

**Daniel Albright. *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xiv, 395 pp.**

*Reviewed by Ruth Longobardi*

In their introduction to *Modernism: 1890–1930*, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane acknowledge the inevitable limitations of studies on early twentieth-century literature: “Perhaps the most any account can offer,” they warn, “is a personal or at least partial version of an overwhelmingly complex phenomenon, an individual selection from the infinity of detail” (1991:21). Numerous other scholars have shared the conviction that Modernism should not be fixed within definitive parameters. The literary critic Linda Hutcheon, for example, describes the term Modernism as “a *culturally* limited and limiting label” (1980:2–3; italics in the original). Art historian Richard Sheppard devotes a chapter of his book on the European avant-garde to the problem of defining Modernism, which he understands as “a deeply and multiply fissured movement” (2000:5–6). And Jonathan Kramer warns against such reductions as “modernist vs. postmodernist” in the field of music. “Artistic movements,” he argues, “refuse to be reduced out of existence by critics who draw arbitrary distinctions” (1984:345).

Daniel Albright, author of *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, concludes his introduction with a similar sentiment:

The purpose of this book is not to argue a thesis concerning Modernism, or to delimit Modernism as a period, or to discuss the interaction of the various isms that both organize and perplex the history of twentieth-century art. (32)

On the contrary, Albright’s study addresses a single characteristic common to an assorted group of twentieth-century works: the unruly conduct of their media. In particular, he demonstrates that the interaction between music and text in music dramas of the modern period is unpredictable enough to justify extensive analysis. Albright’s unraveling of select works in the chapters that follow, and his simultaneous resistance to generalizations about Modernism, combine to produce a fascinating study. For musicologists, *Untwisting the Serpent* will be a welcome contribution to the literature on a repertory that has been relatively little explored.

Albright focuses, in large part, on the different degrees of unity, or

disunity, among the collaborating media of music drama. Appropriate to the study, therefore, is Albright's lengthy introduction on "the Laocoön problem," a transhistorical aesthetic debate concerning the proper topics and parameters for mimesis in the various arts. Central to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's early discussion in *Laokoon* (1766) are two artistic renderings—one in verse, the other in sculpture—of the priest Laocoön, who was put to death for prophesying doom to Troy. While in Virgil's *Aeneid* Laocoön is said to have let out a bellowing shriek upon his execution, an antique sculpture unearthed in 1506 depicts a serene priest tangled in the deathly coils of a large snake (hence the title of Albright's study). As Albright carefully recounts, Lessing concludes in *Laokoon* that the difference between depictions is owed to the protocols of the two media. On the one hand, wrote Lessing, the visual arts are properly confined to the decorum of space, showing no projection into time; since a climactic scream implies a less intense state to follow, it is unsuitable for representation in stone. The literary arts, on the other hand, are properly concerned with linear development through time and not static description; Virgil's inclusion of Laocoön's horrible clamor, says Lessing, is therefore entirely apropos.

As Albright goes on to explain, several scholars since Lessing, Albright included, have reevaluated the Laocoön problem in relation to the experimental works of more recent times. For Albright, the unique characteristics of twentieth-century musico-dramatic collaborations necessitate a more complex formulation of mimetic terms. One can no longer assume, in other words, that music and text are simply temporal media that together represent characters and events as they progress through time. The author rather proposes that many of these works either resist linear development in order to exhibit a unique vertical mimesis—that is, the media join together to represent the world of experience as a unified whole—or else separate from each other completely so that the text may develop through time while the music rejects mimesis altogether, projecting instead its own abstract materiality.

The twelve chapters that follow are organized around this unity/disunity dichotomy. Part 1, "Figures of Consonance among the Arts," explores works (including Stravinsky's *Renard*, Britten's *Curlew River*, and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*) whose media, according to Albright, join together at certain moments to represent the quintessential meaning of a work over and above its dramatic series of events. Part 2, "Figures of Dissonance among the Arts," explores several works (Satie's *Parade*, Antheil's *Ballet mécanique*, and Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, among others) whose media, Albright argues, refuse to cooperate as a mimetic whole, rejecting representation in order to revel in their own materiality; music, at these moments, acts as sheer sound. In these chapters, figures of consonance and

dissonance are the substance of Albright's analyses. Such figures are precise musical, literary, or multi-media units that engage in different degrees and types of representation. They allow the author to escape a simple tracking of musico-dramatic events in order to pursue less traditional mimetic issues.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the six chapters in part 1 addresses either a particular figure of consonance (hieroglyph or *gestus*<sup>2</sup>) or a particular genre (the ideogram, Noh theater, or the Villonaud) that, according to Albright, incorporates figures of consonance. The hieroglyph (chapter 1) is a figure used by one medium that assumes the properties of another medium. For example, Albright illustrates how a musical hieroglyph can function as a verbal message even when it is not attached to a text. The *gestus* (chapter 4) is normally a musical entity that suggests a meaningful physical movement (such as a shrug) but that may simultaneously embody the dramatic essence of a work (such as "spiritual acquiescence"). Albright's examples of *gestus*, most of which are extracted from the Weill/Brecht repertory, consist largely of musical motives that the author tags with extramusical identities, including one that acts as "organ-grinder" and others that represent "lamentation," "boogie-woogie," or "the proscenium arch itself."

These two chapters address the capacity of certain media to signify beyond a dramatic sequence of events, and they define the tools (or figures) by which they can do so. If Albright's methodology for identifying such figures is never completely explained, and if it is difficult at times to tell one type of figure from another, the remaining chapters in part 1 allow the reader other opportunities to observe the figures in action. These four chapters concern genres that Albright believes resist the teleology of dramatic time by means of figures of consonance in order to express a deeper meaning. The ideogram (chapter 2) is a literary genre that represents a complex idea by juxtaposing discrete, descriptive units that do not develop through time. Albright's primary example is Ezra Pound's poem "In a Station by the Metro," whose two lines superimpose human faces and damp leaves to create a unified and static vision. "Noh" (chapter 3) delves into Modernist adaptations of Japanese Noh theater by Pound and Yeats, and in the late twentieth century by Benjamin Britten in *Curlew River*. Albright analyzes music in this last work largely in terms of undeveloping musical figures that, he argues, communicate the work's overarching message of spiritual transcendence. Chapter 5, "Villonaud," illustrates the manner in which a certain type of music drama imitates the Modernist world ("botched civilization") by means of preexisting or highly stylized material ("hunks of cultural refuse from the most disparate sources" [139]) that are pieced together side by side. Finally, "Noh Again" (chapter 6) presents Brecht and Weill's Noh opera *Der Jasager* as the supreme "consonant" music drama;

the music's repeating and motoristic units communicate "a single master gestus: acquiescence" (172) that is the primary meaning of the corresponding text.

As a whole, the six chapters of part 1 illustrate a novel and instinctive approach to analyzing the representational effects of Modernist genres, with particular emphasis on the music drama. Given that any project of this scope is bound to be difficult and expansive, it is understandable that Albright's music analyses are sometimes oversimplified by his overarching method of pinpointing repeating melodic motives as figures of consonance. Because Albright applies this methodology to most of the music dramas he discusses, it does at times verge on the artificial. Nevertheless, Albright's proposal that music can escape the simple teleology of dramatic events while still functioning as a representational medium is, I believe, imperative to any consideration of this repertory. Moreover, the author aptly provides detailed information on the genesis and historical context of numerous artworks, quotations from the artists' essays and correspondence, and anecdotes about events surrounding the works' composition, all of which are extremely useful and enjoyable.

Part 2 of *Untwisting the Serpent* provides a nice contrast to part 1, moving as it does from mimesis to abstraction. Its six chapters are half taken up with particular figures of dissonance (loops and cubes) and half with a Modernist movement, surrealism, that Albright believes relied on such figures. In general, the second half of the book is more rewarding than the first, since the author focuses on a single music drama, *Parade*, in five of the chapters, which allows him to engage in more detailed analyses of the work in question. In "Loop" (chapter 7) Albright proposes that the media of *Parade* are organized as discrete, stratified, and sometimes non-representational entities. Albright demonstrates how the score's repeating melodic motives, what he calls "music loops," bear little relation to the onstage drama that occurs simultaneously. "Cube" (chapter 8) relates the scenery, text, and music of *Parade* to the flat and abstract cubist style that was contemporaneous with its composition. Albright isolates instrumental lines in Erik Satie's score that resemble geometric shapes while escaping the confines of dramatic reference. "Loop Again" (chapter 9) examines Satie's (and other composers') debt to the crude features of early cinema: silent pantomime, captions, film loops, and especially the misalignment of picture and sound, in which music occurs as a backdrop but not necessarily as a representational partner to drama.

These three chapters provide a wonderfully detailed study of *Parade*. They speak about the work's relationship to contemporary aesthetic styles; they also explore ways in which music can accompany text without contributing extramusical content. Albright's analytical language, in fact, seems

especially tailored to a piece like *Parade*, whose score is constructed out of the succinct musical figures that Albright extracts from scores throughout this study. And while at times the author is a bit narrow in his analyses—for example, I am unconvinced by the geometric “cubist” shapes that he highlights in *Parade*—he nevertheless provides a compelling historical and theoretical rationale for characterizing the work as “dissonant.”

Chapters 10 and 11 provide an even broader context for *Parade* by examining surrealism in the visual arts, literature, and music. Chapter 10 is a fascinating illumination of two different theories of the surreal, one by the writer and critic Guillaume Apollinaire, and the other by his contemporary André Breton. This chapter also reflects on the manner in which each medium of a surrealist collaboration can occupy its own abstract domain and yet still combine with other media to represent an external world that is itself a combination of dissonant elements. “Each medium,” Albright writes, “should pursue its own way of seizing the world, its private apprehension of reality” (246). Chapter 11 then delves into several of Jean Cocteau’s surrealist music dramas, *Parade* included, in order to illustrate how the independence of text and music in these works reflects an external world in which nothing bears a relationship to anything else.

The book’s final chapter, “Heaven,” discusses the Gertrude Stein/Virgil Thomson collaboration, *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Albright cites this opera as an example of extreme surrealism in which “the component media attain such a state of perfect disregard for one another that dissonance itself is superseded, and a new consonance is achieved, in a sort of afterlife of the dream of total theatre” (311). For Albright, it is the setting of the work—the empty, inactive landscape of heaven—that motivates a lack of musical and verbal semantics. Music and text, according to the author, are both dissonant in their failure to project a story, but consonant because that failure is completely appropriate to the opera’s locale. This last chapter (along with the five preceding ones) offers the reader abundant rewards. Albright’s illustration of an analytical method that is not founded on dramatic alignment between music and text is a welcome contribution to the study of music drama, as is the complete and wide-ranging examination of *Parade* that the author provides.

The study as a whole, however, also struggles with several (though not unassailable) difficulties. One of these is that it is structured on what at times seems an overly simplistic dichotomy. As Albright himself warns in the introduction, his consonant/dissonant antithesis is “somewhat frail” (28). To be sure, the distinction is intriguing and will certainly prove a useful point of entry for future studies on twentieth-century music drama. But the dichotomy also forces works into molds that provide a less than comfortable fit; Albright sometimes ignores unique characteristics of com-

positions so that each work can be categorized as either consonant or dissonant. And this either/or method limits our ability to hear music as existing somewhere in-between or as incorporating both qualities. Indeed, the relationship between musical and textual representation can be much more complex; music can represent via an enormous variety of means and methods and those means do not only vary with every composition but within every composition as well. Music may sometimes agree with its libretto, sometimes disagree, and sometimes correspond only tangentially. The composer can represent any aspect of any model at any time.<sup>3</sup>

Another problem, briefly mentioned above, is Albright's inclination to divide musical scores into repeating melodic and harmonic figures that signify figures of consonance or dissonance. Since repeating motives begin to look like other repeating motives, the numerous works discussed do not always stand out as distinct compositions but rather as similar conglomerations of isolated motives. Even consonant and dissonant figures eventually begin to take on similar aspects. Both are frequently described as discrete, repeating motives that are juxtaposed with other repeating motives. And neither type develops through time. Therefore, it is ultimately difficult to remember why the figures of *Renard* are consonant while those of *Parade* are dissonant, or why the figures of Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* are merely "clumsy hieroglyphs" (228) while *Curlew River's* figures are "pure simultaneity of being" (95).

Given the musical similarity among figures, it is also difficult to follow the logic by which these figures are assigned specific representational values. In *Parade*, repeating pattern units, "so profoundly fixed, as if pounded in with a pile driver" (193), represent the abstract shapes of cubism. But repetition is also the primary criterion for Albright's characterization of musical motives as "undenoting sound" in *Ballet mécanique* ("all emphasis collapses into a sonorous puddle" [238]); as a parody of a hieroglyph in *Renard* ("It is repetition for repetition's sake, not for the sake of insistence or highlighting" [59]); as quintessential "plaint" in *Der Jasager* ("the figure keeps repeating itself . . . The figure is not an expression of pain, but a hieroglyph of pain" [177-78]); as the serene landscape of heaven in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, whose repeating diatonic motives "simply roll down the slopes of the text" (344); and as "everything, or nothing" in *The Threepenny Opera*, where a four-note ostinato is described variously as a "a naked thumping . . . a gestus of pure abstract motion—a gestus of reality . . . a gestus of fundamental being-there . . . the solid 1-7-6-5 figure seems to stand for the proscenium arch itself" (132-33). What the author refers to variously as fixed figures, fixed elements, ostinati, and pattern units—all musical motives that repeat—leap to the foreground of almost every analysis in this book, and yet Albright never explicitly explains how to tell the differ-

ence between repeating motives that are dissonant and those that are consonant, or between those that are mimetic and those that are abstract. Albright distinguishes between these types of figures throughout, but the means by which he does so are not enumerated.

Halfway through the book, as if anticipating these questions, Albright does conclude that the primary difference between figures is that dissonant ones provide backdrop while consonant ones provide dramatic essence: "*Music as environment*," he writes, "*is the exact opposite of music as hieroglyph*: for Satie, music doesn't aspire toward an instant of devastating apprehension of meaning, but instead aspires toward a pleasant diffusion, a letting-go of meaning" (191–92; italics in the original). But how does one know which figures carry meaning and which diffuse it, which are environmental and which hieroglyphic? Albright does not say; he only increases the confusion by adding, "Satie did write pieces that are like hieroglyphs, in that they present brief figures with clear kinesthetic relations to a referent in the exterior world," but each of these figures is merely a "parody of a hieroglyph, a bit of musical nausea" (192). The reader may then wonder what a "parody of a hieroglyph" is, or how to recognize "musical nausea" when it happens. She may also finally wonder what this information communicates about the parameters of musical representation in general. What Albright does not state explicitly, but what is nevertheless implied, is that the consonance or dissonance of musical figures does not always define the work as mimetic or non-mimetic, as representational or abstract, but rather defines the kind of world—spiritual or non-spiritual, complete or empty—on which the work of art is modeled.

The shortcomings listed above are, however, more than offset by the wealth of other valuable information and interpretations that the author provides. For every work, Albright offers historical data, pictures of sets and costumes, descriptions of choreography, etymologies of important terms, accounts of relevant literary and philosophical theories, extended literary analyses, and thoughtful insights. More importantly, his inquiry into different types of artistic collaboration is extremely valuable to musicology, since what it offers that field, frequently insulated from other disciplines, is a new path by which to enter an interdisciplinary consideration of Modernist music dramas. Indeed, Albright presents a welcome escape from more traditional analyses of music drama by discussing collaborative works in all their numerous artistic dimensions. *Untwisting the Serpent* is a creative attempt to explain qualities of artworks that are strangely ineffable—to illustrate ways in which musical scores can function as more than accompaniment to characters and events as they progress through time. For all of these reasons, Albright's new book deserves close and careful study.

Notes

1. Albright's terms "consonance" and "dissonance" are not related to those employed in traditional harmonic analysis.
2. These are established terms that Albright reformulates for a Modernist context.
3. In my forthcoming dissertation, *Complex Mimesis: The Models and Methods of Musical Representation in Benjamin Britten's "Death in Venice"*, I propose a more flexible conception of musico-dramatic mimesis, especially as it occurs in opera.

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