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Politics and the popular in British music theatre of the Vietnam era

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Abstract: British music theatre works of the 1960s and early 1970s largely avoided direct engagement with contemporary political topics. Intriguing in this light is Michael Hall's recent proposition that Brecht's music theatre set the terms for younger British composers' experiments with the genre. Brecht proved a complicated model, however, because of composers' anxieties about music's capability to convey socio-political messages, and their reluctance to accord popular music a progressive function. The entanglement of Vietnam war activism and rock music forms the backdrop for analyses of two works that do address Vietnam directly – George Newson's *Arena* and Anthony Gilbert's *The Scene-Machine* (both 1971) – both of which also pass pointed comment on different popular music traditions. Both works highlight the difficulty in emulating Brecht's model in an era when the concept of 'the political' was being significantly redefined, and the cultural gap between activist cadres and the wider population was unprecedentedly visible.

Keywords: music theatre, Vietnam war, protest, popular music, Brecht

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I

In a recent overview of the historiography of 1960s Britain, Mark Donnelly draws attention to the competing interpretations of historians, that have placed emphasis on differing aspects of the decade.¹ Marxist accounts stressing political movements and protest have been superseded by histories dwelling on the era's cultural and attitudinal revolutions, which in turn have prompted attention to turn to the mass of the population who experienced none (or little) of these things. These successive waves of revisionism have, however, left one basic perception largely untouched: namely that, as the decade drew to a close, Britain was 'the vacuum of late 1960s rebellion', its protest movement 'diluted', 'less violent, less radical and more easily controlled than those in continental Europe and the United States', even 'puny'.² Lacking the pressures of conscription, large-scale racial conflict, a legacy of wartime fascism, or an aggressively authoritarian government, Britain experienced the traumas of 1968 in diluted form, youthful energies being channeled instead into a vigorous and highly exportable counterculture that challenged social norms and prevailing behavioural codes but largely abstained from direct involvement in the political crises of the period.

In this light, it should perhaps come as no surprise that younger British composers almost entirely avoided direct reference to contemporary political topics in their music during the 1960s – tending to confirm the impression of the British sixties as mild and unpoliticised. British music theatre of the 1960s drew subjects from ancient Greece, the Bible, distant history or ancient folk traditions, or it intensively explored the states of mind of historical

I am grateful to George Newson and Anthony Gilbert for generously sharing recollections about their works. [Other acknowledgements redacted to preserve anonymity.]

¹ Mark Donnelly, 'Sixties Britain: The Cultural Politics of Historiography', in Trevor Harris and Monia O'Brien Castro, eds, *Preserving the Sixties: Britain and the 'Decade of Protest'* (Palgrave, 2014), 10-32.

² Peter Doggett, *There's a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars and The Rise and Fall of '60s Counter-Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007), 166; Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (Harlow: Perason, 2005), 144; Sylvia Ellis, quoted in Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 8; David Widgery (ed.), *The Left in Britain, 1956-1968* (London: Penguin, 1976), 305. See also Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*, 1-2.

figures. Of the atom bomb, class relations, civil rights, gender equality or anti-colonial struggle, there was none – in contrast to prominent theatrical works of the time from a number of American, Dutch, German and Italian composers.³ Vietnam, too, eluded the attention of British composers, in spite of significant opposition to the Vietnam war in Britain, which climaxed with two highly-publicised demonstrations in London on 17 March and 27 October 1968. By 1967, two-thirds of the British population were opposed to Prime Minister Harold Wilson's support for the United States' campaign in Vietnam, a view reflected in the editorials of most newspapers.⁴ The first of the 1968 protests in front of the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square attracted a crowd of 10,000, and the second an estimated ten times more, the tussles with police being broadcast around the country via a live television relay. Despite the widespread concern about the conflict, this movement too failed to generate a mass following amongst the wider British public, in part (as we will see) because of the way in which leading activists identified with aspects of the counterculture and so alienated mainstream public opinion. Nonetheless, as I will describe in the following pages, the movement made an impact upon British rock musicians, a number of whom aligned themselves with anti-war activists; and it proved influential too upon the development of both established and alternative theatres in Britain.

A valuable corrective to the picture of political disengagement on the part of composers has recently been offered by Michael Hall's book *Music Theatre in Britain, 1960-1975*, which unearths two music theatre pieces premiered in 1971 that do, in fact, squarely address the conflict in Vietnam.⁵ Anthony Gilbert's *The Scene-Machine* takes the form of a parable about a folk singer whose surrender to commercial forces is symbolized by the progressive transformation of a protest song about Vietnam (heard at the start of the piece) into a banal love song. George Newson's *Arena* is a kind of staged oratorio addressing different socio-political 'games', climaxing in the shooting of anti-Vietnam student protesters at Kent State University; it is presented as a series of 'acts' involving different performers, linked by a compère. Hall offers a detailed account of the dramatic shape and theatrical realization of each piece, based on interviews with the composers. Wider questions regarding

³ See Robert Adlington, ed., *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Beate Kutschke, ed., *Musikkulturen in der Revolte: Studien zu Rock, Avantgarde und Klassik im Umfeld von '1968'* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008).

⁴ Sylvia Ellis, 'British Opposition to the Vietnam War, 1964-68', in Kristiaan Versluys, ed., *The Insular Dream: Obsession and Resistance* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), 166-82: 179-80

⁵ Michael Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain, 1960-1975* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015).

the relation of these works to the cultural and political context in which they were created, and what they tell us about the composers who stayed away from current politics, are however left largely unexplored.

The purpose of the present article is twofold. First, following Hall's lead, I wish to look again at the concern for politics – or lack of it – in British music theatre works of the Vietnam era. In his account of the early crystallization of the genre for British composers Hall gives particular attention to a discussion entitled 'Opera Today' at the Wardour Castle Summer School in 1964, at which many leading young composers were present. There, socio-political engagement was urged and the model of Brecht was offered as an exemplar. Yet Brecht is a name generally absent from existing accounts of British music theatre of this period.⁶ So what impact did Brecht's approach to political theatre have on young British composers? Which elements of Brechtian method did these composers develop, and what does their reception of Brecht indicate about their attitude to socio-political engagement? Second, I wish to address a topic that receives little analysis in Hall's account, namely the nature of these composers' relationship to popular music. My attention here focuses specifically on what might be called the 'Manchester generation': composers born in the mid-1930s (Newson and Alexander Goehr were both born in 1932, Gilbert, Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle were born in 1934), who conceived themselves as pioneers in their energetic reception of the lessons of the post-war serial avant-garde. Unlike Brecht, these composers generally avoided reference to vernacular musics in their music theatre works. But it is notable that both *The Scene-Machine* and *Arena*, in addressing the subject of Vietnam, also turn their attention to popular musical traditions – as they could hardly avoid doing, I argue, given the particular centrality of popular music to the British antiwar movement. By looking with greater intensity at these two works' negotiations with popular music, it becomes possible to see how political subject matter was made complex for this generation of

⁶ For example, Brecht's name is absent from the indices to Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle* (London: Robson Books, 1984); Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years* (London: Robson Books, 1998); Robert Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Robson Books, 1982); Mike Seabrook, *Max: The Life and Music of Peter Maxwell Davies* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1994). It receives a single mention in Philip Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and three fleeting mentions in David Beard, *Harrison Birtwistle's Operas and Music Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). As we will see, of the leading Manchester triumvirate, only Alexander Goehr had sustained involvement in the theatre of Brecht.

composers by its entanglement with rock music especially – an anxiety that left a pronounced mark on the socio-political message the works end up conveying. We will see too how key cultural shifts since Brecht’s experiments of the 1920s and 1930s made it impossible to reproduce an ‘authentically’ Brechtian political music-theatre. First though, it is instructive to consider the wider relation of this generation of composers to the distinctive cultural developments of 1960s Britain, developments that provided the context for some of their most enduring theatrical creations.

II

Recent analyses of the relation of British composers of the 1960s to the decade’s currents of protest and dissent prise open the complexity of the notion of ‘the political’ as it relates to art-making. Notwithstanding the absence of contemporary political topics from the new experiments in music theatre, other kinds of engagement have been widely perceived. Philip Rupprecht, for instance, compares the ‘sonic ferocity’ of Birtwistle’s and Maxwell Davies’ scores with the amplified rock of the late 1960s, arguing that the ‘globalized threats of war, either cold or thermonuclear’ are as audible in the works of these composers as they are in ‘the sound of amplified guitars’.⁷ A similar subtext underpins the connection, made by several commentators, of works like Birtwistle’s *Punch and Judy* and *Down By the Greenwood Side* to Peter Brook’s Artaud-inspired idea of ‘rough theatre’, which in 1968 Brook characterized as possessing a ‘militant energy ... that produces rebellion and opposition’.⁸ In both of these readings, a political connection is held to be implicit in the confrontational manner of works’ modes of expression. Composers’ preoccupations have also

⁷ Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 60; 109. Birtwistle however has bluntly rejected the association of *Punch and Judy*’s violence with the rebellious era of which it was a part; see Beard, *Harrison Birtwistle’s Operas and Music Theatre*, 39.

⁸ Brook, cited in Heather Wiebe, ‘Confronting opera in the 1960s: Birtwistle’s *Punch and Judy*’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 142/1 (2017), 173:204: 181. On ‘rough theatre’ in Birtwistle see Jonathan Cross, *Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music* (London: Faber, 2000), chapter 2. On Artaud see Beard, *Harrison Birtwistle’s Operas and Music Theatre*, 280-6. Wiebe notes (p. 190) that critics reviewing the first production of Birtwistle’s *Punch and Judy* regularly referenced Artaud, apparently following the prompting of the director Anthony Besch.

been aligned with the countercultural exploration of alternative values and lifestyles. Virginia Anderson places Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) in the context of 'swinging London',⁹ on account of the work's use of pop-art-like quotation and a vivid theatrical staging involving the flamboyant actor Roy Hart in full ermines and robes of state. Her implication though is that this represented a sanctioned and institutionalized appropriation of the counterculture, to be contrasted with the experimental work of Cornelius Cardew, John White and AMM, which for a few years was embraced by the underground press alongside early psychedelic pop and other manifestations of alternative culture.¹⁰ Benjamin Piekut's account of the 'mixed avant-garde' in London between 1965 and 1975 similarly highlights the countercultural ethos of improvisatory music-making at the time, although he is careful to distinguish this scene from the 'mainstream contemporary music' associated with establishment institutions – by which he means the 'composers, works, scores, and performances' of the Manchester School.¹¹ The latter distinction reminds us both of the variegated nature of new music production in this period, and the way in which affordances of rebellion and dissent were inevitably conditioned and complicated by institutional entanglements. For the social historian David Addison, the patrons of young British composers in the 1960s – most notably the BBC – represented continuity, not rupture, their support reflecting the 'traditional aristocracy of taste' of 'a narrow and self-perpetuating milieu', even as this milieu cast itself as a force of renewal in British cultural life for its internationalism and progressivism.¹² In this way, and especially in the absence of concrete political position-taking, the object of a composer's act of provocation or resistance could become a matter of considerable contestation.

Questions around the location and the meaning of 'the political' in this repertoire are brought into sharp relief by Michael Hall's identification of the model of Brecht as the

⁹ Virginia Anderson, "'1968" and the experimental revolution in Britain', in Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton, eds, *Music and Protest in 1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 171-87.

¹⁰ Anderson, "'1968" and the experimental revolution in Britain'.

¹¹ Benjamin Piekut, 'Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde: Experimental Music in London, 1965-1975', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 67/3 (2014), 769-824: 801.

¹² David Addison, 'Politics, Patronage, and the State in British Avant-Garde Music, c.1959-c.1974', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 27/2 (2016), 242-65. On the projection of this image by the BBC, see Neil Edmunds, 'William Glock and the British Broadcasting Corporation's Music Policy, 1959-73', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 233-61.

starting point for a new approach to theatre by a whole generation of British composers. In Hall's account, the event that served to crystallise the new genre of music theatre took place in August 1964 at the first Summer School of Music at Wardour Castle. This school, which was reprised the following year, focused specifically upon contemporary music and drew a remarkable cross-section of younger British compositional talent.¹³ Coordinated by Birtwistle and Goehr, the Summer Schools represented (in Philip Rupprecht's words) the Manchester composers' 'own forum for a pedagogy of avant-garde composition', in answer to the continental models of Darmstadt and Donaueschingen.¹⁴ The event that interests Hall was a discussion session entitled 'Opera Today', which involved presentations from Goehr, Maxwell Davies and Michael Tippett, each of whom were preoccupied with new stage projects. But it was through an intervention from one of Goehr's students, Anthony Gilbert, that discussion turned to music theatre specifically. As Hall relates the event,

Gilbert took the bull by the horns by attacking the whole concept of traditional opera in the mid-twentieth century. In his opinion opera had had its day He felt that composers should develop a much more concentrated form of opera, that it should be relevant to contemporary situations, and cited as an example Hindemith's *Das Badener Lehrstück*, a work that dates from 1929, lasts fifty minutes and has a text by Brecht about four airmen who attempt to cross the Atlantic as Charles Lindbergh had done two years earlier. According to Gilbert, the general discussion that ensued eventually led to a consensus among the composers present. They decided that 'Music Theatre', as all agreed to call it, should be 'concise, contain no stage fripperies, no large orchestra, no divas, no gigantic arias. It could include the spoken word, ideally be done in the round, and music and theatre should be integrated for the clear purpose of putting across a socio-political message. In its purest form, the idea of plot could be dispensed with, in which case the content could be abstract.'¹⁵

¹³ The most detailed account of these summer schools is to be found at Michael Hooper's blog <https://wardourcastlesummerschool.wordpress.com/>. Hooper lists David Bedford, Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies, Brian Ferneyhough, Anthony Gilbert, Alexander Goehr, Robin Holloway, David Lumsdaine, Michael Nyman, Bayan Northcott, Roger Smalley, Michael Tippett and Hugh Wood as amongst the attendees at the summer schools, with most attending both events.

¹⁴ Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 252.

¹⁵ Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain*, 16-17; Hall is quoting from his interview with Anthony Gilbert.

In a separate interview with Michael Hooper conducted in 2009, Gilbert added that ‘This was the key discussion. It changed the future of British music from that point on.’¹⁶

In his call for a Brechtian music theatre, Gilbert would presumably have had the example of his teacher Alexander Goehr most closely in mind. Goehr was at the time working on *Arden Must Die*, which, despite being composed for the full resources of a large opera house (the Hamburg Staatsoper), corresponded to key aspects of the Wardour discussion through its clear political subtext and pointed dramaturgical artifice. David Drew was later to describe the work as ‘a morality play in the modern secular tradition of Epic Theatre (without “psychology” or moral conflict)’, an interpretation heightened by the Hamburg production’s employment of a director who had worked with Brecht, and a designer who had worked with Brecht’s long-time collaborator Casper Neher.¹⁷ Goehr’s interest in German political theatre was deep-rooted.¹⁸ His father Walter had been acquainted with Hanns Eisler since their time as students of Schoenberg, and in the late 1950s Goehr senior championed Eisler’s music in London and with the BBC, taking trips to East Berlin with his son.¹⁹ After the death of his father, Alexander continued to correspond with Eisler and proselytize on his behalf.²⁰ In 1963 Goehr travelled to East Berlin to experience the theatrical style of the Berliner Ensemble, in preparation for directing Eisler’s music for a London production of Brecht’s *Das Leben des Galilei*.²¹ Hall relates that, from the moment

¹⁶ Gilbert, cited in <https://wardourcastlesummerschool.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/gilbert-and-lumsdaine/>.

¹⁷ Drew, ‘Why Must Arden Die?’, 33-4.

¹⁸ It is counterpointed by a parallel interest in the work of Sergei Eisenstein, whose writings and montage techniques formed the basis for the cantatas *The Deluge* (1958) and *Sutter’s Gold* (1961); see Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 148-61.

¹⁹ Jürgen Schebera, ‘Hanns Eisler, Walter Goehr and Alexander Goehr: The Long Road to the *Deutsche Symphonie* in London, January 1962’, in Oliver Dahin and Erik Levi, eds, *Eisler in England: Proceedings of the International Hanns Eisler Conference, London 2010* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel, 2014), 110.

²⁰ Schebera, ‘Hanns Eisler, Walter Goehr and Alexander Goehr’, 110.

²¹ Paul Griffiths, ‘“...es ist nicht wie es war...”: The Music of Alexander Goehr’, in Werner Grünzweig, ed., *Alexander Goehr. ‘Fings ain’t wot they used t’be’*, Archive zur Musik des 20. Und 21. Jahrhunderts, vol. 13 (Hofheim: Wolke, 2012), 15–90: 64. There are more details on Goehr’s Mermaid Theatre work at <http://www.fcqv.org/Goehr/Stageworks.htm>.

of Goehr's trip, the Brechtian model of 'music theatre' was a regular topic of conversation with immediate colleagues.²²

Preparatory ground for this Brechtian turn had also been laid in British spoken theatre. In the decade following the first performances by the Berliner Ensemble in London in 1956, most of Brecht's plays were performed in Britain, albeit to mixed critical reception.²³ Principles of Brechtian theatre began to make an impact on home-grown plays and productions, with emerging playwrights such as John Arden, Edward Bond and Robert Bolt openly acknowledging the influence of Brecht on their work of the early 1960s.²⁴ The acting style and staging techniques of the Berliner Ensemble also gained an increasing foothold in established theatres; the newly appointed artistic team of London's National Theatre, for instance, made a collective pilgrimage to East Berlin at the start of the decade.²⁵ Missing from this early 'British Brechtianism', however, was 'a clear engagement with Brecht's politics', a gap that Stephen Lacey has attributed to Cold War discomfort about Brecht's identification with the East German state.²⁶ This was to change later in the decade, not least because of the growing public unease about the Vietnam War. Peter Brook's *US* (1966), mounted by the Royal Shakespeare Company and described by Nora Alter as 'arguably the most powerful of earlier indictments of the Vietnam War offered on the stage in any country', leant upon Brechtian devices, including the use of direct address to the audience and a strongly didactic flavour to the second half.²⁷ Two years later Brook was to assert that 'Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts from or returns to his statements and achievement'.²⁸ This statement was lent credence by the new alternative theatre groups that had sprung up around the anti-war and student protest movements, whose commitment to social criticism and class analysis, frequently presented in

²² Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain*, 7.

²³ Margaret Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht: Forty Years of British Performances* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

²⁴ Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht*, 55-6.

²⁵ Janelle G. Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 7.

²⁶ Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context 1956-1965* (London: Routledge, 1995), 156.

²⁷ Nora Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 48.

²⁸ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1968), 80.

a brusque, highly unelaborated theatrical style, undoubtedly absorbed lessons from Weimar socialist theatre, even as Brecht's theorizing was rejected for being over-intellectual.²⁹

The potential of Brecht to inspire quite different forms of contemporary theatre may have been exacerbated by the publication in 1964 of the first edition of John Willett's English edition of Brecht's writings, whose contents were as internally varied, even contradictory, as they were productive for later generations of practitioners.³⁰ One is reminded of what Joy Calico terms 'the most enduring and dubious remnant of the entire epic theater project: the term "Brechtian"', which she regards as 'an indefinite adjective so broadly and casually applied as to be rendered virtually meaningless'.³¹ In the first place: what was the nature of 'Brechtian' theatre's politics? We have already seen how early British followers tended to sideline Brecht's Marxism. A similar hesitancy is evident from Gilbert's intervention at Wardour Castle, which left open substantial room for flexibility on the question of political content: according to Gilbert's statement, music theatre should aim to put across a socio-political message, or 'the content could be abstract'. It is revealing on this score that Gilbert cited the Brecht-Hindemith *Lehrstück* (1929) as progenitor for the new model of music theatre, rather than any of the more explicitly militant works of the 1930s. As originally conceived by Brecht and Hindemith this work interleaves the story of an unnamed crashed pilot with a scene featuring two clowns dismembering a third, offering in sum a parable about 'whether man helps man'. At its premiere Marxist critics attacked the work for its 'ideological nebulosity', eventually leading Brecht to comprehensively revise the work without Hindemith's cooperation.³² The original version's radicalism resided more in its theatrical innovations, notably the montage effect of the clown scene (which shocked many at the premiere), and the use of audience participation – the audience is designated as 'The Crowd', and at the premiere was expected to read the lyrics and notated music of their part

²⁹ An example would be the premiere production of the CAST theatre company in 1966, *John D. Muggins is Dead*, which 'explored the links ... between the capitalist system and mass murder'; Bill McDonnell, 'CAST', in John Bull, ed., *British Theatre Companies: 1965-1979* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 121-46: 124.

³⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964).

³¹ Joy H. Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 143.

³² Stephen Hinton, *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 180-2. The revised Brecht text (without music) was entitled *Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis*. Gilbert's recollection thus confuses the title of the two versions; the music-theatre work is properly named simply *Lehrstück*.

from a screen projection.³³ As the different versions of *Lehrstück* indicate, the genre to which it subsequently lent its name admits of no simple reductive definition, containing a mix of contemporary and universal themes, messages variously ethical and party-political, and methods both democratically participatory and discomfitingly confrontational.³⁴

Such flexibility was essential for the new generation of British music theatre composers, because of abiding concerns about the degree to which a musical language developed under the shadow of a compositional culture – namely, post-war serialism – that was preoccupied with autonomy from social meaning could be bent to the demands of concrete political content. A BBC television documentary about the premiere production of *Arden Must Die* furnishes evidence for Goehr's later observation that, as he put it, 'my political views and my musical views didn't go hand in hand.'³⁵ The work's libretto was written by leading German-language political poet Erich Fried,³⁶ and included a spoken epilogue (without music) that drew an explicit connection between the sixteenth-century tale of the murder of Arden of Faversham and the acquiescence of the German people to the crimes of the Nazis. Goehr conceived of the work as 'a political opera about ourselves and the way we behave in the crises in which we are involved'.³⁷ But in interview, he stated 'I consider myself ... a political being', but only 'as far as a musician can', given that 'he is dealing in a very abstract language'.³⁸ Goehr's proposal that 'We're not attempting to convince anybody of anything. ... They can go and think out what it means for themselves'³⁹

³³ Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, 29.

³⁴ On the difficulty of a narrow definition of the *Lehrstück* genre, see Hinton, *Weill's Musical Theater*, chapter 7, and Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, chapter 1.

³⁵ Goehr, *Finding the Key*, 29.

³⁶ For an account of Fried's political work, see Gregory Divers, *The Image and Influence of America in German Poetry Since 1965* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), chapter 5. Goehr also set Fried's poetry in the song cycle *Warngedichte* ('Poems of Warning', 1966-67), at the heart of which are five poems from Fried's landmark collection *und Vietnam und*. Vietnam was also the focus of a third Goehr-Fried collaboration, the protest song 'King Herod's Carol', written for a 1966 rally in Trafalgar Square; see Griffiths, ' "...es ist nicht wie es war..."', 65.

³⁷ Goehr, cited in David Drew, 'Why Must Arden Die?', in Bayan Northcott, ed., *The Music of Alexander Goehr* (London: Schott, 1980), 32-9: 32.

³⁸ Goehr, cited in a 1967 BBC documentary on *Arden Must Die*, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnHtvz-moD0>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*.

could be defended on the basis of Brecht's insistence that an audience ought to take an active role in thinking through the issues presented on stage. But there was more obvious discomfort on the part of the composer around the explicit contemporary parallels laid out in Fried's epilogue: 'I find the epilogue a great problem, I haven't made up my mind about it'.⁴⁰ The epilogue was not included in the score published later in the year, suggesting Goehr did make up his mind about it quite quickly. Speaking to Michael Hall forty years later, Goehr cast the collaboration as an extreme disappointment because of the force with which Fried used the work to express his political views.⁴¹

It is small surprise, then, that in Goehr's first small-scale music-theatre work *Naboth's Vineyard* (1968), which the composer himself likened to the Brecht-Hindemith *Lehrstück*,⁴² the allegorical content – that man's evil becomes the burden of the future – is general and uncontentious; there is little about the work to urge a specific connection to be made to present-day injustices.⁴³ The work's dramatic presentation, on the other hand, concords with many of the features being advocated by Gilbert at Wardour: theatrical minimalism, with a few masked mimes, singers and small ensemble all sharing the same stage without elaborate sets or props; use of montage, so that narrative continuity is replaced with the juxtaposition of different perspectives on the story; separation of the elements, with the mimes providing an embodied counterpoint to the alternating personifications of singers and instrumentalists; all contributing to a dramatic distancing that is further emphasised by the use of third-person narration and Latin texts.⁴⁴ For Brecht, as is well known, the value of such distancing devices lay in the way in which they withdrew the option of dramatic empathy and prompted instead an audience's critical reflection on lessons to be learnt for the contemporary situation.⁴⁵ But in the absence of specific cues to engage in reflection of this sort – as are provided in some Brecht plays by narrator figures – the distinctive aspects of

⁴⁰ Ibid..

⁴¹ Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain*, 116.

⁴² Alexander Goehr and Stanley Sadie, 'Naboth's Vineyard', *The Musical Times* (July 1968), 625-6.

⁴³ Writing at the time of the premiere, Michael Nyman noted that Goehr intended a connection with German industrialist Alfred Krupp, who collaborated with the Nazis and was allowed to retain his business empire after the war; see Michael Nyman, 'Alexander Goehr's *Naboth Vineyard*' (1968), in Pwyll ap Sion, ed., *Michael Nyman: Collected Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 36-8. Nowhere is this connection made explicit in the piece itself, however.

⁴⁴ See Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain*, 117-23; Nyman, 'Alexander Goehr's *Naboth Vineyard*'.

⁴⁵ Calico writes on the gap between theory and practice in this regard; see *Brecht at the Opera*, 32-4 and 41-2.

Brecht's stage techniques were as likely to function as totems of a more generic anti-romanticism (entailing detachment from naturalistic emotional representation and foregrounding of compositional and theatrical technique, for instance) to which many younger composers of the 1960s could enthusiastically subscribe. Masks, fractured and multiple narrative, and the eradication of the fourth wall or proscenium arch correspondingly became standard fare in British music theatre of the following years, Brecht providing only one of several precedents for such innovations.

Composers of this generation wishing to embrace Brecht as a model faced a further, distinct challenge: how to respond to Brecht's expectation for 'meaningful and easily comprehensible music', and indeed his acknowledgement of the purposeful dramatic role that could be performed by 'so-called "cheap" music'?⁴⁶ Kim Kowalke has argued that Brecht's principal musical collaborators Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler came to work with the playwright in part as a consequence of their independent decisions to 'transcend the self-preoccupation, subjectivity and ultimately isolation of the New Music [as embodied by the compositions of their teachers Busoni and Schoenberg] and to forge new contacts with mass culture and mass audiences for a socially engaged musical art'.⁴⁷ This coincided with Brecht's suspicion of the 'formalism and emotional entanglements' of cultivated composition,⁴⁸ and his desire to create new forms of musical theatre in which the message of his texts was not obscured by compositional pretence and ambition. Brecht was eventually to disown Weill's crowd-pleasing popular song styles (as incorporated most memorably in *The Threepenny Opera*) in favour of Eisler's more severe proletarianism, which Brecht regarded as constituting a musical 'voice of reason'.⁴⁹ But the music of both composers marked a clear departure from the earlier modernist traditions in which each had been trained. Eisler described Brecht's musical ideal as 'not decadent and formalist, but extremely close to the people. It recalls, perhaps, the singing of working women in a back courtyard on Sunday afternoons'.⁵⁰

The programmes of the Wardour Summer School, on the other hand, reflected the shared faith of its organisers in the continuing vitality of the compositional innovations of

⁴⁶ Brecht, 'On the use of music in epic theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, 84-90: 90, 87.

⁴⁷ Kim Kowalke, 'Brecht and Music: Theory and Practice', in Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 218-34: 224.

⁴⁸ Kowalke, 'Brecht and Music', 220.

⁴⁹ Brecht, 'On the use of music in epic theatre', 88.

⁵⁰ Kowalke, 'Brecht and Music', 221.

Schoenberg, Webern, Messiaen, Babbitt and Stockhausen, whose music was programmed alongside that of the young British composers. New music-theatre works of the late sixties correspondingly made reference to popular styles only very occasionally, and when they did so such styles tended to be deployed with negative connotations. In Maxwell Davies' *Missa super l'homme armé* (1968/71) and *Vesalii Icones* (1969), for instance, the foxtrot is invoked as a cipher for corruption and spiritual betrayal, accompanying Christ's recognition of Judas in the first, and the appearance of the Anti-Christ in the second.⁵¹ Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* and *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1969) engage in a kind of mythologizing reinvention of popular culture (the puppet show and the mummers' play, respectively), but audible references to vernacular musical styles are limited to the parodied nursery-rhyme rhythms favoured by Punch as he savours his acts of mindless sadism.⁵² Such acts of avoidance or implied expressions of suspicion may be related to the broader cultural milieu inhabited by these composers. In his article David Addison dwells upon the supportive attitude of the BBC as personified by the Controller of Music from 1959 to 1973, William Glock, who ensured that adventurous young composers received regular BBC commissions and Proms performances throughout the 1960s. Glock had scope for such patronage because of a broader disinclination at the BBC to be led by the 'tyranny' of ratings, or to provide (in the words of the BBC's Director-General Hugh Greene) mere 'mild pleasure or a soporific to people too indifferent to switch the programme off'.⁵³ Here again the 1960s brought continuity rather than rupture, with the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting affirming in 1962 the role of the BBC as a bulwark against an Americanised commercial culture – a reiteration of the 'Death to Hollywood' sentiment that had conspicuously accompanied the post-war creation of key national cultural organisations such as the Arts Council and the Third Programme.⁵⁴ Building on the perceptions of influential academics such as Richard Hoggart (who sat on the Pilkington Committee) the BBC aimed at expanding public taste in conscious opposition to

⁵¹ Michael Burden, 'A foxtrot to the crucifixion', in Richard McGregor, ed., *Perspectives on Peter Maxwell Davies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 51-65: 64-5.

⁵² On this element of *Punch and Judy*, see Nyman, 'Harrison Birtwistle's "Punch and Judy"', in ap Sion, ed., *Michael Nyman*, 38-41: 41.

⁵³ Hugh Greene speaking in 1962, cited in Addison, 'Politics, Patronage, and the State', 19.

⁵⁴ Hugh Wilford, 'Britain in Between', in Alexander Stephan, ed., *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 23-43: 36.

the perceived regressive impact of the culture industry.⁵⁵ For adventurous composers, it was easy within this context to disregard the sorts of distinctions between authentic and manufactured popular culture that preoccupied Hoggart, and rally instead to the cruder cause that regarded any musical form enjoying relative audience appeal as a danger to artistic innovation and intelligence.⁵⁶ When the 1969 BBC report *Broadcasting in the Seventies* proposed moving away from the established paternalistic cultural policy towards a new responsiveness to public demand, Goehr, Maxwell Davies, Richard Rodney Bennett (b. 1936) and Thea Musgrave (b. 1928) were amongst forty prominent cultural figures who wrote to *The Times* in protest at the potential threat to the ‘quality of listening’.⁵⁷

Yet new developments at the end of the decade inevitably brought this stance under pressure. Growing public concern over Vietnam made it harder for composers to turn a blind eye to current affairs. And the emergence of rock as a distinct category predicated upon perceptions of authenticity and creative independence from the industry that produced it elicited the sympathies of the politically-aware, and correspondingly invited a more overt position-taking from composers, in the face of the perception that the most potent ‘political’ expression of the hour lay precisely in the counterculture they rejected. The two works examined in the following pages comprise contrasting case studies in many regards, but both see the turn towards contentious contemporary subject matter occasion parallel comment on different popular music traditions. The first, by Anthony Gilbert himself, unsurprisingly adopts a number of consciously Brechtian devices in a parable about the threat posed by the capitalist system to those holding dissenting views, especially on the question of Vietnam. Equally unsurprisingly, it alights on pop music as the symbol of capitalist incorporation. Where this left the work in relation both to Brecht and to the activists of the anti-war movement is the focus of my discussion. The second, by George Newson, invokes a more positive notion of the popular by addressing an array of contemporary topics – including Vietnam – in the guise of a traditional variety show. How to reconcile adoption of a working-class cultural institution with the new priorities and perspectives of anti-war activists was no easy matter however, and as in Gilbert’s piece, ambiguities within Brecht’s practice and

⁵⁵ Addison, ‘Politics, Patronage, and the State’, 20.

⁵⁶ There were however important generational differences between composers, as I will discuss in the final section of this article.

⁵⁷ ‘Maintaining Quality of Radio’, *The Times*, 23 Jan 1970, cited in Addison, ‘Politics, Patronage, and the State’, 22.

theorising legitimised a solution that entailed the eventual abandonment of the vernacular. In sum, the questions to be asked of these works are as follows: How did they relate to the Brechtian model put forward by Gilbert at Wardour Castle? What ‘socio-political message’ did they offer? What was the nature of their engagement with the popular?

III

It was only in 1971 that Anthony Gilbert himself had the opportunity to realise on stage the vision of music theatre that he had articulated at Wardour seven years earlier. *The Scene-Machine*, written to a libretto by another BBC radio producer, the poet George MacBeth, was commissioned in 1968 by the Staatstheater in Kassel, West Germany, which wanted a didactic work for an audience of young people.⁵⁸ The piece relates the Faustian tale of political folk singer Frank, who is seduced by the trappings of commerce and whose fans consequently turn upon him, killing him but not the forces that corrupted him. *The Scene-Machine* opens with a protest song by Frank about the Vietnam war, and the core of the work depicts the song being gradually ‘debased’,⁵⁹ both textually and musically, under the pressure of ‘the machine’. Gilbert recalls that the intention was to offer ‘a parable for youngsters, explaining the importance of adhering to one’s ideals rather than abandoning them for the sake of simple “success”’.⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, given both the nature of the commission and Gilbert’s own preoccupations, the model of the *Lehrstück* loomed large. The concision and economy urged at Wardour are reflected in the modest scoring for chamber orchestra and a running time of 50 minutes (which was cut to 40 minutes in the abridged London production the following year). Dramatic realism is replaced by a montage-like sequence of self-contained scenes, each presenting a different perspective on Frank’s fate. A narrator addresses the audience directly in speech, guiding their critical response. Speech also

⁵⁸ Stephen Walsh, “‘Time Off’ and ‘The Scene Machine’”, *The Musical Times* (February 1972), 137-9: 137. Following its German premiere, the work was presented eleven months later at London’s Sadlers Wells, in a different production by the New Opera Company. Gilbert recalls his disappointment at the predominantly adult audience that attended the London production; email to author, 3 August 2013.

⁵⁹ This is the term used for the revised song in Macbeth’s libretto; George Macbeth, *The Scene-Machine: A Message for the Times* (London: Schott, 1971), p. 36.

⁶⁰ Anthony Gilbert, email to the author, 13 June 2017.

predominates in the writing for the ‘chorus of adolescents’, follows the Sprechchor model adopted in Brecht and Eisler’s *Die Massnahme* and other agitational theatre of the early Weimar republic.⁶¹ The Brechtian device of role exchange is used for both the narrator, who morphs into a press reporter and a TV host, and the choir, which adopts two different guises, one adoring towards Frank, the other critical of his mutation. At the first performance, the choir was situated amongst the audience, mimicking the fluidity of the audience-performer boundary in many Lehrstücke. The use of ‘placards’ to notate the uncoordinated chanting of the choral parts (see Example 1) reflected the way in which Gilbert associated his audience with youthful protest, and provided a further resonance with Brechtian staging techniques.

EXAMPLE 1 NEAR HERE

In *The Scene-Machine*, then, the relation of popular music and political protest takes centre stage. MacBeth summarised the moral of the tale in brutally direct form: ‘*The Scene-Machine* centres on the theme of corruption: how what is fundamentally valuable can be undermined and subverted through the pressures of the commercial machine. Within the terms of the work’s period and setting – roughly, England now – the specific forces of evil are those of the pop world acting on a young protest singer who starts out with high ideals.’⁶² This focus for the work’s critical message was underlined by the German title used for the work’s premiere production: *Das Popgeheuer*, which translates roughly as ‘The Pop Monster’.⁶³ In MacBeth’s treatment, the evils of the pop world are embodied in a ‘monstrous puppet figure’, but only manage to do their work on Frank after the puppet has transformed – in a clichéd gesture that left at least one contemporary music critic wincing⁶⁴ – into a seductive woman. The puppet first appears after Frank is interviewed by a ‘magazine for pop fans’, where, in a symbol of his independence from ‘the whole show-biz machine’, he shows himself to be thoroughly uninterested in the interviewer or his fans. The puppet ‘proceeds to expose Frank to a series of Mephistophelean temptations’, offering him money, boundless poetic inspiration, and then finally, as the woman emerges from inside the puppet, her ‘body,

⁶¹ See Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, 31-2.

⁶² George Macbeth, ‘Anthony Gilbert’s “The Scene-Machine”’, *The Listener* (2 March 1972), 284-5.

⁶³ As noted in James Helme Sutcliffe, ‘Gilbert’s “The Scene Machine”’, *Opera* (October 1971), 877-9: 877.

⁶⁴ Bayan Northcott, ‘Double Bill’, *Music and Musicians* (June 1972), 56. Fuller detail on the work’s libretto and staging is provided in Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain*, 192-8.

sound and whole'. Frank succumbs, and subsequently defends himself from the speaking chorus warning him to 'take more care, man'. The fifth scene of the work shows Frank revising his Vietnam song under the guidance of the Mephistophelean force to which he is now in thrall, in which it is sapped of every trace of political commitment and turned instead into what MacBeth called 'a sentimental love lyric'. Line by line, the lyrics are revised, so that 'killing' becomes 'kissing', 'hate' becomes 'heat', 'Vietnam' becomes 'heart of me', and 'I see the small children dyin'' becomes 'I feel my baby flyin'' (see Figure 1). In the work's final scene, the rewritten song is performed in a televised spectacle complete with white grand piano and dance troupe, whereupon Frank's former fans storm the stage in a fury, killing Frank and, in a reminiscence of the clown scene from the Brecht-Hindemith *Lehrstück*, dismantling the puppet – although the piece ends with the puppet appearing again, newly whole.

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

It was left to the composer to characterise the corruption process from a musical point of view. The designation of Frank as a 'folk singer' linked him to the long tradition of politically engaged folk musicians, most recently exemplified in the performances of Phil Ochs and Joan Baez at American anti-war rallies. However, when asked about the 'protest song' that opens *The Scene-Machine*, Gilbert was keen to distance himself from any particular model: 'I wasn't consciously writing a pop-song There was no attempt to pastiche anything.'⁶⁵ Nonetheless, Frank's song adopts a quasi-vernacular style very different to Gilbert's customary angular atonality. It alternates metrically free verses cast in a melancholy modal diatonicism, with a more militant chorus whose repeated injunction to 'Kill, kill the dark angel' – a reference to the helicopters of the American military – is accompanied by insistently strummed crotchets (see Example 2). Gilbert recalls that the song was 'entirely based on religious chant, remembered from my early teenage years as a choirboy';⁶⁶ the 'Dies irae' plainchant is clearly quoted in the opening guitar notes. The idea that this song should be subject to a process of gradual transformation tapped into existing compositional concerns, for Gilbert had for a number of years been preoccupied with what he

⁶⁵ Gilbert, cited in Walsh, "'Time Off' and 'The Scene Machine'", 137.

⁶⁶ Anthony Gilbert, email to the author, 13 June 2017.

termed ‘epitome form’, where ‘a piece would consist of a series of multiple, constantly expanding realisations of a simple harmonic premiss.’⁶⁷ In this case, however, the process of modification also passes comment on the popular musical environment of the time, even as Gilbert fought shy of literal ‘pastiche’. As Frank revises the lyrics in the presence of his seductress, erasing all specific reference to the Vietnam conflict, the austere guitar accompaniment of the opening gives way, first to a more ingratiatingly triadic piano part, then gradually increasing amplification, and then the electric guitars, keyboard and drums of what the score calls a ‘pop group’. (The premiere production in Kassel used a local ex-pat British rock group called The Sonics, who apparently did not object to featuring as a cipher of the ‘forces of evil’.⁶⁸) Finally, as the TV show begins, the group enters with full force for the first time, Gilbert’s oblique take on contemporary rock underscored by swung rhythms, syncopation and ‘blue notes’ in the vocal part, and a classic ‘truckdriver modulation’ between verses.

EXAMPLE 2 NEAR HERE

The Scene-Machine’s textual and musical presentation of ‘pop’ as symbol of ‘spiritual annihilation’⁶⁹ corresponded in broad terms to the brickbats hurled at Bob Dylan since he ‘went electric’ in the mid-sixties, perceived by many of his former fans as a betrayal of authenticity, and made worse by his refusal to offer clear statements of opposition to the Vietnam war.⁷⁰ It corresponded too to the almost total absence of Vietnam from rock and pop hits of the time; a scant 2% of the songs featuring in the Billboard top 100 singles charts during the Vietnam war mentioned the conflict.⁷¹ Yet *The Scene-Machine*, as well as linking ‘pop’ with an abandonment of politics, also implicitly acknowledged the tremendous pull exerted by mass-marketed popular music on young people desiring social change – and by

⁶⁷ Andrew Digby, ‘An interview with Anthony Gilbert’, *Music Matters: News and Views of the RNCM*, 25 (Summer 1990), 3-5.

⁶⁸ Sutcliffe, ‘Gilbert’s “The Scene Machine”’, 878.

⁶⁹ Gilbert, email to author, 3 August 2013.

⁷⁰ See Doggett, *There’s a Riot Going On*, 180-1.

⁷¹ James E. Perone, *Music of the Counterculture Era* (Westport: Greenwood, 2004), 43. On the absence of direct reference to political subjects in British rock, see Jeremy Tranmer, ‘The Radical Left and Popular Music in the 1960s’, in Harris and O’Brien Castro, eds, *Preserving the Sixties*, 90-104: 92-3.

rock in particular, whose crystallisation as a distinct category in the late sixties hinged precisely upon perceptions of authenticity and rootedness in longer histories of popular culture.⁷² (Gilbert's avoidance of the word 'rock' in his score may represent a tacit refusal of the idea of this 'alternative' to manufactured pop.) Indeed, in few places were leading rock musicians more exalted than amongst leading British anti-war activists. As Celia Hughes discusses in her ethnographic study *Young Lives on the Left*, music played a central role in the lives and identities of young radicals around the anti-war movement.⁷³ This is clearly reflected in the pages of *Black Dwarf*, house journal of the International Marxist Group, whose lead editor was Tariq Ali, co-founder of the Vietnam Solidarity Committee. The VSC was responsible for coordinating the largest Vietnam rallies in London in 1968, regarded today as the 'key events in the protest landscape of 1960s Britain'; in Hughes' words, the organization formed 'the heart of a growing activist scene'.⁷⁴ Amongst the articles on American imperialism, student protests and workers control, *Black Dwarf* contributors grappled with rock's sonic construction of defiance and liberation, alongside its frequently non-committal lyrics and its perceived complicity with capital. The magazine's sharply polarized reception of the Rolling Stones' 'Street Fighting Man' and the Beatles' 'Revolution' – the first deemed 'the seed of the new sub-cultural revolution', the second mere 'establishment propaganda'⁷⁵ – epitomized the passion of the debate, and famously triggered responses from Mick Jagger and John Lennon, which were published in subsequent issues.⁷⁶

⁷² Allan F. Moore, *Rock Music: The Primary Text* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1993), 64-5.

⁷³ Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*, 93-4. As one of her interviewees remarked, 'politics was about friendships and music' (94).

⁷⁴ Holger Nehring, 'Great Britain', in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds, *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-77* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 125-36: 130; Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*, 1.

⁷⁵ Ronald Muldoon, 'Subculture: The Street-Fighting Popgroup', *Black Dwarf*, 13/6 (15 October 1968). This article concerned the single release of 'Revolution', with its infamous call to 'count me out'; the significantly different 'Revolution 1' which appeared later in the year on the *White Album* featured an ambiguous rewrite of this line: 'Count me out ... in'. Most issues of *Black Dwarf* have been made available online at <https://redmolerising.wordpress.com/black-dwarf/>.

⁷⁶ The ins and outs of these encounters have been frequently recounted, with varying emphases: see for instance Doggett, *There's a Riot Going On*, 197-201; Neil Nehring, 'Sir Michael and the Origin and Reception of "Street Fighting Man"', *Rock Music Studies* 2/1 (2015), 61-72; Tranmer, 'The Radical Left and Popular Music'; Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), XX-XX. The interest of student radicals in Jagger was sharpened by his brief appearance at the first of the large VSC rallies in March 1968.

Black Dwarf editor John Hoyland encapsulated rock's elevated status amongst activists with his assertion that rock music was 'part of what has made me into the kind of socialist I am'.⁷⁷

How then are we to position *The Scene-Machine* in relation to the 'youthful idealism' that the work sought to defend?⁷⁸ There were undoubtedly elements of Gilbert's and Macbeth's analysis with which those who led the opposition to the Vietnam war could identify. The entanglement of rock musicians with radical politics during these years was unquestionably an equivocal and sometimes blatantly opportunistic phenomenon.⁷⁹ *Black Dwarf* contributors were not blind to the ways in which rock was 'embroigled in the ethics of Big Business and Showbiz', or the fact that 'the system chooses to set up the pop business as a kind of Roman circus of unprecedented splendour and debauchery'; nor did they overlook the reluctance of most rock musicians to commit to political action.⁸⁰ But the wholesale condemnation of **pop** presented in *The Scene-Machine* misses a distinction that was evident to many youthful commentators at the time and has remained a mainstay of rock criticism ever since: namely, that the politics of rock music could not be reduced to the politics of either rock musicians, the rock business, or (especially) rock lyrics. Richard Neville encapsulated this insight in his 1970 chronicle of the London counterculture, *Playpower*: 'Rock is revolutionary. Usually the performers and promoters are not, at least consciously.'⁸¹ In this reading, neither the statements of musicians, nor the words of a song – one of the focal points of *The Scene-Machine* – were decisive for the music's political significance. Audience research demonstrated that words were frequently incidental to listeners' responses to rock music.⁸² Instead, as Peter Wicke has argued, 'the supposed protest character of rock's musical appearance relieved it of the necessity of taking a clear political position in its lyrics.'

⁷⁷ John Hoyland, 'An Open Letter to John Lennon', *Black Dwarf*, 13/7 (27 October 1968), 6.

⁷⁸ Gilbert, email to author, 3 August 2013.

⁷⁹ Jagger's flirtation with the revolutionary attitude, for instance, did not last beyond the end of the decade: in 1969 he told a student journalist that he had no interest in politics because 'if you get really involved with politics, you get fucked up'; cited in Doggett, *There's a Riot Going On*, 263.

⁸⁰ Red Head, 'Reviews' [of The Beatles' *Abbey Road* and The Kinks' *Class Society*], *Black Dwarf*, 14/20 (26 October to 15 November 1969), 7; Laurie Limn, 'The Great Groupie Hoax', *Black Dwarf*, 14/17 (16 May 1969), 5.

⁸¹ Richard Neville, *Play Power* (London: Paladin, 1970), 82.

⁸² John Platoff, 'John Lennon, "Revolution," and the Politics of Musical Reception', *Journal of Musicology*, 22/2 (2005), 241-67: 250.

The power of this music was in its effect on the senses.⁸³ This was recognised by rock critics of the time: Greil Marcus wrote of ‘Revolution’ that ‘There is freedom and movement in the music, even as there is sterility and repression in the lyrics’,⁸⁴ and Ellen Willis commented that in spite of the ‘innocuous’ lyrics, ‘the heavy beat and all that chaotic noise in the background’ of Jagger’s “Street Fighting Man” ‘leaves no doubt where his instincts are’.⁸⁵ The moralizing of *The Scene-Machine*’s narrator that, by being ‘a cog in the show-biz machine’ Frank’s music will ‘right no wrongs, or put no brakes on wars’ created an opposition not recognized by rock’s audiences.

The potential of rock’s ‘effect on the senses’ – its visceral and sensual satisfactions – to motivate and animate protest is most readily grasped when we take into account the demographics involved. The anti-war movement in late-1960s Britain was overwhelmingly a movement of the young, dominated by the students and recent graduates aligned with the VSC.⁸⁶ In the largest anti-war march of the decade, coordinated by the VSC in October 1968, three-quarters of the 100,000 marchers were under 24; moreover, the protestors were preponderantly highly educated, with almost all having enjoyed some form of higher or further education.⁸⁷ Rock was susceptible to alignment with youth-dominated political movements simply by virtue of its status as the music of a new generation. But its overtly physical charge additionally resonated with the broader concern for ‘the liberation of the self’, which Celia Hughes depicts as central to the lives of young, educated activists. This was a project that encompassed sexual experimentation and the pursuit of pleasure alongside campaigning and political debate – albeit (as Hughes describes) to an unequal extent between the sexes. ‘Intimate relations’ consequently became ‘an integral if unconscious site of activism’. In this regard, the relationship of political militancy and countercultural lifestyles was one of ‘fluid boundaries’, rather than sharp differentiation.⁸⁸

In *The Scene-Machine*, on the other hand, it is precisely the drumkit, electric instruments and amplification – those elements of **modern popular music** most central to its visceral impact – that are figured as the corrupted musical equivalent to Frank’s newly written, blandly apolitical lyrics. Gilbert’s unwillingness to attribute a productively resistant

⁸³ Wicke, *Rock Music*, 103.

⁸⁴ Cited in Platoff, ‘John Lennon, “Revolution”’, 249.

⁸⁵ Cited in Platoff, ‘John Lennon, “Revolution”’, 257.

⁸⁶ Ellis, ‘British Opposition to the Vietnam War, 1964–68’, 176.

⁸⁷ Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), 149.

⁸⁸ Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*, 124; 131.

energy to rock's sonic qualities is further underscored by the work's moralistic equation of sexual pleasure with capitalist decadence and abandonment of principle. What the narrator sardonically casts as 'seduction as destruction' is graphically presented in a lengthy 'Scene of Bizarre Seduction', in the course of which the Woman first emerges from inside the 'monstrous puppet', and then takes control of Frank as her own puppet, singing 'I take you to my thighs and place you there, ... in passion bound', to which Frank replies 'in love's disguise, I blow my mind, am nearly blind'. The equation of sensual immersion with loss of sight and mind, subsequently generalised out to rock's pounding sonic embrace, presents bodily satisfaction as something intrinsically opposed to rational political action. The point is bluntly underlined during the 'Big Show' at the end of the work, when the chorus, adopting its second, 'adorational' guise, sings a 'chorus of false praise' consisting entirely of animalistic grunts.

Anxiety about the suspension of rational thought and the mutation in habits of listening was widespread in high cultural circles, as we saw at the end of the previous section. Gilbert was not alone amongst his peers in fearing for those 'lost in passion, following the fashion of the times', as *The Scene-Machine*'s narrator wryly expresses it. But in adopting such a view, Gilbert and his contemporaries were also adhering to a well-worn trope of modernist aesthetics, namely an ambivalence towards (or out-and-out repudiation of) pleasure. What Laura Frost calls 'the modernist doxa of difficulty' is generally agreed to have emerged as a response to the flood of easy pleasures afforded by mass culture from the end of the nineteenth century onwards – pleasures moreover that were, as in *The Scene-Machine*, frequently gendered feminine.⁸⁹ From this perspective artistic modernism jarred with the life priorities of 1960s anti-war activists, even as some of the same gender asymmetries persisted. This larger history also helps to identify an important aspect of the appeal of Brecht for post-war composers. Brecht's best-known writings appear exemplary of the modernist doubts about pleasure. In them, he famously proselytised for a 'theatre of instruction' over a 'theatre of pleasure', rejecting the 'culinary character' of the bourgeois theatre and its preoccupation with the 'gratifying of appetites'.⁹⁰ Special ire was reserved for the German concept of

⁸⁹ Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 6; 2.

⁹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?', in *Brecht on Theatre*, third edition, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 109-17; 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*', in Silberman, Giles and Kuhn, eds, *Brecht on Theatre*, 61-71: 61.

Genuß, ‘with its connotations of hedonism and excessive indulgence’.⁹¹ This is arguably one of many areas where (as has been noted by many theorists) theory and practice diverge in Brecht’s works. Brecht’s writings are contradictory on the matter: elsewhere the playwright was happy to accept that ‘It is in fact a characteristic of the resources of the theatre to transmit knowledge and impulses in the form of sensual pleasures: the intensity of the knowledge and the impulses is directly related to the intensity of the sensual pleasure.’⁹² But the reputation of Brecht’s theatre for austerity and didacticism only served as encouragement for post-war composers’ censoriousness with regard to mass-marketed entertainment, even when (as we have seen) Brecht saw a place for popular musical idioms as an essential element of his socially engaged art.⁹³

This is not to say that *The Scene-Machine* is devoid of its own particular pleasures, especially for those who share Gilbert’s predilections and points of creative departure. Recent studies of the relationship of modernism and pleasure have argued that, rather than rejecting pleasure outright, modernists were more frequently concerned with the ‘redefinition of pleasure’, or (sometimes) with the pleasures to be had in appreciating things others find difficult.⁹⁴ Here the generational difference between the work’s creators and its intended audience was decisive: Gilbert and Macbeth were a decade older than most of those in the antiwar movement. Barry Faulk has noted how, in the mid-60s, rock ‘pushed out jazz music to become the primary soundtrack of the British underground, and fostered a generational divide that separated a British Left which had come of age before the sixties from younger radicals’.⁹⁵ Interestingly, it is precisely modern jazz that is the musical reference point for the knowing cynicism of *The Scene-Machine*’s narrator, whose barbed remarks about Frank are

⁹¹ Calico, *Brecht at the Opera*, 36.

⁹² Cited in Anne Ubersfield, ‘The Pleasure of the Spectator’, *Modern Drama*, 25/1 (1982), 127-39: 138 n. 2.

⁹³ Brecht: ‘Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them/adopting, consolidating and correcting their standpoint/representing the most progressive segment of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership: thus intelligible to other sections too/linking with tradition and carrying it further/handing on the achievements of the section now leading to the section of the people that is striving to lead.’ ‘The popular and the realistic’, in Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre*, 108-12.

⁹⁴ On this see Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure*, Introduction; Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), chapter 4.

⁹⁵ Barry Faulk, *British Rock Modernism, 1967-1977: The Story of Music Hall in Rock* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 2.

accompanied by a kind of serial bebop, complete with hectic plucked string bass spelling out 12-note rows, and prominent solo clarinet and muted brass (Example 3).⁹⁶ But this generational gap had larger consequences for the work's 'socio-political message', the presence of which Gilbert had argued should be intrinsic to the new music theatre. The very end of *The Scene-Machine* hints briefly and obliquely at a critical judgement on the Vietnam war itself: the revived puppet-monster is greeted despairingly by a member of the chorus as a 'Dark Angel', creating a pointed elision between the helicopters of Frank's protest song and the big business that eventually crushes him. But the work's larger warning is clearly directed towards a more local concern, namely the cultural choices of the young – especially those who proclaim radicalism but forego the challenges of demanding high culture.

EXAMPLE 3 NEAR HERE

IV

Like *The Scene-Machine*, George Newson's *Arena* was written specifically with a young audience in mind. Commissioned by William Glock for performance at the Promenade Concerts, its conception was shaped by the concerts' traditional venue, the circular Royal Albert Hall, whose 'arena' (the stalls area, with seats removed) is given over to the standing promenaders. The idea for the piece derived, the composer explained, 'from the Albert Hall as a place where so many other activities than music have their day: politics, religion, sports, commerce – all the games people play. And it derived from the youth and exuberance of the Promenaders.'⁹⁷ In the event, however, the work was separated from the venue that had inspired it, becoming part of a new venture in 1971 that took some late-night Prom performances to the more informal environment of the Roundhouse in Camden. The

⁹⁶ Gilbert recalls taking Gerd Albrecht, the Intendant of the Kassel State Theatre, to a late-night performance by the Modern Jazz Quartet at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, following their first discussions of the commission of *The Scene-Machine* in 1968; email to the author, 13 June 2017.

⁹⁷ George Newson, programme note for *Arena*, BBC Henry Wood Promenade Concert, 6 September 1971, programme booklet, 5-6: 5. The phrase 'the games people play' had gained currency following the publication of Eric Berne's best-selling book *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* in 1964, which in turn inspired Joe South's 1969 hit song 'The Games People Play'.

compendious nature of the piece extended to the work's performing forces: Newson conceived each movement as 'a kind of showpiece with, if possible, a set star or group of stars'.⁹⁸ The work's first and (so far) only performance brought together an attention-grabbing line-up of performers: a capella vocal group The King's Singers, jazz vocalist Cleo Laine, soprano and avant-garde specialist Jane Manning, clarinettist Alan Hacker, a student 'speaking choir' from Goldsmiths College, and an ensemble of wind, brass, percussion and electric guitars (22 players, with 'the inference of 11-a-side') of the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Boulez. The impression of a kind of variety show, with each movement showcasing a different soloist or group, was strengthened by the use of Joe Melia, a veteran of West End theatrical comedy and satirical revues, as a compère or master of ceremonies. Melia's linking texts were scripted by Newson's friend Leonard Smith to resemble the cheery patter and ribald jokes favoured by hosts of popular variety shows like 'Sunday Night at the Palladium'.⁹⁹

Arena represented a marked departure in Newson's output, both for its allusions to popular entertainment and its overt 'relevance to contemporary situations'.¹⁰⁰ An introductory first movement, 'Beginning to begin and stopping beginning', allows the musicians to assemble on stage, one-by-one, their warm-up rehearsal routines composed into a staged crescendo, accompanied by exclamations of curiosity and anticipation by the speaking choir. The second movement is a 'Black Magnificat', sung by The King's Singers and a small brass and percussion ensemble, which dissects what the composer called the 'egotism game, the pay-attention-to-me game', in reflection of his perception that, in sharp contrast to the self-deprecating injunction of the Magnificat, 'most of us are too intent on magnifying ourselves'.¹⁰¹ The title of the third movement, 'My dancing days are over', was triggered by a

⁹⁸ George Newson, cited in abridged broadcast of the Roundhouse performance of *Arena*, *Music on Two: Counterpoint*, BBC television programme, 26 September 1971. My thanks to the BFI National Archive for making it possible for me to view a copy of this broadcast.

⁹⁹ George Newson, interview with the author, 2 August 2016. Michael Hall focuses upon a comparison with music hall, but Newson relates this his primary point of reference was music hall's 1960's descendent, the variety show.

¹⁰⁰ Hall's paraphrase of Gilbert's Wardour intervention; *British Music Theatre*, 16. For a more detailed description of *Arena*'s six movements see Hall, *British Music Theatre*, 184-9.

¹⁰¹ Newson, programme note, 5; Newson, cited in abridged broadcast of the Roundhouse performance of *Arena*, *Music on Two: Counterpoint*.

casual remark made by the composer's wife;¹⁰² scored for Jane Manning, the Kings Singers and wind quintet, the work sets its titular phrase, repeated several times, alongside lines taken from the Lamentations of Jeremiah that figure Jerusalem as a forsaken woman. In the context of the surrounding movements, the framing lines of this movement – 'Our dance is turned into mourning ... The young men have ceased in their music' – readily connotes the sobriety and disillusion of the end of 1960s counterculture. The fourth movement, punningly titled 'Garden Fate', is an elaborate allegory on the Garden of Eden from the viewpoint of Eve. Here the connection to the Royal Albert Hall is more immediate, for (as Michael Hall notes) November 1970 saw the televised sabotaging and stage invasion of the Miss World competition – a protest today remembered as 'probably the most famous women's liberation action of the early seventies'.¹⁰³ Cleo Laine's Eve is presented as 'a woman of today', tracing emotional states that are 'at different times sad, extrovert, lyrical, violent, satirical', and which enable the showcasing of a range of vocal types consciously modelled after Cathy Berberian (see Example 4).¹⁰⁴

EXAMPLE 4 NEAR HERE

In the fifth movement the contemporary political scene comes most overtly to the fore – and indeed, in its intensity of engagement with the political turmoil of the time, it knows no equal in British composition. In his introduction to the television broadcast of the performance, Newson stated that

I wanted to write a movement based on the feeling of confrontation, particularly between the young and the old. Because many of the things young people believe in I sympathise with very much. If I was 21 now instead of 39 I think I'd be a dropout like the rest of the young people.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Newson, cited in abridged broadcast of the Roundhouse performance of *Arena, Music on Two: Counterpoint*.

¹⁰³ Caroline Hoeffler, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 191.

¹⁰⁴ Newson, programme note, 6; Graham Collier, *Cleo and John: A Biography of the Dankworths* (London: Quartet Books, 1976), 152.

¹⁰⁵ Newson, cited in abridged broadcast of the Roundhouse performance of *Arena, Music on Two: Counterpoint*.

The movement's title is a verbatim quote from a statement by Enoch Powell in the wake of his sacking as a shadow minister following his infamous Rivers of Blood speech in April 1968: 'I'm in the game, I shall continue to play, and I do not use the game at all lightly'.¹⁰⁶ Assembling all the work's performers except Laine, the movement comprises a tumultuous collage of texts taken, in the composer's words, 'from many sources: political speeches, news cuttings and TV reportage, slogans heard chanted and seen written up, quotes from Hippies/Yippies, an Art School manifesto calling for action against institutions, and Women's Lib pronouncements.'¹⁰⁷ These are variously recited by Melia, sung by The King's Singers, and chanted by the student speaking choir (who were positioned within the audience seated on the Roundhouse floor), their topicality highlighted by an accompanying film that juxtaposed street demonstrations and police scuffles with images of prominent politicians and voting statistics from the 1970 General Election. These vocal and visual layers are superimposed upon a re-orchestrated version of an existing instrumental work, *This Gap of Time* (1968). From this welter of layered spoken and sung texts, the topic of Vietnam emerges as central: 'What do you think the students are trying to say?', Melia shouts, 'They are trying to say that they want to stop the killing. They are trying to say that they want to end the draft. They are trying to say that we ought to get out of Vietnam' (Example 5). The climax is formed by the police shooting of student protestors at a Vietnam demonstration at Kent State University in May 1970, a moment unsparingly depicted both by a violent orchestral and vocal tutti and film projections of the demonstration and its aftermath. The movement closes with moving quotations of words by one of the student victims, Allison Krause, and a press statement from her father. A short concluding movement, 'The Final', is built around the idea of 'the mass protagonism of football crowds', with the speaking chorus split into opposing sides. It provides an ambiguous end to the work, with the 'Away Side' chanting 'It's not as though I understood a word!' and the 'Home Side' narrowing its focus onto the 'marvellous moves' of the game.

EXAMPLE 5 NEAR HERE

¹⁰⁶ Newson, programme note, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Cited from the original performance materials for Newson's *Arena*, housed at the BBC Music Library, BBC Archives, Perivale, London.

For all their many differences, some of which will shortly be elaborated, in both *Arena* and *The Scene-Machine* socio-political comment is treated as occasion for comment on popular music traditions. How this works in *Arena* is more complex than in *The Scene-Machine*. Here, first, there is no attempt to directly incorporate popular music idioms. Newson's score, like those of his better-known British contemporaries, takes its principal points of orientation from the structural and gestural preoccupations of post-war European serialism, to which Newson had been thoroughly exposed at the Dartington and Darmstadt Summer Schools, and by periods of work at electronic studios in Urbana-Champaign and Milan.¹⁰⁸ This remains the case even for Cleo Laine's extended movement: her own extravagantly demanding part is counterpointed by instrumental scoring that makes full use of pointillist textures, irrational rhythms, proportional and unmeasured notation, rhythmic mobiles and free counterpoint, all couched (like the score as a whole) in a fully chromatic harmonic language. Instead, in *Arena* popular music is referenced by the diverse star performers, whose presence invokes other musical worlds including jazz (Laine), light music (The King's Singers) and musical comedy (Melia). The chosen frame of the variety show brings further musical associations, which are, as it were, evoked *in absentia* by Melia's substantial linking 'spots'.¹⁰⁹ These embrace coarse humour, social comment (notably a joke at Boulez's expense about the European Common Market), and brief audience participation in a jaunty rhyme about environmental pollution (assisted by the choreographed involvement of the speaking chorus stationed in the audience).¹¹⁰ This delicately balanced acknowledgement of various popular music traditions reflects aspects of Newson's own path

¹⁰⁸ Newson did not attend either Wardour Summer School, but he was on friendly terms with many of the key figures from those meetings, including Gilbert, Birtwistle and Hugh Wood; interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

¹⁰⁹ They are so termed in the original BBC copy of the text, kept with the performance materials for Newson's *Arena* housed at the BBC Music Library.

¹¹⁰ An additional movement, contained with the original performing materials but omitted in the Roundhouse performance, more fully integrates the music-hall flavour into the composition (included with the original performance materials for Newson's *Arena*, housed at the BBC Music Library). It comprises a sequence of jokes united by their extremely broad sexual innuendo, rudely illustrated by Manning, the Kings Singers, and members of the orchestra, and delivered by the narrator in variety-show styles variously labelled as 'Max Millerish', 'Ken Dodderish' and 'Frankie Howerdish'. Newson recalls that the movement was a response to the banning in 1971 of *The Little Red School Book*, a book written for school children that mounted a provocative attack on establishment morals through a relentless focus on sex, drugs and the inequities of the school system.

into composition. Newson's first exposure to music-making came as a wartime evacuee in Taunton, where he learnt boogie-woogie from a local club pianist. Back in London he played in and made arrangements for dance bands whilst gaining formal musical tuition through scholarships at the Blackheath Conservatoire and, later, Morley College and the Royal Academy of Music.¹¹¹ While the compositional circles he inhabited from the late 1950s onwards militated against literal references to vernacular musics in his mature compositions – as we have seen, this was most definitely not 'the done thing' for this generation of composers – Newson never felt the kind of distance from popular traditions experienced by a figure like Alexander Goehr.

Striking in its absence from *Arena*'s invocations of diverse popular forms, however – especially given the intended audience for the work – is **pop or rock**, neither of which are represented amongst Newson's compendious performing forces. Moreover, the work's second movement, the 'Black Magnificat', appears to single out these genres for particular criticism. Its text takes aim at the 'grotesques craving their downstage spots', and the target is made more specific by the text's references to music and 'amps':

Light me, let me be seen.
I'll thrill you, I'll cajole.
Play on my light, I star!
My life, my love, my role!

Amps then, so I resound,
I'll lift you, I'll condole,
All eyes, all ears ... I star!
Peel me the world I stole.

Give me, give me your hearts,
I'll punish, I'll parole,
Music ... My fans ... I star!
Feed me and feed my soul.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Newson, interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

¹¹² Verses 2, 3 and 4 from 'Black Magnificat', movement 2 of *Arena*.

Introducing the work for the BBC television broadcast, Newson was clear that his metaphor for contemporary self-obsession was ‘the pop star’.¹¹³ *Arena*’s adoption of the variety show format can be connected to this diagnosis of the shortcomings of the popular music scene. Traditional music hall, of which the modern variety show was a direct descendent, had long been celebrated as ‘an authentic cultural expression of the popular classes, with the special function of reinforcing British unity’.¹¹⁴ This reading remained strong as the waves of imported jazz, Hollywood movies and rock’n’roll intensified after the war, so that, by the 1960s, even as music hall appeared on the verge of extinction, the genre was being extolled specifically for its role in ‘a search for authenticity in the face of the Americanization of British popular culture’.¹¹⁵ Music hall, in other words, stood for these commentators as the ‘truly’ popular, in opposition to the corporatized products of the music industry.¹¹⁶ In this way, *Arena*’s allusions to the variety form represented an implicit rejection of modern pop’s commercialism, of a kind that invites clear comparison with *The Scene-Machine*.

However, the surface absence of pop or rock from *Arena* hides a more complex story, which is important to grasp if we are to understand the nuances of the work’s relationship to popular culture and politics. For there is an underlying affinity between Newson’s composition and the work of many rock musicians from the period. Precisely one of the facets of rock artists’ attempts to distinguish themselves from their ‘pop’ counterparts was a changing attitude towards the music business of which they were a part – a change that in some cases led to a self-conscious embrace of elements of traditional working-class culture, including music hall. As Brian Faulk discusses at length in his book *British Rock Modernism*, from about 1967 rock musicians’ growing consciousness of their integration within a hugely lucrative industry, and how this chafed with the rebellious image they wished to project, led

¹¹³ Newson, cited in abridged broadcast of the Roundhouse performance of *Arena*, *Music on Two: Counterpoint*. As in *The Scene-Machine*, in this analysis Newson appears to recognise no distinction between ‘pop’ and ‘rock’ musicians, regarding both as susceptible to the ‘self-magnification’ of celebrity stardom.

¹¹⁴ Faulk, *British Rock Modernism*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Dave Laing, ‘Music Hall and the Commercialization of English Popular Music’, in Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton, eds, *Britpop and the English Music Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 11-26: 21.

¹¹⁶ In fact, this was a romanticised view: music hall had been a highly commercialised and profit-making enterprise since the late nineteenth century.

to a concern for how ‘to detach rock music-making from corporate enterprise’.¹¹⁷ Musicians from modest backgrounds who had met fame and fortune, as well as those from more metropolitan, middle-class backgrounds who sought to portray a working-class image, felt drawn to forms of traditional working-class culture, either as a response to their sense of cultural and economic displacement or as demonstration of their claimed roots. Faulk cites the film production *The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus*, recorded in December 1968, which presented a variety of musical and circus acts, performed by rock artists, clowns and acrobats within a specially-constructed circus tent before a live audience.¹¹⁸ In place of a single compère, each act was introduced by one of the musicians, some of them wearing ostentatious Victorian dress. The musical emphasis was placed upon the progressive wing of late 1960s rock, including the Who’s multi-section epic ‘A Quick One, While He’s Away’, the flute-dominated folk-rock of Jethro Tull, a blues jam from one-off ‘supergroup’ Dirty Mac with violin and vocal extemporisations from Ivry Gitlis and Yoko Ono, and of course the Stones themselves. Faulk proposes that the project was ‘meant to build a powerful link between the new rock music and the British working-class past’.¹¹⁹ In both the *Rock and Roll Circus* and *Arena*, then, the variety-show frame acted as a device for presenting modern, even experimental material as rooted and authentic – and thus a means of reconciling their authors’ current creative selves and their imagined or actual pasts.¹²⁰

Yet as Faulk observes, uniting the worlds of popular cultural tradition and countercultural innovation was no simple matter, especially when the latter came to be associated with the political radicalism of 1968, as it did on the pages of *Black Dwarf* and elsewhere. Such efforts had to confront one of the defining schisms of late 1960s Britain, between predominantly middle-class student protestors and the broader population. The revolutionary rhetoric of VSC activism, together with growing moral consternation around drug-taking and sexual libertarianism, drove what Mark Donnelly terms a ‘backlash against

¹¹⁷ Faulk, *British Rock Modernism*, 88. This concern persisted into the early 1970s: see Doggett, *There’s a Riot Going On*, 441-6.

¹¹⁸ Faulk, *British Rock Modernism*, 85.

¹¹⁹ Faulk, *British Rock Modernism*, 77.

¹²⁰ In interview, Newson accepted the comparison with the interest of the Beatles in music hall, on the basis that ‘they came, not from the same background as me, but something similar in Liverpool. So those kind of roots that you grow up in, they can make a strong impact on you. I’m sure it’s the same thing.’ Interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

permissiveness' that set in in full in 1969.¹²¹ A *New Society* survey published in November of that year demonstrated 'the resilience of illiberal popular attitudes' amongst the British public at large.¹²² The public response to Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech was indicative: Wapping dockers came out on strike in support of the sacked minister, and opinion polls showed between 67% and 82% approval rating for his speech.¹²³ The *New Society* survey revealed the two least popular developments of the 1960s to be 'student unrest' and 'immigration of coloured people'.¹²⁴ Writers for *Black Dwarf* despaired at the conservatism of working-class culture. An article analyzing the dockers' strike concluded that a 'traditional working class culture ... meshed in kin and neighbourhood' reflected 'an essentially conservative nostalgia' that was 'the antithesis of an ideology of socialism'.¹²⁵ *Black Dwarf* writers glumly concluded that the anti-war campaign in Britain was being waged at a time 'of comparative working-class non-consciousness'.¹²⁶ In May 1969 Mick Jagger himself critiqued the 'self-interest', 'tribalism' and 'fantastically backward' nature of traditional working-class culture, as manifested by the striking dockers, remarks that reflected an awareness of the larger British public's disdain for his own subversive lifestyle.¹²⁷

In the light of such tensions it is interesting to examine what happens in *Arena* when attention turns to political conflict and activism specifically, as it does in movement 5. As we have seen, this movement articulated Newson's sympathy for the 'dropouts', and took particular critical aim at Powell by conjoining his declaration of defiance (as quoted in the movement's title) with the student deaths at Kent State. As if in response to this alignment with the activism of the young, the work's evocations of traditional popular culture are briskly dispensed with. First, the role of the compère disappears, so that movement 5 proceeds directly from the end of movement 4, and is followed directly by movement 6.¹²⁸ More drastically, in a quite Brechtian gesture of role exchange, movement 5 recasts Joe

¹²¹ Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, 151ff.

¹²² Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, 157.

¹²³ Faulk, *British Rock Modernism*, 90; Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, 168.

¹²⁴ Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, 157.

¹²⁵ Hilary Rose and Chris Downes, 'Why Did the Dockers Strike?', *Black Dwarf*, 13/3 (19 July 1968), 3.

¹²⁶ Unnamed correspondent, 'Letters', *Black Dwarf*, 14/14 (28 March 1969), 8.

¹²⁷ Jagger, in Barry Miles, 'Jagger (Miles)', *International Times*, 31 (17 May 1968), available online at <http://www.internationaltimes.it/archive/index.php?year=1968&volume=IT-Volume-1&issue=31>.

¹²⁸ The performance materials stored at the BBC Archives reveal that a part for the compère was drafted for after section 4, but not incorporated into the score for performance.

Melia – up to this point, essentially the implied on-stage representative of the audience – as, first, impassive news reporter and then (through a megaphone) the trigger-happy police commander ordering the shooting on the Kent State demonstrators, a perturbing metamorphosis that throws a dark shadow over the levity of earlier parts of the work. Above all, the movement shifts away from the relative coherence and focus of earlier parts to present an overwhelming welter of musical, verbal and visual stimuli: multiple shouted and sung texts delivered from different places in the auditorium; spatially separated ensembles of wind and percussion hurling out volleys of arhythmic pitch configurations; coloured spotlights; and a quick-fire bombardment of visual images from the film projection. The movement's multilayered textures link the movement to Newson's then-recent works *Twenty-Seven Days* for orchestra (1969/70) with its spatially separated ensembles, and *June is a Month in the Summer* for choir and orchestra (1969) with its superimposed sung and spoken texts. But they could hardly be further removed from the world of the variety show.

What, then, of the famed economy and 'minimalism' of the Brechtian *Lehrstück*, which Gilbert had urged as a model for his contemporaries, and elements of which were adopted in *The Scene-Machine*?¹²⁹ We have already noted some putatively 'Brechtian' elements in *Arena*, including the use of a master of ceremonies figure, role exchange, and a speaking choir, all of which are also common to Gilbert's work. But rather than ape the style of Brechtian theatre directly, this movement's approach to political subject matter is closer to influential Italian precursors such as Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* and the third movement of Berio's *Sinfonia* (1968). Newson studied briefly with Nono at Darmstadt, and he enjoyed a friendly relationship with Berio that lasted the whole of the 1960s, culminating in a period working in Milan's Studio di Fonologia in 1968. Both Nono and Berio were themselves influenced by the first Italian productions of Brecht in the 1950s, and a number of their works, including *Intolleranza* and *Sinfonia*, reference Brecht's texts directly.¹³⁰ Newson recalls, indeed, that 'it was through Berio I first discovered Bert Brecht'.¹³¹ But it is instructive to analyse the shape that this Italian Brechtianism takes. Characteristic of both *Intolleranza* and the third movement of *Sinfonia* is a desire to overwhelm the spectator or listener with a barrage of stimuli, in which the Brechtian device of 'separation of the

¹²⁹ Fredric Jameson characterized the brusque directness of the *Lehrstücke* as 'a kind of Brechtian minimalism'; see Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 60.

¹³⁰ Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera Since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997), 61-2.

¹³¹ Newson, interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

elements' is taken to extremes, the principle of montage being, so to speak, verticalised. In the case of *Intolleranza*, this involved simultaneous stage action, multiple film and slide projections, and electronic sound diffusion through speakers placed around the auditorium.¹³² The primary point of reference here was the idea of 'total theatre' first pioneered by one of Brecht's early collaborators, Erwin Piscator, and subsequently adopted in different ways by Antonin Artaud and Josef Svoboda (Nono's collaborator on *Intolleranza*).¹³³ Total theatre sought to deploy the full staging and technological resources of a professional theatre, including multiple stages and film screens to create an immersive and unsettling experience. The third movement of *Sinfonia*, whose combination of superimposed sung and spoken texts Newson admired, achieves a comparable effect in the context of the concert hall.¹³⁴

The techniques of total theatre have often been regarded as an extension of Brechtian practice, creating what David Osmond-Smith describes as 'a bundle of mutually alienating praxes' which 'compels the audience into self-consciousness'.¹³⁵ But other commentators have noted how the idea of total theatre pulled in the opposite direction to Brecht, in the emphasis it placed upon extravagant resources and complexity. Graham Holderness makes a pointed contrast between the crisp montage of the *Lehrstück*, which holds the spectator at bay (thus enabling critical reflection), and the immersiveness of total theatre that 'internalises the spectator within its experiential medium' and thus brooks 'no distance, no opportunity for reflection, no exercise of the sceptical intelligence'. Noting the uncomfortable proximity of aspects of total theatre practice to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* so reviled by Brecht,

¹³² For details on the production of *Intolleranza 1960* see Angela Ida De Benedictis, 'The Dramaturgical and Compositional Genesis of Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 9/1-2 (2013), 101-41; Harriet Boyd-Bennett, 'Modernist *Mise-en-scène*: Luigi Nono and the Politics of Staging', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 140/1 (2015), 225-35; Andrea Santini, 'Multiplicity-Fragmentation-Simultaneity: Sound-Space as a Conveyor of Meaning, and Theatrical Roots in Luigi Nono's Early Spatial Practice', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 137/1 (2012), 71-106.

¹³³ Piscator was invited to collaborate on *Intolleranza 1960* but declined; see De Benedictis, 'The Dramaturgical and Compositional Genesis'.

¹³⁴ Newson, interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

¹³⁵ David Osmond-Smith, 'Introduction', in Janet K. Halfyard, ed., *Berio's Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1-8: 3-4. Newson recalls that he did not know *Intolleranza* but strongly admired the combination of spoken text and music found in *Sinfonia*; interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

Holderness marks Piscator's model as 'inextricably involved with currents of cultural authoritarianism'.¹³⁶ Whatever stance is taken on this question, it is easy to see the appeal of total theatre practice for composers preoccupied with the rigorous organization of material across multiple domains; from this perspective, total theatre is less a means to stoke audiences into independent action, more an extension of sophisticated composerly control.¹³⁷ The elaborate construction of the fifth movement of *Arena*, whilst delivering an impressively visceral spectacle in response to its overtly political texts, inevitably signals a further kind of distance from the vernacular and the everyday.¹³⁸ In doing so, however, it expresses not simply the late modernist's pursuit of mastery, but also the fundamentally different political context to that of Brecht's Germany. In early 1970s Britain, as we have seen, the popular voice and political activism could not be assumed to coincide – indeed, they were frequently viewed as sharply at odds. In this light, Brecht's solutions for engaging the contemporary and socio-political could not be expected to be Newson's.

V

¹³⁶ Graham Holderness, 'Schaustück and Lehrstück: Erwin Piscator and the Politics of Theatre', in Graham Holderness, ed., *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 1992), 99-119: 114-18. For a related critique see Jon Erickson, 'The body as the object of modern performance', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 5/1 (1990), 231-43: 233-4.

¹³⁷ Berio's later dismissiveness regarding Brecht's interest in audience participation, with the effect (in his view) 'that the role of the music would inevitably be degraded to a dilettantish and mindless collective bawling', seems indicative of this attitude. Luciano Berio in 'Eco in ascolto: Luciano Berio Interviewed by Umberto Eco', *Contemporary Music Review*, 5 (1989), 1-8: 6.

¹³⁸ A comparable exercise is Hans Werner Henze's *We Come to the River* (1975), whose critical analysis of military brutality is delivered by a panoply of spatially distributed ensembles, simultaneous stage action, dozens of solo parts (many of which double roles), and a mobile percussionist roving around an arsenal of percussion instruments. Henze remarked that 'All possibilities that were at our disposal, all knowledge and skill, indeed every virtuosity, served to create serious drama, music drama, whose every note and sentence is political, and which radically takes art at its word, and aims to take it a step further towards social truth and relevance'; *Music and Politics: Collected Writings 1953-81* (London: Faber, 1982), 240.

[T]he only music most people know - pop music - has become a big business beyond anything ever imagined in the musical world, playing its part in drugging constructive, creative thinking.¹³⁹

Why is your music so effing loud? You must all be brain dead. Maybe you are: I didn't know so many clichés existed until the last half-hour.¹⁴⁰

In recent years, leading composers of the Manchester generation have been more forthcoming about their views of popular music, maybe feeling impelled to express opinions that decades earlier could have been assumed as widely shared in high cultural circles. As the remarks quoted above suggest, their verdict is not much different from that issued by *The Scene-Machine*. One of my arguments has been that this outlook brought consequences for British composers' approach to contemporary political topics, especially those attracting the attention of student radicals, because of the close association of student culture with popular music and rock in particular. **The relatively mild political culture of the British 1960s undoubtedly played its part in conditioning composers to look for subject matter elsewhere.** But it is notable how the few works that did take on contemporary political themes felt obliged to pass comment on the music with which political activism was most strongly associated. Even a composer more personally sympathetic towards rock music like George Newson – he recalls it being woven into the fabric of family life via radio and TV¹⁴¹ – struggled to accord it a place in his most political work, resorting instead to traditional popular forms that were seen as more authentic than rock, and which were then themselves ultimately judged out of place in relation to radical causes. **The prevailing doubts about contemporary popular culture as a whole impacted upon composers' preparedness to learn from Brecht, as Anthony Gilbert had encouraged his Wardour peers to do. Where Brechtian traits are perceptible, it is particular tropes that are emphasized: the retreat from emotional empathy; the formalism of montage and separation of the elements; the suspicion of pleasure;**

¹³⁹ Peter Maxwell Davies, 'How Pop and Television Damage Our Culture', *The Guardian* (25 April 2005), online at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/apr/25/1>. Similar comments were offered at greater length in Peter Maxwell Davies, 'A Case for Classical Music, Old and New', *The Guardian* (10 April 2007), online at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/apr/10/classicalmusicandopera.comment>.

¹⁴⁰ Harrison Birtwistle, cited in Tom Robinson, 'A Knight Errant at the Ivors', *The Guardian* (26 May 2006), online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/may/26/post116>.

¹⁴¹ Newson, interview with the author, 2 August 2016.

and an interest in alienation as an end in itself, whether achieved through extreme austerity or overwhelming complexity.

It is important not to over-generalise from the picture drawn in the preceding pages.

Older and younger composers often took a different stance. Tippett (b. 1905), who participated in the Wardour discussion, had no qualms at any stage in his career about evoking popular music in his own works, typically as a gesture of human empathy. Gilbert's *The Scene-Machine* received its British premiere alongside a new work by Elizabeth Lutyens (b. 1906), *Time Off? Not the Ghost of a Chance!*, a 'charade' for two singers and small ensemble, whose philosophical ruminations on generational difference and the passing of time include a pre-recorded pop song (complete with electric guitars, electric piano and drum kit), offered non-judgementally as a symbol of the transience of youth. Younger composers such as Tim Souster (b. 1943), meanwhile, were able to perceive at the end of the 1960s that 'pop and the avant-garde have been fixed on a collision course for some time', a view embodied in a figure like John Tavener (b. 1944), whose flamboyant lifestyle and friendship with the Beatles reflected a rejection of what he later termed 'the intellectual kitchens of Europe' (i.e. Darmstadt; the Manchester school).¹⁴² Philip Rupprecht notes how members of this younger generation discovered rock and the European avant-garde simultaneously, as teenagers, although this naturally did not mean their careers followed the same trajectory: consider Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman (both b. 1944) on the one hand; Brian Ferneyhough and Roger Smalley (both b. 1943) on the other.¹⁴³

Some prominent contemporaries of Gilbert, Newson and the Manchester triumvirate also found an easier accommodation with popular styles. For Malcolm Williamson (b. 1931) and Richard Rodney Bennett (b.1936), this formed part of a more general willingness to embrace different aspects of musical tradition. More directly relevant to the present discussion is the case of David Bedford (b. 1937), who studied with Nono in Italy, and attended the 1964 Wardour Summer School, but by the end of the 1960s was working as 'a gigging pop musician' and writing concert hall works which enthusiastically embrace rock

¹⁴² Tim Souster, cited in Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 365; John Tavener, *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament* (London: Faber, 1999), 19. On Souster, see Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, chapter 7.

¹⁴³ Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 411. David Matthews (b. 1943) recounts the formative experience of rock 'n' roll in his essay 'The rehabilitation of the vernacular', in Christopher Norris, ed., *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), 240-51: 249-50.

influences.¹⁴⁴ In a published discussion with his friend and exact contemporary Cornelius Cardew from 1966, Bedford compared leading rock band The Who to John Cage, for their shared interest in unorthodox instrumental techniques at the service of new sounds.¹⁴⁵ Amongst his generation, however, Bedford was extremely unusual in his positive appraisal of rock.¹⁴⁶ Despite the positioning by the underground press of Cardew and his associates alongside the psychedelic rock of Soft Machine and Pink Floyd, Cardew himself appears to have been uninterested. John Tilbury observes that Cardew ‘showed no interest in the popular music of the time’ and ‘there is no recollection within circles of friends and family of any discussion of the phenomena of pop culture’.¹⁴⁷

It may be that Cardew, who in his late-1960s projects for school groups and the part-amateur Scratch Orchestra was developing his own brand of ‘experimental vernacular’, would have agreed with Hanns Eisler’s harsh diagnosis of mass-produced ‘entertainment music’: namely that it comprised a form of ‘musical barbarism’ that offered only ‘facile pleasure’ and promoted ‘a corrupt musical passivity’.¹⁴⁸ In a 1976 essay Alexander Goehr explicitly invoked Eisler’s view of ‘the emotionally cheapening mass qualities of mechanised pop’ in support of his own broader attack on rock’s ‘primitive repetitions’ and ‘technical manipulation that impairs the response of the listener’.¹⁴⁹ But by the late 1960s Eisler’s was a difficult view to sustain in unmodified form, even if plenty of composers tried to do so (and not just in Britain).¹⁵⁰ Evidence that rock, in particular, was an active agent for social change was not hard to come by in Britain as the decade neared its close. A greater challenge was that the old imagined binary, in which modernists, political activists and the masses were aligned in unison against the forces of oppression, clearly no longer held. Politicised students often rejected modernism, and ‘the people’ often rejected politicised students. From this fallout, it was difficult to retrieve a clear and uncontentious agenda for progressive composers wishing to rearticulate their social role.

¹⁴⁴ Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 395.

¹⁴⁵ David Bedford and Cornelius Cardew, ‘A conversation’, *Musical Times* (March 1966), 198-202; 202.

¹⁴⁶ On this point, see Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 381-5.

¹⁴⁷ John Tilbury, *Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981): A Life Unfinished* (Matching Tye: Copula, 2008), 212.

¹⁴⁸ Hanns Eisler, *A Rebel in Music: Selected Writings*, ed. Manfred Grabs (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 70; 38; 60.

¹⁴⁹ Goehr, *Finding the Key*, 153.

¹⁵⁰ See the comparable stance taken in the Dutch political music-theatre piece *Reconstructie* (1969); Robert Adlington, ‘“A Sort of Guerrilla”: Che at the Opera’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 19/2 (2007), 167-93.

