Roddy Hawkins

From the Mixed Avant-Garde to the Invention of Postwar Music. Becoming the New Complexity in the 1980s

The term "New Complexity" emerged in Britain at the turn of the 1980s at a time when contemporary classical music was neither postmodern nor avant-garde but rather in a state of flux between two different conceptualisations of contemporaneity in new music. Set against the profound impact of social, educational and technological changes underpinning the circulation of contemporary music, in this paper the term New Complexity and the idea of a grouping is placed into a broader reception history that examines this and similar terminology, namely New Simplicity and New Romanticism. Such terms must be understood not only as responses to one another but also, and more urgently, as part of a broader dialogue with, and as responses to, the possibilities and limits of the modernist and experimental avant-gardes. With a focus on the writings of Keith Potter and Richard Toop, the position of Contact *magazine and the contrasting perspectives of Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Nyman, I propose that the emergence of New Complexity is a discursive effect of what I term 'the invention of postwar music' – the proliferation, fragmentation, marketisation and professionalisation of new music composition that took place internationally throughout the long 1980s.*

Between the late 1970s and the early 1990s a specific discourse of complexity, including the term "New Complexity", emerged in British music criticism as well as elsewhere in Europe.[1] Specifically between 1979 and 1982, the notion of a *new* grouping took hold in Britain as a means of locating a small subset of the post-serial, post-Manchester School generation of UK-based composers.[2] They were born in the 1950s and by the end of the year 1982a handful of insiders might have included amongst them James Clarke, James Dillon, Chris Dench, James Erber and Richard Emsley, to be followed soon after by Richard Barrett and Roger Redgate. Building on, yet also departing from, the experiments and explorations that proliferated in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – including the 1970s abstractionist phase of Michael Finnissy and the hyper-expressionist phase of Brian Ferneyhough – these younger British composers became grouped together along with Ferneyhough and Finnissy, not through a published manifesto, but in response to a handful of concerts in which some of their works appeared together, and through

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1 Darbon 2008; Hawkins 2020; Pace 2015. See also Heiter/Schmidt 2025.

2 Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies were both established and prominent figures by the 1980s, though Maxwell Davies's modernism had softened; the 'generation' of British composers to emerge at the turn of the 1960s, whether avowed modernists or otherwise, is vast. Most were born in the 1930s but not all. See Rupprecht 2015.

discourses circulated by promoters and critics keen to map out the territory of contemporary music 'after' the avant-garde and keen, too, to position their ideas, organisations or journals at the forefront of new music culture in 1980s Britain.

The very idea of a singular, identifiable 'forefront' is of course an awkward fit in any history of music, and historians of late twentieth-century music are perhaps especially prone to assume proprietary rights over the historiographical problems it poses. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore quite how pronounced the question of 'the new' was in the 1970s and 1980s;[3] it is also easy to understand why it occurred, given the increased fragmentation and plurality of styles, scenes, philosophies, politics and practices that were jostling for attention and support in the space of 'contemporary music', across establishment and fringe publications and venues alike internationally. In this context, a particularly self-conscious discourse accompanied an environment in which the legitimacy and direction of new music was excitingly undecided and debated. This is not only to say that what constituted new music was an ongoing, open question – a truism if ever there was one. It is to hone in on how the question animated discourses *within* establishment, state-funded spaces of the British contemporary music infrastructure; how, in a certain sense, such a question could only be posed there;[4] and what kinds of insights might emerge for music historians as a result.

Added to this, it is important to acknowledge that a central and widely accepted tenet of critical writing on New Complexity concerns its hollowness as a means for interpretation or musical understanding, whether at the level of individual work, composer or larger grouping. Therefore, while my main purpose in what follows is to provide an overview of how the term New Complexity emerged, including examples of how notions of both the new and of complexity relied on different notions of both the old and of simplicity, my underlying impetus stems from the urge to better understand how such discursive formations can be viewed in retrospect as a crucial stage in the solidification or invention of the canonical account of 'postwar music', which, until very recently, held such a central position in the dominant narrative of twentieth-century art music. In this respect, my emphasis on invention not only contributes to the reception history specific to New Complexity but also adds, more broadly, to recent debates in the historiography of minimalist music, especially where established orthodoxies of postwar music are repositioned as facts and disputes,[5] points of comparison that I address in the conclusion. While I can ultimately only gesture towards the 'invention of postwar music' here, the following three snapshots of music-historical-discourse-in-action are instructive, not only because of what is documented, but also because they highlight the international connections and material conditions that made the circulation of New Complexity possible in the UK context, that enabled it to be both local and universal, and that continue to complicate any attempts to return to the moment of its emergence. Before turning to these snapshots, however, I first elaborate on the historical and historiographical context necessary to think once again about New Complexity and its relevance to histories of contemporary music, especially in post-sixties Britain.

3 Hawkins 2020, p. 6.

4 See the argument on 'inward' or 'official' critique in Iddon 2024.

5 See Levaux 2020 and Nickleson 2023 respectively.

After the mixed avant-garde: positioning *Contact* and the New Complexity in the British context

To revisit the emergence of New Complexity requires us to revisit the aftermath of what Benjamin Piekut has called "the mixed avant-garde", a period of genre-crossing in the creation, dissemination and consumption of late-sixties and early-seventies experimental music that, as Piekut has it, took place beyond establishment spaces and networks in London's musical life.[6] To use the term mixed is to come to terms with class, gender and especially racial markers of experimentation that upset the divisions between high and low art in the postwar period, and their ongoing negotiation and policing. In terms of the white-coded spaces of 'new music' it is to acknowledge, in particular, avant-garde noises in jazz, free improvisation and psychedelic rock; the impact of tape, electronics and computers, mass-market amplification and multi-channel loudspeakers; of affordable domestic recording solutions and the microscopic intimacy of sound perspective resulting from stereo recording technology; and the numerous new innovations in instrument design, techniques and usage, built in university studios and garden sheds alike, and nurtured through specialist performance practices and collaborations that blurred boundaries between composer and performer. And all this is to say nothing of comparable formal innovations and radical politics cutting across the visual arts, film, television, literature and theatre. If this all appears rather conventional as a context, the point is to gently push back against the tendency amongst some to convey the New Complexity phenomenon as an establishment, post-serial cult: it is important to recall that although the composers associated with New Complexity were clearly connected to musical modernism in various ways, they nevertheless came of age against the backdrop, influence and impact of the late-sixties mixed avant-garde and experimentation that Piekut's study unravels.

Ultimately, any endeavour in new music after 1970 was set against the full range of sonic experimentation, fragmentation and fallout that potentially falls within what Piekut has since coined as "postwar music and sound".[7] As a result, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, such distinctions were increasingly hard to discern, as fringe musics took on new forms and occupied alternative spaces beyond the purview of 'new music', while some of the sixties generation grew into middle-age respectability. Within the sphere of art music a still novel combination of public access, expanded and free education, mass reproduction and cross-genre consumption habits helped to create a complexity of its own, one in which the cultural and musical experimentation of the 1960s encountered the forces of a growing university-educated, 'grammar-school' demographic and the institutionalisation and professionalisation that accompanied it.[8] Indeed, one important and relevant political and societal reform of the postwar period included the so-called 'utopian' new universities, including at Sussex, East Anglia (UEA) and York, where contemporary composition and, to some degree, early electronics were a particular focal point.[9] In terms, though, of the availability and circulation of new music as it cuts across social class, it is also important to note that new work was made accessible beyond the concert hall and university campus not only on commercial recordings and radio, but through the availability of recordings, scores and specialist books and journals in municipal libraries, publisher shop fronts and record stores as well as specialist music centres and uni-

6 Piekut 2014.
7 Piekut 2017.
8 For a critique, see GriffithsD 2000.
9 See relevant examples in Taylor/Pellew 2020.

versities.[10] If indeed the postwar period takes the study of new music beyond 'the literate tradition', where and how literacy took place remains an important part of the same overall story.

One does not have to accept Piekut's contention, stated elsewhere, that by the end of the 1970s the radical potential of experimental music had been largely extinguished in order to acknowledge that a transition took place from a vibrant "mixed avant-garde" to an increasingly fixed avant-garde by the turn of the 1980s,[11] which meant that, in the words of Chris Heaton, "[j]azz, improvised music, electronic music and different types of classical music seemed to exist in small isolated groups, with their own interests and preoccupations".[12] And it is my contention that the emergence of New Complexity offers a window through which to glimpse a settling of the dust thrown up by the effects enumerated above: 'settling' may not be entirely appropriate, however, since it includes, on one side, the breakdown of the postwar consensus in state-supported musical culture and the onset of an early neoliberal manifestation of what Pierre Bourdieu has, in a different context, called "the institutionalisation of permanent revolution" in the field of modern art;[13] on the other, this is balanced against the persistence of an establishment worldview from an earlier, more paternalistic (or enlightened) era that was, within institutions like the BBC, continuously in tension with concerns about the gap between artistic enclaves and 'the public' for contemporary classical music.

As an example of both a cause of and a response to such a large-scale transition, we may take the Arts Council-funded Contemporary Music Network (CMN), whose first concerts took place in 1971 and which, until 2008, provided at an institutional level the necessary 'post-genre' infrastructure to enable a wide range of UK-based and international groups to tour beyond London, dominated initially by contemporary chamber ensembles, with occasional jazz groups, live electronics, and free improvisation collectives. After the 1980s a wider array of styles and approaches was supported, reflecting the more general cultural shift towards forms with wider public appeal.[14] The CMN was a significant outlier in terms of how the Arts Council of Great Britain, and its successor Arts Council England, thought about and funded contemporary music in the 1970s, since the latter typically funded commission fees to secure first British performances from both prominent and lesser-known composers (the London Sinfonietta was the exception here, since it also benefited from general subsidy as a London orchestra). Likewise, the breadth of performing practices and instrumentation in CMN tours was not, for example, something that the Society for the Promotion of New Music (SPNM) was set up to serve. The SPNM, separate to but part-funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain, promoted composers without a publisher, and supported the production of score-based composition, not performers who may also have composed or commissioned new work.[15] Instead, the SPNM provided funds to support the production and performance of new scores, including the copying of parts, and then set about commissioning professional soloists, ensembles and orchestras to perform them in public; furthermore, it was generally the SPNM reading panel, not perform-

10 Richard Barrett (2008), for instance, recalls encountering music notation by following, amongst other things, Stockhausen scores at the city library in Swansea, Wales. More recently, James Gardner (2022) remarked on similar experiences growing up in Liverpool. In a related way, Michael Finnissy (2023) recalls that in the early 1960s much obscure music, including by Satie, was only available in Britain through the examples printed in analytical books.

11 Piekut 2019.

12 Heaton 2001b, p. 28.

13 Bourdieu 1996, p. 219.

14 Heaton 2001a.

15 Wolf 2013.

ers, that recommended works for support, a point which requires some further nuance where the initial public recognition of Chris Dench and James Dillon is concerned.

Caught somewhere in the middle of these positions, the niche journal *Contact* emerged in Birmingham, also in 1971, with the explicit intention of covering contemporary music ('today's music') in all its dimensions, from high art to the vernacular, and to provide 'contact' between them.[16] As students, its founding editors, Chris Villars and Keith Potter, hoped to transcend the kinds of boundaries that typically marked the establishment concert from the radical event, and might recognise, too, the multiplicity of vanguard activity emanating from loudspeakers and on recording. However, while they referred to 'contemporary music' or 'today's music' to indicate breadth of coverage and connectedness, it was ultimately a utopian mission and one that, by 1980, lay in increasing tension with its institutionalised position (part-funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain) and what was in any case an implicit historical positioning: to assume an elevated position 'beyond' factions was to provide a perspective 'at' the scene rather than in it, a form of dispassionate and distanced criticism that was important to Potter.[17] And if not always writing *about* 'serious music', as contemporary classical music was still termed then, writers in *Contact* unfailingly wrote seriously – and sometimes with a level of analytical detail and expertise that was unlikely to generate the kind of widespread appeal that their generalist ambitions presupposed. As becomes clear in the examples that follow, by attending to and aiming to connect the fragmentation and specialisation of contemporary music, *Contact* attempted to trade the verticality of the classical tradition for the horizontality of the contemporary present without actually doing so discursively, a challenge which was made all the harder by the ways in which the expansion and fragmentation of contemporary music under postmodernism provided a plurality of styles within the singular institutional space of the classical concert hall and its ever-expanding museum of musical works.

The extent, then, to which either the CMN or *Contact* could in fact promote, or report on, the full range of contemporary music even within the UK, while also remaining reliant on, and part of, a contemporary music establishment rooted in classical compositional norms, and with limited resources, was always going to provide a test to the catholicism that underpinned their professed missions. But while the CMN promoted an increasingly wide range of ensembles and groups beyond score-based composition throughout the 1980s and beyond,[18] *Contact,* with fewer resources and a tendency towards analysis and scholarship, focused (again, throughout the 1980s) increasingly on the sphere of contemporary composition alone, with *Wire* magazine, *Sounds, Microphone* and others catering for related but distinct fringe spaces of the 'unpop avant-garde' – which, as Stephen Graham coins it, conceptualises ways "in which influences from popular and non-Western music play more significant roles than before and liminal, quasi-popular practices such as noise are in the emergence".[19]

Nevertheless, to look at *Contact* and New Complexity with the SPNM and other Arts Council funded spaces in the background is still to trace another of the ways in which the impact of the experimental and modernist avant-gardes echoed through elements of British musical culture at the turn of the 1980s. And, as alluded to above, what I'm interested in is how this narrowing of emphasis reflects or parallels the growth and professionalisation of new music in the 1980s – most notably in the international 'circuit' of festivals and ensembles – and the myriad

16 The journal is nowadays fully digitised, see *Contact* 1990.
17 Potter 2008.
18 Heaton 2001c.
19 Graham 2019, p. 531.

ways in which younger composers absorbed or rejected the experimental avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s within a more conventional composer-performer relationship. Indeed, in stark contrast to musicians that sought to extend experimental music in new directions, pushing the boundaries of performance in improvised-driven practice (from Cecil Taylor to Evan Parker) or the boundaries of sound in the margins of the vernacular (from art-school post-punks to dub poets), the British composers loosely grouped under the umbrella term New Complexity were conventional composers in the important sense that the form of their notated compositions – the sonic image, if you will – was almost exclusively fixed and linear, and the instrumentation and doublings largely conventional. If not straightforwardly post-modernist, they were at the very least post-experimental.

To the extent that composers associated with New Complexity shared anything in common compositionally, their works tended to push the possibilities and limitations of instrumental and vocal techniques, in some cases explicitly in search of new modes of musical expression, and to produce often highly self-referential written programme notes on the process of composition and its ontological significance for musical meaning. Their works tended, too, to exhibit at least a few of the following interlinked aspects: carefully worked-out processes of construction, manipulated and applied to multiple parameters; elaborate, irregular polyphony, including within individual (deconstructed) instrumental and vocal parts; the exploration of the minutiae of timbre, especially with respect to gradations in pitch, rhythm and instrumental technique; and larger-scale, through-composed forms inspired by, or translations of, concepts, images, symbols and texts beyond music, from post-structuralist philosophy to late modernist theatre, visual art and film. In terms of overall sonic impression, and in common with other forms of post-serial composition, this body of work often produced a high degree of saturation and sense of over-abundance,[20] manifest in rapid and numerous sequences of musical events (whose moment-to-moment form could be hard to determine as a result), as well as frequent explorations of the extremes of register and dynamics. This created effects of temporal and bodily dislocation and, at times, a certain monumentality – effects found, to be sure, in a range of music globally but especially prevalent in avant-garde music of various kinds.

In other words, nothing about the musical features summarised above could be claimed as uniquely 'new' in the history of music up to 1980. Within a British perspective, the key thing that determined the music as 'complex' and then the New Complexity was precisely the nationality of its composers (British), the space that they occupied socially (state-funded, some early publisher support, non-commercial) and ontologically (they were not free improvisers), and the historical moment in which the production and reception of this music took place (the onset of postmodernism and the 'return' to tonality). And, of course, there was the small matter of notation and scores. Although notational approaches varied a great deal from composer to composer (not all followed Ferneyhough's interests in the expressive potential of overabundance and "meaningful inexactitude"),[21] in a certain sense the visual appearance of the scores (with excerpts often included in publicity materials) dramatised in the visual, more public domain many of the wider aesthetic-historical issues of the day, issues that have continued to frame complexity in the years since: namely, freedom and control, relevance and popularity, and the endgame (or terminus) of the modernist and experimental avant-gardes.

20 This wider, sensorial framing is found, for example, in Rutherford-Johnson 2017.

21 The phrase was shared with me by Roger Redgate (2008). See the Ferneyhough emphasis on 'interstices' in Duncan 2010a/b.

That is why I use the emergence of the discourse of the New Complexity as a vehicle for thinking through the ways in which the common historiographical distinction that divides the "mixed avant-garde" (experimental musics) and, as it were, its 'fixed' equivalent, was negotiated: from a composer's perspective, as a problem to be addressed; and, for music critics and promoters, a distinction for organising the recent past and thus for re-orienting the present and future. To put it another way: to understand the emergence of New Complexity requires us to return to the way it marked the cultivation of a space within new music culture where specialist (not necessarily elitist) practices of what Anders Førisdal calls "radically idiomatic instrumental practice" circulated as forms of, and increasingly a style within, the episteme of contemporary classical music.[22] And to capture this, we must look not primarily at Potter's articles in his 'own' journal *Contact*, but at those he wrote for the more widely read *Classical Music* magazine.

Keith Potter, Michael Finnissy, Suoraan and the emergence of the grouping New Complexity in Britain

While there are many routes into the emergence of New Complexity, an early programme for the ensemble Suoraan, based in London, is particularly instructive given the context outlined above. Set up by James Clarke and Richard Emsley to promote their own work, and a forerunner of what was later named Ensemble Exposé, both relied for the identity of their ensemble sound on the pianism of Michael Finnissy, the voice of Josephine Nendick and in particular the playing of the flautist Nancy Ruffer and the oboist Christopher Redgate.[23] The following quotation, though, helps to illustrate the crowded field of contemporary classical music and the positioning of a particular place adjacent to experimental music and live electronics, and yet with a focus on composition for acoustic or 'live' instruments beyond the British modernist 'Pierrot ensembles' then dominated in Britain by the ensemble The Fires of London.[24] In an early concert promotion (shortly before Finnissy and Redgate joined), they summarised their position as follows:

> Although dedicated to the promotion of recent music, the group limits its programmes within this sphere to determinately notated pieces exploiting the sounds of 'live' performers, at the same time emphasising music which is new *not merely in terms of sheer novelty,* but in its development of techniques capable of carrying a continuously evolving heritage 'straight ahead' – *suoraan* – into the future.[25]

Not only did Suoraan position its activities against electronics, aleatoricism, improvisation and indeterminacy (at least as conventionally understood), it also avoided the kinds of collaborative production and devising that, in a different space, underpinned the working out of Steve Reich's large ensemble pieces *Drumming* and *Music for Eighteen Musicians.*[26] Working instead to move along in the modernist tradition, Emsley, Clarke and others produced scores for specialist soloists and new ensembles – some who served as advocates – and in some cases for generalist, and typically larger, orchestras. They were, in this sense, very much 'young composers' that organisations in the contemporary classical-music world, and especially its performing

22 Førisdal 2015.
23 Michael Finnissy and Christopher Redgate joined in 1980, following the ensemble's first four concerts.
24 Dromey 2012.
25 Suoraan 1979. My thanks to Richard Emsley for sharing his personal collection of Suoraan materials.
26 Nickleson 2017.

groups and publishers, could (in theory) get behind (though they often did not): while challenging on an aesthetic level for many performers and critics, what became known as the New Complexity was not at all complicated ontologically, which was surely one key factor in determining its continued and outsized influence as an idea in histories of postwar music.

The idea of a grouping probably has its roots in a 1975 concert at the Festival of Contemporary Arts in Royan, France, where, supported and promoted by the Belgian musicologist Harry Halbreich, Ferneyhough's *Transit* and Finnissy's piece *World* were performed together by the London Sinfonietta. In a sign of a somewhat unequal level of art-world support and recognition between Ferneyhough and Finnissy, it seems telling in retrospect that whereas *World* (which the Sinfonietta commissioned) was performed in October 1977 at a BBC College Concert under the radar of most critics, the Sinfonietta instead chose *Transit* (which was mostly composed without a commission in place) to open its tenth anniversary season in November 1977. In these early stages of British reception, the recurrent discursive figure is the unperformed composer, 'performed abroad more often than at home', a trope which would be routinely wheeled out, so to speak, in response to all of the subsequent composers associated with New Complexity, with some justification.[27] In January 1977, for example, Potter reviewed a first performance of Michael Finnissy's *Pathways of Sun and Stars,* given by Boulez and the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Round House in London, remarking that:

> We don't hear much of this 30-year-old English composer in this country: like Brian Ferneyhough (with whom he's often been confused) he's found that his complex, 'European'-influenced style goes down better in Europe. This piece wasn't overcomplicated, though; in fact it was rather beautiful in parts.[28]

While this exile trope has framed just about every public response to Ferneyhough in Britain ever since (it was still prominent, for example, at the BBC Total Immersion weekend dedicated to his music in 2011), by 1979, when Suoraan gave its first concert, it was no longer possible to talk literally about unperformed composers in the case of Finnissy and Ferneyhough. Both composers had received at least two orchestral performances, including one each from the BBC and the London Sinfonietta; a special issue of *Contact* had been dedicated to Ferneyhough's music; Decca had released its 1978 recording of *Transit;* and Finnissy had signed a contract, admittedly short-lived, with Universal Edition, unfortunately just before the publisher embarked on a process to reduce the number of younger composers on its books.

Wary in any case of unfavourable and misleading likenesses, as early as 1976, during correspondence related to the first BBC performances of his music, Finnissy was keen to point out in a letter to the corporation's head of contemporary music, Stephen Plaistow, that despite sharing a reputation as "unperformed composers" both he and Ferneyhough would welcome "a bill of divorcement".[29] But Ferneyhough and Finnissy continued to be viewed as kindred spirits within the classical music world at the turn of the 1980s and beyond. In the most striking example, the London Sinfonietta commissioned Finnissy's piece *Alongside*, partly on the recommendation of Elliott Carter, only after it became clear that Ferneyhough was unable to complete the first instalment of *Carceri d'Invenzione* in time for 1980.[30] *Alongside* was given its notoriously terrible first performance as part of that orchestra's strategy to segment its audience

27 Hawkins 2010; as it relates to Ferneyhough specifically, this is set out in Hawkins 2020.
28 Potter 1977, p. 29.
29 Finnissy 1976.
30 Finnissy 2008.

between exclusive concerts of postwar repertoire for smaller, specialist audiences in smaller venues, and more conventional, thematic series and portraits spanning a broader range of music from the twentieth century and before, a process paralleled almost exactly by two books on modern music by Paul Griffiths, one on music up to Boulez and another on music after him.[31] When *Carceri d'Invenzione I* was completed and performed in the Sinfonietta's next instalment of its specialist postwar series in 1982, it was received much more favourably by the British critics than Finnissy's *Alongside* had been two years previously, a turn of events that, even allowing for differences of taste, and along with the situation at Universal Edition, left a lasting, perhaps even traumatic impact on Finnissy's relationship with key sources of support and recognition at the heart of the contemporary music establishment in Britain.[32]

However, some sympathetic commentators did remark upon the differences that existed between Ferneyhough and Finnissy as composers in ways that did not merely elevate Ferneyhough to the level of exiled genius and dismiss Finnissy as merely hard work: this can be found after *English Country-Tunes,* as early as the account of Finnissy's shift away from European modernism in "Notes from a Native Alien" by Paul Driver in *The Guardian* in 1980, who notes that:

> The audacious, lofty modernism of Finnissy's earlier scores quickly won them a high reputation at such festivals as Royan, Donaueschingen, and Graz where qualities repugnant to British audiences – and supposedly shared by Brian Ferneyhough, with whom Finnissy is eternally linked – were readily valued. But while Ferneyhough has gladly accepted the welcoming bosom abroad and opted to live permanently in Germany, Finnissy became increasingly unhappy about his divorce from native culture, to the extent in fact of introducing a palpable English folk-song element in his music.[33]

There is more to this story than is possible to elaborate here, but from the point of view of discourse, the key point is that differences at compositional and geographical levels were frequently elided or confused to suit the perspective of the writer, which ultimately only served to reinforce their links. In the grouping presented by Richard Toop in his infamous 1988 article "Four Facets of 'The New Complexity'", Ferneyhough was explicitly excluded because the article focused on those composers living in Britain, though by this stage Toop was not interested in drawing out explicit points of similarity or influence between any of the composers mentioned, a form of disavowal that has continued since.[34] Indeed, pulling both the compositional and geographical differences together, when undertaking interviews that underpin this research, Richard Emsley and Roger Redgate were especially direct on these points, with Emsley remarking that:

> I don't think the two words, "new" and "complexity" are very helpful at all. But the sheer fact that there is a label pointing to certain figures … yes, there is … there was a certain grouping going on at that time, even if it was a loose one. I think … well at the time I was leaving university, coming to London; there was a sort of Ferneyhough, Finnissy, you know, those were the – for me and people who thought like me – two very interesting figures. […] But of course with Finnissy and Ferneyhough, it didn't take long for people to realise that they're not at all close as composers. They knew each other, they were good friends; maybe it was just because they were both so dis-

31 Griffiths 1978 and 1981. The impact of both books has recently been discussed vis-à-vis minimalist music in Levaux 2020.

32 Hawkins 2019.

33 Driver 1980, p. 8.

34 Toop 1988.

> tinct from everything else that was going on; they were both very active in Europe – Brian lived in Europe. But they were a definite sort of beacon and I think the other ones, the slightly younger ones fell into … well, they fell under the influence to a certain extent. I know James Dillon was very interested in Michael's work around about the late seventies and so was Chris Dench; James Clarke was very interested and very influenced by [Finnissy] – so was I. James Erber and Roger Redgate both studied with Ferneyhough so they would fall more naturally under his influence. That set up this sort of loose grouping of composers who all knew each other and all of whom had been influenced by either Ferneyhough or Finnissy or both.[35]

That such nuances sometimes get lost within a much wider field of contemporary music practice is unsurprising. And given that Suoraan was a composer-led ensemble in which Finnissy featured as a performer and which promoted work by Ferneyhough, Finnissy and the younger names mentioned above (alongside works by John Cage, Morton Feldman and especially Iannis Xenakis), it is even less surprising that the *idea* of a grouping and the name New Complexity starts to take shape in British music criticism (though not *only* in Britain) with the reception of an informal first concert by this ensemble, performed prior to the group's official debut on 22 January 1979 at the Wigmore Hall, London.

This informal concert took place at Goldsmiths College, also in London, and was made possible because Potter introduced the ensemble to the music department at Goldsmiths where he worked. Although he was unable to attend the concert itself, he was working on Ferneyhough's music, published later that year in *Contact*, and was in the midst of doctoral research at the University of York researching new approaches to musical notation in the New York experimental scene as explored in the 1970s by Michael Nyman.[36] Potter was not, as it were, disinterested in the music and position that Suoraan had adopted. It seems probable, too, that he had already carefully noted the promotional literature cited above, where Suoraan explicitly positioned itself as part of "a continuously evolving heritage 'straight ahead' – *suoraan* – into the future". In a preview of the Suoraan debut concert, published for his shorter, new music slot in *Classical Music* magazine (and thus for a broader public than read *Contact*), Potter *almost* makes explicit the lineage and groupings to which Clarke and Emsley allude only generally:

> [T]he group's aims incline, it would seem, to the presentation of works tending to represent the 'heavier' aspects of the European avant-garde and also those which, like, I think, their own compositions, have connections with the beginnings of a movement which, *though broadly based and hardly a 'school'*, could be identified as a 'back-to-full-and-highly-complex-notation-but-perhaps-with-greater-concern-for-harmonic-organisation' lobby. […] a heavy but interesting event.[37]

The use of the term "New Complexity" was present here in all but name, and through the next few years the concerts by Suoraan were significant in focusing their sound around the unapologetic directness and 'heaviness' of Finnissy and Xenakis in particular; meanwhile the critical responses were significant in reproducing a narrow range of tropes, throughout 1980 and 1981, with an emphasis on "fearsome complexity" and "aggressive and forceful works", as well as the occasionally openly hostile piece, such as a review by Meirion Bowen. Even if we acknowledge

35 Emsley 2008; Redgate 2008. A snapshot of Roger Redgate's perspective, amongst others, is cited in Fitch 2014, p. 36.

36 Potter et al. 1979. My thanks to Keith Potter for his precise recollections on the timeline here.

37 Potter 1979, p. 9 [emphasis added]. (Until September 1978 when the move was made to fortnightly publication, the title was *Classical Music Weekly.* This became *Classical Music and Record Reviews* for a short time before a shift to the more widely known *Classical Music*. I use the latter throughout.)

that it may well have been an uneven performance, and of music he disliked, in its belittling attempt at parody it is neither a testament to critical integrity nor style.[38]

Potter was an important figure in developing the idea, but he was not alone, with established and emerging critics, including the influential pen of Paul Griffiths, writing in a range of daily newspapers, magazines such as *Music and Musicians* and scholarly journals such as *Tempo.* In 1980, though, the composers James Dillon and Chris Dench received first performances from the London Sinfonietta, from Suoraan, and in solo piano recitals by Finnissy at the British Music Information Centre, all of which, when taken together, forms an important development in the emergence of a grouping, and will form the subject for much greater micro-historical enquiry elsewhere. Suffice to say that, in July that year, again in *Classical Music* magazine, Potter observed of Chris Dench that the composer had "started to find his own individual path in that very difficult area, full of pitfalls for composer, performer and listener, which has been charted most familiarly in this country so far, and *in their own very different way,* by Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy."[39] And although no written record exists to verify it, Potter's reporting also lends support to the claim made by James Dillon, retold to others and in my own interview, that the first time he heard the term "New Complexity" was on 19 October 1980 (at the first London performance of *Once Upon a Time*), when, according to Dillon, the composer Nigel Osborne, speaking from the concert platform on behalf of the SPNM, suggested that there was "a new complexity in the air".[40]

What the SPNM archives reveal more concretely, as was the case in the promotional activity that took place on behalf of Brian Ferneyhough in London in 1977, is the concerted efforts of important individuals behind the scenes to ensure that the press turned up to their events and had something exciting to discuss. For the London Sinfonietta performance and public rehearsal of Dench's piece *Kinjiki,* promoted by the SPNM on 9 November 1980, the SPNM's youthful and newly empowered administrator Roderick Lakin wrote a press release (most likely sent out before the event featuring Dillon on 19 October) in which he claimed that:

> Chris Dench is in the vanguard of a new generation of radical young composers following in the footsteps of the *bête noires* of British contemporary music, Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy. Chris Dench's music is of transcendental technical difficulty; uncompromising and provocative.[41]

Unsurprisingly, when responding to *Kinjiki,* Potter made the following remarks, which in the use of the word "representative" is significant for how we conceptualise an emergent grouping in the broader context of the crisis of new music:

> Two pieces last month stood out on account of their variously disturbing natures. If Chris Dench's *Kinjiki* […] and Roger Smalley's *Konzertstück* did nothing else, they certainly demonstrated two highly opposed *but equally representative* approaches to the problems of composing in the 1980s.[42]

By reporting events in this way, Potter would become an important figure, not least of all because *Contact* would later publish numerous articles and reports by the Australian musicologist Richard Toop including his "Four Facets" essay, in which the explicit positioning of New Complexity *relative to other compositional tendencies* is the primary reason for its use as a term.

38 Griffiths 1980, p. 13; Cole 1981, p. 7; Bowen 1980.
39 Potter 1980a, p. 16 [emphasis added].
40 Dillon 2008. Osborne also confirmed this in conversation at the University of Edinburgh, October 2012.
41 Lakin 1980.
42 Potter 1980b, p. 25 [emphasis added].

Dispatches from Darmstadt (and elsewhere)

To the best of my knowledge, the name New Complexity first appears in a *British* publication two years later in 1982, after Dillon in particular had started to garner a reputation and found a publisher in Edition Peters. And again Potter is the author, and again he writes not in *Contact* but in *Classical Music.* As if to prove the point that "there is much more to be gained by tapping into […] slippage and play than in constructing a seemingly stable etymology that subtly mystifies",[43] this early occurrence of New Complexity appears tucked away in a lengthy discussion of Oliver Knussen's first opera *Where the Wild Things Are,* where Potter explores Knussen's relationship with tonality and neo-romanticism, arguing that the composer's interest in "'avant-garde' attitudes should not be underestimated". The passage is worth quoting in full as a result:

> Knussen can be said to have a good deal in common with some other composers of his age (he is 30 this year) who have reacted against the kinds of 'avant-garde' music that composers a generation older were writing in the 1950s and 1960s and, in at least a limited sense, 'gone back' in search of earlier values. Here, though, I am thinking not so much of the West Germans like Wolfgang Rihm and Detlev Müller-Siemens who have given the 'neo-Romantic' label much voguish currency in recent years, but Knussen's English colleagues: some still pretty flamboyant about their Romanticism, such as Robin Holloway, others perhaps more cautious, like George Nicholson and Nigel Osborne.
>
> At the same time, the extent to which the 'proportion, weight and seriousness' side of Knussen relates to more apparently 'avant-garde' attitudes should not be underestimated. The sophisticated, serially and modally-derived pitch system which he evolved during the composition of the Third Symphony is one aspect of this. Another is the notion of 'instrumental characterisation' which in Knussen's case can be related not only to the 'idiomatic' concern I mentioned earlier, but also to the ideas of Elliott Carter, a particular enthusiasm of his. In this sense Knussen has things in common with a very different group of English composers, who represent what might crudely be called the New Complexity: Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy, James Dillon and Chris Dench.[44]

It is significant that Potter mentions New Complexity while attempting to map out new neo-romantic tendencies in Britain, as distinct from Germany. This was a time when there was much promotion of 'the new generation of British composers' in London, not only by the London Sinfonietta (which had to switch focus to British music after its ambitions to work in France were thwarted by the emergence of Ensemble Intercontemporain after 1976), but also by the SPNM and the British Music Information Centre. All were run by relatively young male administrators, in Michael Vyner, Roderick Lakin and Roger Wright, respectively; the last two, in particular, were determined to reinvigorate their organisations by reorienting them towards the forefront of new music in Britain, as the SPNM example above suggests.[45] More broadly, Potter's British comparison involves a process of mapping which leads, by the end of the 1980s, to New Complexity functioning as a cipher for a very late modernism in the wrong place (Britain) at the wrong time (postmodernism), with a range of tropes which, when taken together, effectively figure the composers as marginal and un-British.

43 Harding 2013, p. 4.
44 Potter 1982, p. 17.
45 See Hawkins 2019.

Such discursive conceits operated regardless of whether a particular writer was an advocate or a detractor and, more importantly, in part because of the confusion they elided when transforming international circulations of music and connections into national and local debates, as we will see in both this and the subsequent section. *Contact* is a rich source of evidence in this context because of its record of detailed reports of music festivals and events in the UK and across Continental Europe, written by a range of figures committed to the cause, many of whom were already going to the events for their day jobs as music publishers, writers or young composers. These 'dispatches', to borrow a word from political diplomacy, created the sense of a genuinely international outlook within the narrower social space represented by the international contemporary music festival; by contrast, the local and national coverage in *Contact,* which was considerable, spanned a much wider array of musical activities, creative practices and social spaces.

Rather than focus on its reporting of the Darmstadt summer courses in the 1980s, interesting and important as it is, if we turn instead to the pages of *Contact* in autumn 1984 we nevertheless find echoes of Darmstadt's influence: first, in the dominance of Toop specifically, who contributed no less than three festival reports and an original article to the issue; secondly, and moreover, in the kinds of oppositions to simplicity and romanticism that parallel the Knussen example above as well as, in a different way, the hullabaloo underway in New York through the Horizons festivals on the New Romanticism in 1983 and 1984.[46] For example, in a review of Musica '83 in Strasbourg, Graham Hayter, at that time the contemporary music manager representing both Ferneyhough and Dillon for Edition Peters in London, noted that the new festival in France included music that represented "the first explicit manifestation of the current Franco-Italian axis, which seems to have developed in direct opposition to the 'new simplicity' and neoromantic forces prevalent in Austro-German culture."[47] Meanwhile, of the younger composers at Donaueschingen in 1983, Toop reported that "two were avowed neoromantics: von Bose (strange how many representatives of the 'new inwardness' seem to have aristocratic surnames) and Krebs. I must confess to a certain aversion from the whole neoromantic school".[48] Though banal, I would argue that these snippets are nevertheless insightful, precisely because, as with the Knussen example above, they are seemingly irrelevant in terms of the events covered: they demonstrate how superficially similar terminology was used to signify different compositional tendencies and geographical scenes in a clear example of the lasting relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the cultural field and the exchange of capital. Here, there is a slippage between 'post-serial' approaches to neo-romanticism at one level and post-experimental examples of musical minimalism at another, each with interesting and at times perplexing points of disjuncture that deserve extended discussion in their own right, but which clearly relate to the 1980s factionalism that was cultivated at Darmstadt.[49]

A key question in terms of the resulting historiography is the positioning of simplicity as the incumbent force in new music, and complexity as the disrupter; whether or not this position is justified in terms of the allocation of funding and prestige, within a diachronic view it is partially misleading: both Rihm and Ferneyhough emerged more or less in parallel, and in response to shared problematics. On the other hand, the emergence of discourses and groupings did largely unfold in this order and with a slight gap between them, but it is easy to exag-

46 See Robin 2021.
47 Hayter 1984, p. 36.
48 Toop 1984, p. 40.
49 Iddon 2024, pp. 80–82.

gerate this point and lose sight of the feedback loop and interconnections within the overarching discourse of new music.[50] By 1987, certainly, the oppositions in Toop's mind had hardened considerably. As Ferneyhough was about to be featured at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival that year, Toop's essay on the *Carceri* cycle suggests it was written alongside his more famous "Four Facets" (which was published in spring 1988 but written the year before). He begins his Ferneyhough essay by explaining the composer's success and notoriety as follows:

> today, as at any other time, to be suspected of success is to attract resentment and scepticism. Besides, given that the catchwords of the late 1970s – 'New Simplicity', 'New Romanticism', etc – mainly led in a direction quintessentially opposed to Ferneyhough's modernist transcendentalism, resistance was inevitable. […] it may be that in these rather capitulationist times, his refusal to recant any of his early precepts […] has won him a certain grudging respect.[51]

In "Four Facets", Toop went a step further, however, and lumped all forms of simplicity and romanticism together: with tongue at least partly in cheek, he provocatively provided his neologism "New Capitulationism" as the catchword of all catchwords (serialism notwithstanding), and the one necessary to position his account of the New Complexity in a positive, which is also to say marginalised, position within British and Continental new music circles alike.[52]

As discussed above, although Ferneyhough was not included in "Four Facets" owing to its focus on composers living in Britain, Ferneyhough's position alongside Finnissy is clearly crucial in the grouping of names that Toop settled on, one which had already been set out by Potter in 1982, and which has subsequently been repeated *ad nauseam*.

> For the last ten years his [Ferneyhough's] influence on younger composers has been considerable, both directly and indirectly: directly, through Ferneyhough's activity as a much sought-after composition teacher (notably, until recently, at the Freiburg Musikhochschule), while together with Michael Finnissy he has been the figurehead for a whole generation of younger British composers including James Dillon, Chris Dench and Richard Barrett, even though their music differs from his in some fairly essential respects.[53]

'A whole generation' was hyperbole, to say the least; and while he could have listed students such as Klaus K. Hübler and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf explicitly, the British dynamic was a centrally important factor in Toop's attempts to position Ferneyhough, Finnissy and complexity more broadly as an attack on Darmstadt itself, a point completely absent in most Anglophone scholarship, where New Complexity and Darmstadt are viewed as synonymous, but one made explicit in the framing of "Four Facets".[54]

The rest, as they say, is history: specifically, a history of the rise of postmodernism, a key part of which is a canonical account of postwar music in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the lateness of postmodern discourse in music circles belied a more complex history,[55] it is important to note that it was only as the 1990s came into view that the term postmodernism was routinely used by British music critics. Other oft-cited examples of the term postmodernism in contemporary music discourse include, in Britain, Robin Holloway's essay "Modernism and

50 The symposium "Zur 'Neuen Einfachheit' in der Musik" was held at the University of Graz, Austria, 11–13 October 1979. See Kolleritsch 1981b, p. 7.
51 Toop 1987, p. 624.
52 Toop 1988, p. 4.
53 Toop 1987, p. 624.
54 The point is also made by Ian Pace in relation to Mahnkopf's later writings in Pace 2015, p. 34.
55 Valiquet 2024.

After", published in 1989, and, elsewhere, the first issue, edited by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, of the contemporary-music journal *Circuit* in Canada published in 1990.[56] Famously, none of these publications, nor those that followed, helped to provide answers to the intractable problems of definition that are alluded to above in mapping out the oppositions against which New Complexity made sense.

But coherence is not a precondition of influence where musical reception and historiography is concerned. If anything, it is a hindrance. Given that free online access to *Contact* has only recently been established with a digital archive, and given the limited circulation of *Contact* in the first place, it is highly doubtful that most of the people who have used the term New Complexity over the years have ever read "Four Facets". Nevertheless, its notoriety is not without some foundation: Christopher Fox recalls that "[w]e sold more copies of that issue than any other, which was perhaps just as well as the scale of Richard's article meant that it had double the normal number of pages."[57] Certainly, within the smaller world of music academia or new music, including meetings in the US, Europe and Australia, the influence of Toop's essays has indeed been subject to numerous responses and reflections, including a roll-call of publications in *Perspectives of New Music* in the early 1990s which, in a further stage of development, are repeated in full in the footnotes and reflections of more than one revisionist account published since 2000.[58] That paper trail, as it were, and its repetition, also clearly informed the barbed account provided by Richard Taruskin in his final chapter of the *Oxford History of Western Music,* set against the conventional wisdom that sees the popularity of (post)minimalist tendencies in new music as the ultimate symbol of modernist defeat.[59] After "Four Facets", then, and as a result of the debate that followed, the invention and history of postwar music was secured and the grouping and name which started in 1980 became what Christoph Levaux, borrowing from Bruno Latour, has called a 'fact' of music history.[60]

(For and) Against intellectual complexity in music

The messiness was there from the beginning, if indeed one can still talk of beginnings and endings, and in this respect my final snapshot returns to this interesting period of emergence at the turn of the 1980s, and to an event so obscure that not even *Contact* covered it. It is 1977, in fact, long before the notion of a New Complexity grouping was secured, and the English composers Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy are invited to appear at a conference in West Berlin, probably at the recommendation of Harry Halbreich, where a number of composers from across the world congregate at the metaphorical graveside of serial music to present papers at a conference to discuss, in essence, the late-seventies Cologne School and the broader influence of American minimalism. The conference was called "The New Simplicity in Contemporary Music", and was chaired by the enthusiastic Ferneyhough advocate and Schoenberg devotee, the *Observer* critic Peter Heyworth, hardly a neutral voice or obvious choice given the conference theme.

The venue in West Berlin is significant because the event was hosted by the then-recently opened European outpost of the Aspen Institute, an American-funded instrument of transatlantic, Cold-War era soft-power diplomacy. It was established and run by Shepard Stone, the

56 Holloway 2001; Nattiez 1990.
57 Fox et al. 2018, p. 81.
58 To the examples from Darbon 2008, Duncan 2010a/b and Pace 2015, one can add Cavallotti 2006.
59 Taruskin 2010, pp. 475f.
60 Levaux 2020.

American diplomat who had worked for the Ford Foundation in the 1960s in West Germany and then, less successfully, in Paris, at the European headquarters of the International Association for Cultural Freedom, the successor to the Congress for Cultural Freedom.[61] From the point of view of the Aspen Institute, it seems likely that the crucial thing was not that 'the New Simplicity' was so named, nor what the music sounded like, but rather the cultural dialogue that could be cultivated by inviting composers from 10 different countries, including the USSR, Japan and Iran, to discuss it. The transatlantic dimension of experimental music, especially for those in West Germany and the USA, was then most clearly symbolised by the activities taking place in Cologne and in New York, an exchange and geography encapsulated by many of the interviews conducted in Walter Zimmermann's book *Desert Plants* published the previous year.[62]

But London, and by extension English musical culture, is an important third space in the story of this Aspen conference, too; clearly, Zimmermann was not the only European chronicler of American experimentalism associated with the event – and Michael Nyman was actually there. Finnissy recalls that:

> Brian and I were invited to go on this conference on 'die Neue Einfachheit' – 'the New Simplicity' – which is something that Cologne Radio had promoted. It was to do mainly with a group of composers centred around Walter Zimmermann. It was a reaction against serialism, much inspired by American Minimalism and some among them knew the American minimalist composers. […] A very motley crew of people were invited to this conference: Brian and I went, Steve Reich went, Peter Michael Hamel. Rodion Shchedrin represented the USSR. […] I forget who else. It was just an appalling mess, anyway. We all sat around and discussed what we were writing actually. We didn't talk very much about 'die Neue Einfachheit' because nobody really knew what it was and interestingly enough I don't think they invited Walter Zimmermann, or perhaps he'd refused to go. And there were papers presented … I didn't present a paper; I don't know whether the papers are extant? I don't know if the Berlin branch is still going even? I can't remember who organised it. I was in the throes of writing *English Country-Tunes* as it happens, which is hardly a major representation of 'die Neue Einfachheit-ism'. But it was one way to spend a few days in the summer.[63]

A 1977 report on the conference published in the international journal *The World of Music* supports Finnissy's recollection about the unsurprising lack of clarity and agreement on the meaning of the term "New Simplicity", and from its contents, we can see why if we add to the names provided by Finnissy, and list Alexander Goehr, Edward Cowie, Ton de Leeuw, Wolfgang Rihm, Joji Yuasa, Jan W. Morthenson and Siegfried Palm among other participants. John Evarts, its American author (and a central figure in the administration of new music in postwar West Germany),[64] reports that Heyworth, in the chair, "asked which composers present allowed themselves to be accepted as representatives of The New Simplicity. None did."[65] Not long after, the vagueness of the term, its meaning(s) in German-speaking countries especially, and the range of music presented in 1977 by Cologne Radio (seven episodes of its series "Musik der Zeit") are also mentioned by Otto Kolleritsch, writing in 1981, when he emphasises the differences between American minimalism and German-based neo-romanticism.[66]

61 Berghahn 2001.
62 Zimmermann 1976.
63 Finnissy 2008.
64 See Pace 2018.
65 Evarts 1977, p. 191.
66 Kolleritsch 1981c, p. 11.

The lack of direction or consensus was certainly an issue for Nyman, who remembers that he and Steve Reich were the only legitimate composers of the New Simplicity to attend.[67] Unsurprisingly, then, given the account and arguments presented in his 1974 book *Experimental Music* and in his other post-Reich writings as a critic, Nyman's contribution to the Aspen conference was less circumspect, as Pwyll Ap Siôn has noted in his editorial introduction to Nyman's writings.[68] Later published in the magazine *October* in 1980, in one of his last pieces of criticism, with the title "Against Intellectual Complexity in Music", Nyman asserts an account of simplicity through an ontological rather than descriptive lens, one that he suggested is better understood by contrasting objectivity with subjectivity. The result, as is well known, was that, for Nyman the New Simplicity was, at root, Feldman and Cage, not Karlheinz Stockhausen, and from there the new emphasis on duration and process in La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs and himself; true simplicity was about "unfixing relationships"; it was experimental, non-linear, and completely anathema to the description of simplicity as it can exist in musical surface, design or moments. He writes:

> Simplicity is an absolute, a constant, not part of a scale of values, textures, techniques, dramatic structure, or whatever, spanning the entire gamut from absolute simplicity to frightening (and usually self-defeating) complexity. Nor are there moments of greater or lesser simplicity during a work, unless they result naturally from the chosen process […].[69]

Furthermore, according to Ap Siôn, "Nyman recalls that all the composers present (apart from Reich and himself) were in fact representatives of the so-called 'New Complexity' movement."[70] Clearly, Nyman's recollection must have been informed by the discourse that subsequently emerged: neither the idea nor the details of the New Complexity as subsequently developed by Potter or Toop appeared in Nyman's piece, and as the timeline above has shown they could not have done so. From both the Evarts report and from a version of the Aspen paper held in the Reich archives in Basel, it isn't clear that Nyman knew either Ferneyhough or Finnissy before he visited Berlin that summer: his contribution looked back and targeted Stockhausen, not forwards, and was originally titled "The Reaction to the Dominance of Intellectual Complexity in Music as Manifested, for example, in Serial Music".[71] We can fairly assume therefore that it was the 'motley crew of people' in attendance that caused Nyman to query the purpose of the meeting when, as is documented in the handwritten annotations on the draft typewritten script, he re-jigged his opening comments to highlight how, in his view, the first day of the Aspen event was largely a distraction from the subject at hand. Well, he hadn't heard anything yet.

There is no record of Ferneyhough's contributions in the archives at Basel, but we know from the Evarts report that he later presented a recording of *Time and Motion Study III* (1974) for 16 solo voices with percussion and electronic amplification, and "explained that […] the performer must first de-construct then reconstruct a work". Of *TMS III* Evarts only observed dryly, that: "it was not simple".[72] Shortly after Aspen, in 1978, Ferneyhough wrote "Aspects of Notational and Compositional Practice", which was likely given at Darmstadt where he was invited to participate as one of the senior composers alongside Lachenmann.[73] He makes a great play

67 Ap Siôn 2016, p. 14, fn 59.
68 Ibid., pp. 7–9.
69 Nyman 1980, p. 347.
70 Ap Siôn 2016, p. 14, fn 59.
71 I wish to thank Pwyll ap Siôn for sharing these important details with me.
72 Evarts 1977, p. 194.
73 Iddon 2024, p. 80.

there on the need to strive for an ultimately impossible unity, one that incorporates notation as a parameter of the unified work. And it is the theme of unity which leads to the focused use of the term complexity in Ferneyhough's essay, where he writes that "it seems to me that one of the principal characteristics of an authentic work consists in exactly this: to recognize the endless continuum of complexity uniting all things."[74]

That the question is indeterminacy and the answer is complexity becomes clearer with recourse to the draft programme notes for *Time and Motion Study I* for solo bass clarinet, first performed by Harry Sparnaay at Royan Festival in 1977. Contemporaneous with the 1978 "Aspects" essay, and likely heard at Aspen in 1977, the various draft versions of the programme notes for *TMS I*, also held by the Paul Sacher Foundation and by Edition Peters in London, show Ferneyhough making more or less direct criticism of the fashion, as he saw it, for mid-sixties aleatoricism. In a neater, two-page draft version that bears the most resemblance to the early published programme notes for *TMS I,* he is particularly disparaging of the idea that aleatoricism is the only or even the best way for performers to participate actively in decision-making: "The blandly-made assertion (frequent some few years ago) that only aleatoric or improvisational ways of composition are in a position to offer a significant co-productive role in the performer seems to me to miss the point very neatly." In a previous one-page draft version also held in Basel, he writes:

> [*TMS I*] is one of several compositions in which I set out to undermine, on the one hand, the beautiful deception of the "perfect performance" (in any case a not very useful fiction) on the other the often-made assertion that only in music based upon improvisatory or aleatory principles is a significant co-productive role for the performer possible. This bland ideological assertion – typical for the mid '60's – was founded upon highly questionable formal and esthetic assumptions. In a complicated (and complex) situation, only complex (if not always complicated) means are appropriate. In the sense of the term used by Theodor W. Adorno, "authentic" music must needs [sic] to be self-reflective, self-critical; the central problem for me is the reconciliation of these demands with the drive towards closed, cogent *forms* which, in all other respects, are open.[75]

Strikingly, the penultimate sentence on the necessity of complexity is partially deleted in the neater draft, which then ends abruptly before the Adorno reference, though the sentence does appear in a published English-language note for the performance at the Musica Nova festival in Glasgow in 1979.[76] In any case, perhaps one of the reasons why Nyman remembers that he and Reich were ambushed by exponents of the New Complexity was the presence of Ferneyhough, and specifically when preoccupied with the *Time and Motion Study* sequence: quite apart from the music, no doubt the elaborate style of Ferneyhough's verbal discourse, his forthright, Adornian commitment to complexity and subjectivity in the mediation of world and work, and his rejection of Cage and indeterminacy in particular, must have struck Nyman as provocative.

These responses to indeterminacy in the 1960s are not, however, especially prominent in the accounts offered by Toop after 1980, although the wider 'ethics' of complexity ("closed, cogent forms which, in all other respects, are open") certainly remain crucial in this important, if subtle pivot point. To talk of 'ethics' is to use a conceptualisation of Ferneyhough's commit-

74 Ferneyhough 1995, p. 2.

75 Ferneyhough 1977 [original emphasis].

76 Ferneyhough 1979. Scans of programme notes and reviews held by Ferneyhough's publisher were shared with me by Marc Dooley, formerly at Edition Peters in London, to whom I am grateful.

ment to autonomy that takes centre stage in a 1987 essay by Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, in which he positions Ferneyhough as the saviour of new music in the face of postmodernism – an argument he would extend and elaborate in the years that followed.[77] Indeed, for all those writing on Ferneyhough at the end of the 1980s, the freedom to, as it were, be expressive in neo-romanticism, rather than the imperative to reject expression entirely in experimentalism, is the primary object of scrutiny; unsurprisingly, this is a pattern that parallels the shift that Ferneyhough himself makes compositionally and in his writings in the early 1980s, away from questions of freedom and control in indeterminate music (a response to the late 1960s in London) towards questions of form and style, figure and gesture (a response to the late 1970s in Germany). In fact, for Toop specifically, both the New Romanticism and the New Simplicity were two sides of a smaller coin: he viewed both as specifically 'post-Stockhausen' Germanic developments of the 1970s that sought a non-modernist past.[78] And, following my earlier outline of *Contact* after the mixed avant-garde, the focus on romanticism and freedom of expression is surely a reflection of a more general and complex cultural shift from the 1960s avant-garde to 1980s postwar contemporary classical music, with parallels that can be drawn with the post-serial factionalism at Darmstadt alluded to above and the popularisation and fragmentation of post-minimalism globally.

In this context, perhaps it is less surprising, if ironic, that we find links between Nyman's attempt to move beyond a descriptive approach to simplicity and, as stated a decade later, Finnissy's rejection of the label complexity, a comparison which I find striking:

> It horrifies me that people say the music is complex. It isn't, except in a very superficial detailed kind of way. It's complex if you accept that human beings are complex, and that all art is complex. But to say that it's complex with the implication that somehow it's not 'refined' enough, or that somehow it should conform to the ideals of an 18th-century French garden – you know, geometric precision, economy of pitch-statement *à la* Webern: that's completely ridiculous. Hardly any music is like that […].[79]

But by this later stage, of course, no-one was listening, regardless of whether it was a Parnassian vision of "complexity uniting all things" or Finnissy's very different, anthropological and pluralistic response to the same question. Instead, surface recognition of relative simplicity and complexity was a significant factor in the labelling and organisation of contemporary music; an axiomatic commitment to simplicity or complexity as the ontological condition of music, or indeed life, only served to reinforce the oppositions, with notable exceptions. The avant-garde (dis)order established in the 1960s was truly over, and a logic of musical postmodernism had seized the day, even if nobody could agree on what it meant.

Conclusion

Set against the broader proliferation, fragmentation, marketisation and professionalisation of new music composition that took place internationally, my wider claim, here and in related publications, has been that to grapple with the emergence and discourse of New Complexity is to grapple with nothing less than the *invention* of postwar music. As with scholars who have examined the invention of early music in the twentieth century, to trace the emergence of a

77 Mahnkopf 1987.

78 Toop 1993, p. 54. The article was first published in German translation, as part of the complexity forum, in *MusikTexte,* see Toop 1990.

79 Finnissy, quoted as in Toop 1988, p. 5.

new complexity is always already to trace the emergence of an old complexity: a particular mode of public music history; a set of legitimising discourses that span scholarship, concert promotion and programming, publisher activities, recordings and music criticism.[80] And as Christophe Levaux has demonstrated in his study of minimalist historiography, a very specific view of postwar music began to take shape at the turn of the 1980s in Britain, with notable books (such as those by Paul Griffiths) on single composers and on twentieth-century music aimed at the general concertgoer – with some, as in the case of Nicholas Snowman's "The Contemporary Composer" series, directly linked to the London Sinfonietta's programming through personal and institutional connections.[81] Although the narrowness that this early account of 'postwar music' produced has been challenged in recent years, its influence in shaping the canon of twentieth-century music, and the primary terms of debate that sustained it, cannot be underestimated.

This is why, although serious people do not happily use the term New Complexity or advocate for its value as an indication of a coherent musical style, we nevertheless must acknowledge that the term has continued to be repeated as a useful shorthand in everyday pedagogies and bigger battles alike, from sophisticated explainer videos on YouTube to the withering pen of the late Richard Taruskin, cited above, perhaps the most famous amongst public detractors.[82] And as Duncan has highlighted, there was no bigger battle for music historians writing at the turn of the millennium than the battle for the soul of twentieth-century music, a history almost exclusively focused on art-music composition or the 'literate tradition'.[83] To the extent that either introductory or yet more accounts of late modernist irrelevance are required, this usually explains the reason for the continued circulation of the term long after its sell-by-date, Internet memes notwithstanding. But it is not, of course, the whole story.

A further, more precise point, is that that the term "New Complexity" emerges *in Britain* at the turn of the 1980s, *at the same time as* the summer schools that took place in Darmstadt between 1978 and 1982; for Martin Iddon, at least, these were formative events that he has characterised as "an institutionally sanctioned re-run of Darmstadt's greatest bust-ups".[84] And it was in part the presence of the younger British contingent in 1984 and 1986 that shaped and confirmed Toop's account, the ideas for which were clearly developed in London around 1980 by promoters and critics like Lakin and Potter, amongst others. This is not to dismiss the importance of "Four Facets"; on the contrary, alongside the volume of *Contrechamps* in 1987, cited above, Toop's essay catalysed, almost simultaneously, both the circulation of the term and a revisionist debate in which its legitimacy was roundly disavowed. Put another way, because of its repeated citations "Four Facets" is important historically: it served as both a beginning and an ending in the circulation of the New Complexity discourse, but one which, as Toop addressed in subsequent publications, obscured important differences and wider issues.[85] By the end of the 1980s, before most people had heard of it, New Complexity was already an anachronism and a problem, if not a problematic: a label that could only be used as a conference title when accompanied by a question mark.[86]

80 On early music, for example, see Leech-Wilkinson 2002.

81 E. g. Griffiths 1982.

82 For a video in which the 'paper trail' identified above feeds YouTube content, and a video with 87,750 views when cited, see Classical Nerd 2022.

83 Duncan 2010a.

84 Iddon 2024, p. 81.

85 Toop 1993, pp. 53f.

86 The conference and festival 'Complexity?' took place in Rotterdam, 8–10 March 1990, and Toop 1993 was presented as the introductory talk.

From question marks to issues around dominant groupings and the striking parallels in key years (1977 and 1987), there is much to be learned here in the parallel debates in recent work on musical minimalism. We might say that shared discursive structures of circulation, misunderstanding and disavowal are what is important when examining the many points of connection between music superficially at opposing ends of the spectrum. A further step in this research direction, then, will require trans-national analysis of reception discourses that is sensitive to the importance of oppositions in this overarching discursive space of contemporary classical music. This would help to better understand the ways in which ideas migrate and evolve between locations as they travel with specific composers, teachers, writers and performers within different institutional networks. For these reasons, it seems clear to me that the period between 1977 and 1987 is an important stretch of time for further research.

Within the historiography of minimalist music, too, debates about the reconstruction of musicological 'facts'[87] invite me to confront the limits of reconstruction in my own account of Toop's "Four Facets". However, in this case I would suggest that despite the dangers of post-hoc historiography there is much to be gained by presenting how, at a very specific point in recent history, the combination of existing discourses on simplicity and romanticism, and of two 'figureheads' as different and yet uncompromising as Michael Finnissy and Brian Ferneyhough, provided a discursive framework – off the peg, as it were – into which young, emerging composers could move or be placed – even before critics had heard their music. Indeed, compared to the minimalist case at least, post-hoc analysis in this case is not really the issue, since at a surface level the discourse almost predates the development of the music, and surely there can be no clearer example of postmodernism than this. In any case, the light that this shines on music in Britain (as opposed to Darmstadt) tends to be lost when the notoriety and citations of Toop's essay obscure the ten years that preceded it, which, as alluded to above, involves parallel and connected historiographical developments geographically that are part of a broader and vexed transition from a mixed avant-garde towards one in which competing styles become positions within (not beyond) the institutions of new music.

My approach has not sought to undermine the legitimacy of New Complexity despite its much-discussed limitations, nor to interrogate the discursive effects of denial and disavowal in the decades since, nor to consider music and musicians outside the conventional grouping who might also be considered 'complex'. Building on existing studies of the early British reception of Brian Ferneyhough and the advocacy and performances undertaken by Michael Finnissy, I have shown how these snapshots can, on the one hand, be read as part of a straightforward account of the emergence of complexity discourse and, on the other, as a window onto the nascent 'new music marketplace' in which, distinct from the US example, complexity was, for a short time at least, one valuable element of attempts to promote a vibrant, youthful, relevant and 'alive' world of contemporary composition in Britain.[88] That *Contact* folded in 1990 just as the idea of musical postmodernism was starting to move into the broadsheet newspapers and weekend supplements, suggests that the end of the 1960s may have lasted a good deal longer than most histories of music would permit, but that the period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s – the long 1980s – proved to be decisive in securing what remains a widely accepted account of postwar music and, as a result, a stubbornly persistent New Complexity.

87 Nickleson 2021.
88 Robin 2021.

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Roddy Hawkins *is a musicologist and Lecturer in Music at the University of Manchester. He has published essays on the British reception of Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy, and is co-editing a special issue for* Contemporary Music Review *on contemporary music ensembles and the space of classical music. He is currently writing further articles related to British new music institutions and the historiography of 1980s Britain, and a monograph project on the history of 'the young composer'. With Stephen Graham, he is co-author of* The Work of New Music, *forthcoming with CUP. Research interests: British music; postwar British history; music and politics; sociology of music; music criticism; music notation; contemporary music ensembles; new music institutions.*