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Martin Iddon’s New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez does more than weave together a history of the development, reception, and performance of compositional techniques presented at the Darmstadt School in post-World-War II Darmstadt, Germany. It also poses arguments against the generalizations made about the works produced there, the core group of composers associated with the institution, and the reasons behind their disbandment. The aim of the Darmstadt School’s International Courses for New Music was to offer instruction on and experience performing musical styles previously denied under the fascist government of the Nazi regime. Iddon questions the school’s well-known association with serialism. Using the works of Luigi Nono, Pierre Boulez, Bruno Maderna, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, collectively considered the “Darmstadt School”—similar to the composers of the Second Viennese School—Iddon challenges the perception that the Darmstadt School was a hub for the avant-garde operating under a blanket of multiple serialisms. Iddon also uses direct quotations from reviews by composers and music critics alike to paint a picture of the reception of the new music produced and taught there.
Iddon uses his introduction to provide the historical context of the School’s creation. Here, he references statements from the Darmstadt Deputy Mayor and newspaper articles to recount the British air raid that devastated the town of American-occupied Darmstadt after the war. The author outlines the financial and administrative support the American military provided for the formation of the courses held at Darmstadt as part of the cultural rebuilding in the wake of the war. This section introduces the key supporters of the School: Wolfgang Steinecke, Herbert Eimert, and Hanz-Klaus Metzger. Iddon later accuses this group of constructing the Darmstadt serial image for the press, despite the non-serial content actually being produced at the institution.

The subsequent Part I of the text analyzes the form of works produced by Darmstadt composers to demonstrate that the multiple serialisms associated with the Darmstadt school were not a monolithic entity. Iddon uses composers’ correspondence and articles written by composers and music critics alike as the primary source material to show the holes existing in the so-called “unity” of the Darmstadt School. Part I closes with Iddon foreshadowing Cage’s imminent influence on the institution with his arrival in 1958.

Part 2 of the text references correspondence between the Darmstadt School’s director, Steinecke, and John Cage, to investigate how Cage’s visits and lectures at Darmstadt affected the institution’s structure. This section aims to challenge the general belief that Cage was responsible for the eventual disbanding of the original “Darmstadt School” of composers by 1961. Here, Iddon explores the American experimental music John Cage introduced, as well as his ideas about “chance” that were misinterpreted and caused controversy at the school. Iddon ends his section with a brief conclusion that touches on the aftermath of Cage’s visit and his influence on the Darmstadt version of the European avant-garde. Iddon drives his point home by providing excerpts from compositions that demonstrate the diverging compositional techniques of certain Darmstadt composers that preceded Cage’s lectures, proving that independent of Cage, they followed their own paths and did not stick to an ordered serialism. Thus, Iddon argues that Cage is not responsible for the breakdown of the institution, but rather for indirectly exposing a constructed image that existed socially instead of musically.

The introduction is overly detailed in its discussion of the denazification process musicians had to undergo to be involved with Darmstadt courses. Though interesting in moments, the details of this section fail to return in the rest of the work. Iddon omits that the purpose of the American military’s involvement in Darmstadt was in part to integrate American political and cultural ideas into the German re-education process and to prepare them for a democratic government after the war, much like Amy Beal’s
New Music, New Allies discusses. That said, I appreciate Iddon’s decision to refrain from exploring this subject in great detail, because it falls outside the scope of his study. On the subject of American involvement, Iddon does mention the contributions of American figures such as Everet Helm to courses at the Darmstadt School, and he recognizes their contributions as equal to that of other international figures. Additional literature on this subject, such as Amy C. Beal’s Negotiating Cultural Allies: American Music in Darmstadt, places far more emphasis on Everet Helm as the American whose contribution to the Darmstadt School overshadowed others. In contrast, Iddon introduces Helm briefly, returning to him only when necessary.

Iddon could have been clearer in stating where and with whom the idea to offer the Darmstadt courses originated. Instead he chooses to hypothesize that it is unlikely the idea was simply a product of meetings and conversations between Steinecke, Helm, and Metzer. Where Iddon is surpassed by Beal is her mention of the location of the first three courses in the early years of the school. This is a topic that Iddon seems to gloss over, leaving the reader feeling as if something is missing. Iddon closes his introduction so the reader is aware that the courses at the beginning of 1946 differed greatly from the courses of the 1950s.

Part I of the text contains Iddon’s first argument, where he exposes that the more famous composers of the Darmstadt School were not strictly serialists or disciples of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. Iddon provides a comprehensive explanation of how early pieces from Darmstadt functioned on a foundation of serialism in terms of pitch classes, and then uses the same approach to show how later works from Darmstadt diverged from that foundation. He does this using specific excerpts and drawing from analytical sources to demonstrate each composer’s methodology. Iddon’s use of analytical diagrams that show pitch class crossings and rhythmic organizations may overwhelm some readers, despite the author’s best intentions. Indeed, these detailed explanations require prior knowledge of the music theory behind the pieces discussed to be understood.

Iddon assumes his readers have such a background in serialist techniques necessary to interpret many of the explanations he presents. This makes the text hard to

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follow at times. Indeed, Iddon never warns that his text will contain an in-depth analysis of serial methods and trends, but his partial explanations of the complicated diagrams he uses do not improve the reader’s understanding. A far better example of how to handle this sort of analytical detail appears in M. J. Grant’s *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics*, where Grant clearly defines serialism and then explains it in the context of the Darmstadt School.\(^4\) Iddon could have used Grant’s approach of presenting Darmstadt School works from the perspective of critics who rejected Darmstadt’s concept of serialism even though they were in favor of composing in systematic styles.\(^5\) It would have benefited his already strong arguments about the true nature of serialism at Darmstadt. Instead, to prove his argument, Iddon uses direct quotes from composers themselves on the topic of pre-compositional approaches. He then supplements this material with musical examples that serve as visual aids for understanding the techniques used by the composers.\(^6\)

After reviewing pieces performed at Darmstadt in 1954, Iddon criticizes Boulez for exaggerating the weight of serialism on the program and definitively arrives at his argument that Darmstadt was not a leading institution for extreme composers of serialism (102). Yet in *Statistical Form Amongst the Darmstadt School*, I would argue author Jennifer Iverson has a more direct way of explaining the Darmstadt composers’ divergence from the serialism of Schoenberg.\(^7\) Iverson uses composers’ original sketches to show the statistical construction of various pieces and then supplements this with an explanation of what composers were trying to portray and the relationships they were trying to represent. This is more effective than Iddon’s diagram method, because Iverson’s analysis is more in-depth and uses a vocabulary that is easier to understand. This is not to suggest that Iddon’s analysis is not a good one. Instead, it is not as accessible as the work of other scholars.

Iddon’s second argument concerns the unity of Boulez, Maderna, Stockhausen, and Nono within the new music of the Darmstadt School, and suggests this idea of solidarity was an artificially constructed image created by the press and the music-critic


\(^6\) Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27 supports Iddon’s argument by describing these techniques as being part of a new set of compositional rules the Darmstadt composers characterized as integral serialism.

and Darmstadt lecturer, Herbert Eimert (xii). Iddon convincingly challenges the unity of the school’s leading composers by showing Nono’s broader approach to multiple serialisms, compared to the routes that Boulez and Stockhausen took (141). Iddon clearly stakes his claim in stating, “Any proposal of unity of purpose amongst [the four renowned Darmstadt composers], even from the composerly camp, was founded more in assertion that in understanding” (144). He quotes Nono’s writings about the similarities of his work to that of Schoenberg and Webern, but then strategically follows that up by underlining the weakness of Nono’s argument. Nono had instead completed his works, and later found rhythmic elements and pitch class series used by Schoenberg similar to the compositional decisions he had made (141). By presenting his evidence like this, Iddon effectively conveys his point. This is a thought-provoking approach because it causes the reader to look at evidence in a different way. It prompts the reader to question statements made by influential composers instead of accepting them at face value.

Iddon proposes that Steinke wanted the ‘big four’ to teach separate seminars because he recognized they were diverging aesthetically (146). Iddon builds upon this, stating: “The differences between the composers remained greater than the similarities, continuing the impression that, whatever the press might think, a generalized serial aesthetic, if it existed, could not be grounded in technical procedure” (153). Iddon paints a clear picture of the independent mindsets of these four composers. Had Iddon gone further and hypothesized why the composers were not as unified toward the end of the school’s existence as they had been when the institution was founded, this strong argument would have been even more intriguing. Christopher Fox’s Luigi Nono and the Darmstadt School: Form and Meaning in the Early Works explains the political reasoning behind Nono’s compositional decisions and their relationship to social issues at the time.8 This source amplifies Iddon’s work because it explains why Nono chose to vary from the restricted form the “big four” were perceived to be following.

Iddon draws from primary sources and critical essays about the lectures at Darmstadt to effectively make his point that though the Darmstadt lectures closely followed one another, their contrasting subjects proved that each composer was very involved with his own work. Clearly, they were not concerned with what the other artists were doing (144). This lack of unity strongly concludes Iddon’s compelling argument. He closes off certain streams of investigation by stating absolutely that this belief in compositional unity is a perception shared by Europeans alike. It would be worth exploring which composers recognized the Darmstadt composers’ experimentation and did not approve of the mislabelling. Postmodern to Modern: A

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Different Approach to Darmstadt by Paul Attinello fills this gap by addressing the decisions made by some Darmstadt composers to rebel against this monolithic myth and destabilize the European tradition of serialism. Attinello does so by using descriptive charts that show the relationships and divergences between the music produced before Darmstadt and the serial styles and variations Darmstadt composers explored. This aids one in understanding Iddon’s text.

Finally, the second half of this work contains Iddon’s third and final argument. Here, Iddon demonstrates that the instability of Darmstadt ideals were not a product of John Cage’s arrival. Iddon examines Cage’s influence on the Darmstadt school by exploring the theories he practiced and stood behind. I quickly realized that Iddon assumed readers would have prior knowledge of John Cage’s career. This comes across in the way Iddon references Beal’s New Music, New Allies to examine how Cage established a particular view of what American experimental music was in Germany (157). Without prior knowledge of John Cage’s legacy, Iddon’s observations fail to be accessible to every reader. Iddon uses excerpts from David Tudors’ lectures on John Cage’s experimentalism in music to give the reader an idea of the ideals Cage represented. The author also presents correspondence by Steinecke, inviting Cage to lecture at the Darmstadt School. This evidence shows that despite Cage’s divergent compositional theories, he was treated as a respected composer rather than an intruder.

Using correspondence between Stockhausen—who agreed with “chance” elements in Cage’s compositions—and Boulez—who did not like the direction Cage was taking with his music—Iddon shows that Darmstadt members did not anticipate Cage’s teachings to cause such controversy. By presenting their differing opinions over Cage’s compositional practices, Iddon reveals the underlying conflict between Darmstadt composers that arose because of opposing stances on how music should be composed and performed. This approach exposes how the tensions at the School were not just about Cage, but also about internal issues between composers. In the Cambridge Companion to John Cage, Christopher Shul provides further context about the tensions between Boulez and Cage. Iddon’s work would have benefitted from incorporating Shul’s approach. Instead, Iddon uses negative reviews of Cage’s lectures to clearly demonstrate which talks proved problematic to the School. I found that, compared to

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10 Attinello, “Postmodern or Modern,” 32.

Part 1, Iddon limited his use of musical excerpts dramatically in the final section. Iddon would have benefited from using more analytical evidence to demonstrate what composers opposed.

The most interesting section of Iddon’s Cage discussion dealt with the topic of aleatoric music. Iddon uses diary entries of colleagues close to Cage and correspondence about Cage’s lectures to show that Cage’s proposal of giving the musician the freedom to independently interpret aspects of a composition during a performance were misinterpreted as an acceptance of improvisation. Iddon uses letters between Steinke and David Tudor regarding Cage and this music to show how this association with improvisation was received by Darmstadt and later incorporated into theory. Iddon does not fully explain aleatory in plain terms, which is frustrating. Instead the reader must piece it together on their own by interpreting the jabs Darmstadt composers, meaning mainly Boulez, directed at Cage. Iddon mentions that “Alea,” a published text by Boulez, indirectly critiques the compositional practices of Cage. Iddon drives his point home on all three major arguments in his brief conclusion to the section, using a Stockhausen piece to point out that Darmstadt composers were using open forms similar to aleatoric methods before Cage’s lectures and presentations (215). Iddon convincingly closes his section by leaving the reader with the impression that all Cage was responsible for was exposing the avant-gardists of Darmstadt to other experimental techniques, and in the process, indirectly revealing that they had long abandoned an adherence to strict forms.

New Music at Darmstadt is an ambitious work that tackles the issues and generalized stigmas associated with the Darmstadt school. Iddon’s efforts represent a significant contribution to literature on this topic. Iddon’s text is not an easy read, but he shapes his arguments with language and methods that allow the reader to anticipate his later methodologies. This scholarly work does require the reader to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of serialism and composers such as John Cage, Arnold Schoenberg, and Anton Webern to properly grasp and appreciate the information provided. The reader would also benefit greatly from having prior knowledge of new music in Germany. Overall, Iddon effectively challenges well-worn notions of how the Darmstadt School functioned, and discusses John Cage’s investigation of different paths of new music—paths that were, at times, misunderstood and criticized in Darmstadt, and also Europe. In sum, Iddon’s work effectively draws comparisons between composers at Darmstadt while also bringing attention to the subtle controversy surrounding the School’s compositional methods.
For Further Reading:


