State of Scholarly Research on 
Neoclassicism in Music

© 2006 by Helen Kin Hoi Wong

In searching for a definition of Neoclassicism in music, one is struck by the lack of consistency in terms of its set of defining features, the choice of Neoclassical repertoire and composers offered by writers of historical surveys of Western Music. While a broad definition like the one offered in the *New Grove Dictionary* typifies where writers' agreement ends, no two historians seem to agree which composers should be included in the list of Neoclassicists. Apart from Stravinsky who had explicitly associated himself with this term and identified himself as one of the movement's advocates, nearly every composer who was writing during the interwar period has shared the same fate of being portrayed in one history textbook as Neoclassicist while excluded in another. The inconsistency of the term's general usage was a result of its "rootlessness". Unlike its counterpart in Western Art and Literature where it is widely understood as the 18th century revival of the Classical Antiquity in Arts of ancient Greece and Rome, the term Neoclassicism in music was borrowed and used literally without carrying its original meaning. It is also because of the term's ambiguities that it opens a variety of research possibilities, inviting scholarly interpretations of its meaning from a variety of standpoints. In this essay, I will examine the current state of scholarship on

1 According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the term Neoclassicism is broadly defined as "A movement of style in the works of certain 20th-century composers, who, particularly during the period between the two world wars, revived the balanced forms and clearly perceptible thematic processes of earlier styles to replace what were, to them, the increasingly exaggerated gestures and formlessness of late Romanticism." Arnold Whittall, "Neo-classicism," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 10 Dec 2005), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

Neoclassicism in music by presenting six representative works of different research orientation. All these works represent a variety of research directions and enable us to a more multifaceted understanding of the term's meanings.

The first extensive research devoted to this topic is Scott Messing's *Neoclassicism in Music: from the Genesis of the Concept Through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic*. It first appeared as a dissertation in 1988 before its book publication in 1996. Using a historical research method, Messing unearthed scattered references from the end of 19th century through the early 1920s, such as newspapers, magazine, reviews by critics, and correspondences of musicians, etc. His aim is to provide a historical survey and critical analysis of the origins and development of the term Neoclassicism: how this term first came to be used, what was its meaning to its contemporaries and how has its meaning changed over time. In tracing the historical accounts of the usage of the term, Messing finds that the term carried different meanings at different times, and the ambiguity of its meaning was a result of national prejudices (the term Neoclassicism was originally used by the French to criticize 19th-century German composers who manipulated 18th century instrumental styles at the expense of their originality), the aesthetic change caused by the disillusion following World War 1, and political torsion among composers striving to create a space for themselves in the overpopulated state of the repertoire, as represented by the polemics of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. His research has demonstrated that musical style is largely shaped by cultural ideas. By reconstructing the history of cultural politics surrounding the term Neoclassicism, Messing's work serves to provide a foundation stone on which stylistic problems and aesthetic issues can be further explored.

---

In his book review of Messing's *Neoclassicism in Music*, Richard Taruskin analyzes the term's meaning from a sociomusicological perspective. By taking account of the socio-political elements involved in interpreting the music, Taruskin tries to ask questions about "what" Neoclassicism is: "So what was it, hardboiled modernism or futile nostalgia? Can we define it, or can we only "know it when we see it"? What was its relationship to its own contemporary world, on the one hand, and to the world of the past, on the other? What did it mean to its contemporaries, and what should it mean to us? Should we call it a musical style at all? A concept? A practice?" 

Taruskin adopted Messing's use of critical responses to Stravinsky's works as well as the composer's own prose during the period 1914-23, to determine the link between that composer's musical style and the aesthetic which attempted to define that style. Taruskin believes that public discourse played a large role in determining the Neoclassical style of music. For example, Taruskin argues that Stravinsky sees the word "Neoclassicism" a useful sign for his publicity, and when the term was first used by his supporters, it was used to contrast with Schoenberg's music which was criticized as "Tristanesque and romantic." In order to maintain the popularity of his music Stravinsky further composed in this style. So it was the public discourse which turned him into a Neoclassicist. Therefore, Taruskin argues that it is not just the surface features of a work or the genre which define a work as neoclassical, but the ideological motivation of the person who creates the work, and a Neoclassical work is a product of the socialization of the composer in that particular place and time of history. And moreover he equates the conception of Neoclassicism produced by some historians with the idea of producing authentic music, recreating the past with modern ideas.

Seeing Neoclassical works only as products of the twentieth century, Joseph Straus attempts

---

5 Ibid., 287.
6 Ibid., 289.
to explore the relationship of these works with the musical past. In his book *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition*, Straus provides a study of musical construction of early 20th century, to identify strategies composers employed in order to come to terms with earlier music.⁷ Straus added to his theoretical and analytical method a psychologically oriented perspective. His analytical framework is based on a theory of poetic influence by literary critic Harold Bloom, as published in his two books titled *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975).⁸ Bloom's theory of poetic influence proposes that major poets struggle against the suffocating weight of their predecessors, creating new poems by 'misreading' older ones through a complex series of rhetorical defense mechanisms. Adopting Bloom's theory, Straus argues that the classical tradition burdens modern composers with a sense of anxiety and belatedness, and neoclassical works are a manifestation of their struggle for priority between new and old elements, and compositional procedures used in Neoclassical music are a means of pushing their predecessors aside and clearing creative space for themselves. While being labeled a “post-Freudian theory of compositional influence”, Straus’s theory is not without weaknesses.⁹ By adopting Harold Bloom's standpoint in looking at musical creation (i.e. by assuming that a musical work only exists in relation to other musical works), Straus is ignoring the intrinsic difference between poetry and music, and is denying both the autonomous aspects and creative aspects of a composition. By interpreting composers' choice of musical language as an act of defense aroused by their anxiety of influence, Straus is also undermining the individuality and originality of composer's musical thinking, which are more vital to their artistic achievements. It is as if Straus was telling us that one composer can only succeed by canceling the influences

---

of the other. Despite the weaknesses that lie in Straus' basic assumptions, his comprehensive musical analysis does offer an alternative and imaginative interpretation of Neoclassical music from the perspective of composers themselves in terms of their relationship with the musical past.

First presented in the joint conference of the American Musicological and Theory Societies titled "Historical Reflection and Reference in 20th century Music: Reflection and Beyond," Marianne Kielian-Gilbert's article -Stravinsky's Contrasts: Contradiction and Discontinuity in his Neoclassical Music" offers a psychological interpretation of Neoclassical music.\(^\text{10}\) In Neoclassical music Kielian-Gilbert sees that composers highlighted in their neoclassic works aspects which were historically linked to the music of the past but aesthetically linked to music of the present, resulting in what she calls "historically charged musical contrasts". She sees that the degree to which these charged contrasts vary shows parallels to the dynamics in human relationships. Kielian-Gilbert defines a spectrum of five stages ranging from autonomy and separateness on one end, to intimacy and integration on the other. With this model she tries to explore the different degrees or dynamics of these contrasts in Neoclassical music. Her finding is that these contrasts were set up (i.e. how composers deal with old musical elements in a new setting) in a very individual or personal manner. This individual handling of the old materials is a reflection of composer's relationship to the past. Her essay provides a deeper biographical understanding of composers through the structure of the their neoclassical works.

In her essay "Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses in Twentieth-Century Music," Martha M. Hyde tries to establish a theory of Neoclassicism while taking into account some of the

extramusical issues raised by the recent scholarship I mentioned earlier.\textsuperscript{11} Using an inductive method (i.e. using results from well-established analyses of well-known neoclassical works by other theorists to arrive at a general conclusion), she tries to illustrate four strategies by which 20th-century composers created works that engaged or reconstruct the past, while maintaining their personal styles. She identifies two criteria for a work to be called Neoclassic: it first must fulfill the criteria of a "classic" - a work or style that is significant enough to outlived its creator and be served as a model to later composers, The second criteria is that the compositional approach must involve linking different period styles together. She described this contradiction of styles as anachronism. Hyde adopts Straus' theory of anxiety of musical influence to explain it as one driving force behind a composer's anachronistic impulses, and that the compositional approach is to recover or revive a past model. Her research offers a new way of defining Neoclassicism that shows an integration of music theory and new musicology.

Having written many essays arguing for a formalistic approach to understanding music, Pieter Van den Toorn realizes an ideal, analytical model of Neoclassical music in his essay "Neoclassicism and Its Definition" (a chapter contributed in the book \textit{Music Theory in Concept and Practice}).\textsuperscript{12} While opposing to Taruskin's approach in interpreting Neoclassical music by focusing on its ideological aspects, Van den Toorn argues that musical analysis should be the true focus of musical study, rather than more broadly critical approaches that assume socio-political and humanistic perspectives. He argues that the knowledge generated by formal and technical approaches will provide listeners greater freedom in terms of individual response to musical works since they are free of any socio-political constraints. To


demonstrate how this mode of understanding neoclassical works can be achieved, he identifies features which belong to the common practice period and how they are assimilated within the post-tonal context, using the frameworks of Schenkerian, set, and octatonic theory. In his conclusion, he has singled out Neoclassical music as the one which analysis serves partially to its full understanding because of its socio-political nature. But he maintains that this subject should not be looked at without an application of formalistic analysis.

Given the diversity of interpretations of the term Neoclassicism, it is perhaps impossible to summarize the above findings into a body of knowledge that leads to the configuration or revelation of the term's true meaning. The true meaning perhaps never exists. But in the course of understanding the term from different scholarly perspectives, one can see that Neoclassical music, just like any other music, is born of human's desire to express through available means. Neoclassicism as a means of expression is both fulfilling and effective as it not only links composers' creative ideas with their inspirational sources, it also communicates with the listeners in familiar language. Just like the music, Neoclassicism as a term will continue to attract more scholarly interests, searching for its available meanings.
Bibliography


