new music or hip hop can do just that. It does not matter how unconventional the songs in those genres may be. The genre names alone say and do so much. With this in mind, the proclamations of this new scene being 'post-genre' appear rather rash, if not self-congratulatory. There is no getting beyond genre.

Speaking of irksome phrases, there is that other one: indie-classical. Like Nico Muhly, I groan when I hear it. The phrase may very well be, as Muhly claims, a flashy publicity label, but its brief flash illuminates much about the role of genre in both the new scene and surrounding pluralist world. First, the phrase shows genres continuing to fulfil their fundamental roles, once again very much needed in a pluralist world. Just as with the creation of genres over centuries, what struck many as a new type of music appeared, so a new genre category was formed to distinguish it from other types of music. In this case, the age-old need for classification is met by a new type of classification, one befitting a pluralist environment. As a prefix 'indie' – be it for classical or rock music – does not hold much stylistic information. It instead defines genre along different lines, which is what makes it apt for a pluralist world in which the stylistic profiles of genres grow less clearly defined.

The initial line drawn by 'indie' was an industry one: the distribution between independent production and corporate labels. That line, though, has grown fainter with the increased cooperation between indie and corporate labels, and it has become even dimmer with internet distribution. Now anyone – big stars and nobodies can release their own recordings online; no recording company is needed. 'Indie', though, has drawn a deeper cultural line. As scholars have discussed, it has served as an oppositional term, setting the arts on the indie side apart from the mainstream, which is depicted as the mass production of conventional, conformist popular culture goods.<sup>39</sup> The two sides of the line, it should be said, are far from well defined and are malleable. Those identifying with indie, for example, often construe the mainstream to be whatever they need it to be to make their points, which is easy to do with such a large and amorphous category. Indie, on the other hand, is often defined by what it is not – not the mainstream, whatever that exactly is. Drawn along such lines, the category can be adaptable and changeable. Nonetheless, a line is drawn, and while the terms of that line might not be clear, the need behind it is. Indie responds to a desire to stand apart from the conventional and the commercial. So pervasive have mainstream popular culture goods become that people have sought refuge from them in scenes or styles that are upheld as being more serious, demanding and not swayed by commercial influences or pressures. Indie has provided such a refuge.

No matter how strong the desire to stand apart from the mainstream is, the line between indie and mainstream is far from firm. It is constantly

<sup>39</sup> Michael Z. Newman, 'Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative', *Cinema Journal*, 48/3 (2009), 16–34, pp. 19–22.



being debated and negotiated. Such is the case whenever a group that has won over a small, devoted audience with its captivatingly new sound starts to attract a larger fan base. These familiar moments set off familiar squabbles: is the group still indie? Has it sold out? More often than not, the group maintains its indie credentials as the line between indie and mainstream holds. Michael Newman describes how that flexibility is characteristic of the indie film world. He holds up the films of Steven Soderbergh as an example.<sup>40</sup> Soderbergh has directed art-house fare like *The Girlfriend Experience* and *Eros* along with studio successes like *Erin Brockovich* and *Ocean's Eleven*. Even with those hits, Soderbergh is still considered to be indie, as his hit films are viewed as being stamped by his personal, artistic style. Both the successful indie band and Soderbergh films remain indie because of the need for artistic experiences considered removed from the mainstream. The need is strong enough to withstand any questioning of indie ideals.

Just how strong and adaptable that need is comes through when considering that the indie/mainstream line has been replicated in various popular genres, not just rock. The line goes by various names, all of them suggesting some other side to a popular genre, or as singer Claudia Gonson puts it in her definition of indie, 'somewhat under the radar, or difficult to define, or left of centre, or difficult to grasp'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, not mainstream or conventional: for example, we now have indie pop, alt-folk, alt-country, underground hip hop and intelligent dance music. Whatever it is called, the line separates more challenging – musically and culturally – forms of popular music from more accessible styles. It is not coincidental that two of the three examples that I presented – Sonic Youth and Aphex Twin – come from that side of the line. All sorts of genre labels have been applied to Sonic Youth, including noise rock, alternative rock and punk rock. Whatever the label, they convey that the group's sound breaks away from more conventional rock styles. Aphex Twin was once placed in the category of intelligent dance music, a label that he and others rejected for being elitist, although they never backed down from their challenging unconventional styles. For their part, Public Enemy, my third example, has enjoyed mainstream success while being groundbreaking and provocative in the way they handle sound.

Of all the things to call the new scene, I am not surprised that 'indie-classical' was coined. The term acknowledges the direct links between indie rock and new music created by indie musicians crossing over into the latter

<sup>40</sup> Newman, 'Indie Culture', p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in 'Mark Oppenheimer, "Poetry's Cross-Dressing Kingmaker"', *New York Times*, Sunday Magazine (14 September 2012).

idiom or classical composers who either played in indie bands or have connections with them. 'Indie-classical' also emerges from the breadth and lines of distinction embedded in conceptions of indie. All sorts of styles, some not very rock-like, have been labelled indie. So it is not surprising that the junction between popular music and new music would end up attracting the indie heading. 'Indie' often serves as a catch-all for the innovative and different.

Like 'indie', 'indie-classical' also draws a line, but in this case there are two lines. The first is that between indie and mainstream, which becomes even wider with the dissonances and unconventional structures of modernist styles. New music also adds to what Pierre Bourdieu would call the cultural capital enjoyed by indie participants. As many scholars have suggested, indie scenes are fertile ground for Bourdieu's theories of distinction, as members separate themselves from the mainstream by showing that they possess specialized knowledge and tastes.<sup>42</sup> Knowing an obscure band can increase one's cultural capital; so too can liking new music, which surely comes across as obscure and specialized in the larger world of popular music.

The second line drawn by 'indie-classical' is that between itself and new music, or, to be specific, more established styles and settings of new music. Classical musicians in the indie-classical scene have used the term and the scene as a way of separating themselves from the more standard formats of new music as well as older generations of musicians. 'Indie', after all, is a term best suited to the young. Plus they have enjoyed the cultural capital of hipness and freshness that comes with the term. As for the difference between indie-classical and more conventional presentations of new music, indie-classical concerts are not your typical new music concert in terms of venue (clubs), crowd (indie types) and performers (mix of indie and classical musicians). The repertoire is also different. In these concerts, more severe and established modernist works, like those of Lachenmann or Boulez, are infrequently heard. Such works do little to welcome popular genres, whereas indie-classical is premised on the embrace of popular styles. The minimalist rhythmic currents, lyrical melodic lines, sparse textures and spiky accents of that music can accommodate aspects of popular styles, including more pop-like vocals or electronic dance music beats. At the same time, the music has modernist bearings. It is committed to the harmonic, textural and rhythmic intricacies developed throughout the history of modernism, although it may not explore them in as extensive

<sup>42</sup> Ryan Hibbett, 'What is Indie Rock?', *Popular Music and Society*, 28/1 (2005), 55–77; Matthew Bannister, "'Loaded": Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities', *Popular Music*, 25/1 (2006), 77–95, pp. 80–1; and Newman, 'Indie Culture', pp. 23–4.

ways as some composers have. I feel the need to make this point, as many people might not consider indie-classical works to be modernist, given the openness to popular styles and use of less astringent idioms. I would contend, though, that the music does fit into the history of modernism, especially considering that the affinities between popular genres and modernist idioms are, as I have argued, key to conceptions of new music today.<sup>43</sup>

The audience and cultural lines drawn by indie-classical works bring us to a related topic, that is, separation. Modernist music has often been depicted as being removed from public musical life. To recall, Adorno and Greenberg placed modernist arts in insular worlds of advanced and pure materials. On the performance and composition fronts, there have been such famous exits from the public stage as the closed recitals of Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performance and Milton Babbitt's call that composers withdraw into the protected sphere of university research. The new scene that we are discussing today makes no such grand isolationist claims. The scene stands apart, but not that apart. It may push away from mainstream popular culture, but it draws upon popular genres, a reliance that keeps it never too far away from mainstream popular culture. The use of those genres creates a closeness to popular culture, a nearness, though, that at the same time involves the drawing of lines of separation, those between the mainstream and indie culture.

It is this quality of being apart-but-not-so-apart that may be the form that separation takes in today's pluralist world. The kind of broad line stretched out by the indie/mainstream divide suits this space. It does not involve specific types of modernist arts, as with earlier modernist efforts of separation. It instead opens up to a range of genres. The emphasis on general and malleable qualities like innovation and unconventionality can apply to various genres. In addition, the line also depends on attitudes and taste, which are too changeable to demarcate rigid lines. Shaped by these qualities, the line made by the new scene is flexible enough to hold within the varied, shifting pluralist realm, yet firm enough to set apart a particular area, no matter how large and diverse that area proves to be.

I found myself in such a particular area at the Ecstatic Music Festival concert. The performance occupied a musical and cultural space that was removed from the mainstream, but not as remotely as most new music concerts are. By virtue of being rock music, the Deerhoof songs, even

<sup>43</sup> The analysis of indie-classical works is a topic for another essay. A compelling example of the mix of modernist and popular elements in that music can be found in *Planetarium*, a work jointly composed by Bryce Dessner, Nico Muhly and Sufjan Stevens.

though of a decidedly indie stripe, could bring in more mainstream listeners, in addition to all of the hipsters in the lobby. At the same time, the group's set kept the concert distinct from a standard new music presentation. Yet, as the organizers of the festival have realized, the new music and indie worlds can come together for an evening, and, beyond that one night, be part of a larger emerging scene. The festival concert that I attended and indie-classical works like *Planetarium* are part of a different conception of the new that is arising in the contemporary musical life. The new still has values of innovation, but it mixes them with values of inclusiveness and breadth. Also bringing new music and indie styles together are shared interests, particularly the lines of inquiry pursued by modernist works and, as observed over the preceding forty-some years, different types of popular music. In listening to the Ecstatic Music Festival concert, *Planetarium*, Sonic Youth, Public Enemy and Aphex Twin, what emerges is a modernism that has been transformed – a modernism that has been vitalized and expanded – by a growing proximity with popular music.