

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Sarah Collins. *Lateness and Modernism: Untimely Ideas about Music, Literature and Politics in Interwar Britain***

Cambridge: CUP, 2019 (Music Since 1900)

ISBN: 9781108481496. Hbk, xiv+174 pp.

**Reviewed by Michelle Meinhart**

With its focus on the music criticism of three little-known composers and music critics active in interwar London—Philip Heseltine (who published as Peter Warlock), Kaikhosru Sorajbi and Cecil Gray—Sarah Collins’s *Lateness and Modernism: Untimely Ideas about Music, Literature and Politics in Interwar Britain* may seem niche. But her linking of these critics with contemporary writers recognised by literary studies as ‘late modernist’, such as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and Ezra Pound, illuminates a deeply shared attribute between literary and musical thought of the day that has not been recognised: an ‘ethos, disposition and style’ that she deems ‘lateness’ (p. 8).

More than an aesthetic or style, ‘lateness’ is an attitude towards history, time and subjectivity, as the first two chapters (‘The Afterlife of a Beaten Ghost’ and ‘Sketch of a Milieu: Impasse and Lateness’) deftly explicate. Collins’s use of the term is an amalgamation of those used by literary scholars, namely Edward Said, Jed Etsy and Tyrus Miller; theorisations of lateness in the style of composers (as in Beethoven’s late style); and James Hepokoski’s idea of a generational crisis after 1910 affecting the style of Jean Sibelius, Richard Strauss and Edward Elgar.<sup>1</sup> To delineate this group of ‘artists and ideas collected here under the rubric

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 144; Edward Said, ‘Thoughts on Late Style,’ *London Review of Books* 25, no. 15 (2004): 3–7; Jed Etsy, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); James Hepokoski, *Sibelius: Symphony No. 5* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 8.

of lateness,' she adopts the term 'milieu', meaning both 'environment' or 'surrounding', and 'a group of people with a shared (cultural) outlook' (p. 16). Thus, her central concern is 'extrapolating how a particular sense of lateness shaped some of their ideas about music and literature, and to show how these expressions of lateness were reinforced by specific personal and intellectual exchanges' (p. 17). Collins traces these physical associations, from reading each others' works, to first meetings, to stays in each others' homes. She also distinguishes the late modernist writers within this 'lateness' milieu from other modernist circles like the 'bourgeois modernism of Bloomsbury and the Sitwells' (p. 27). She also introduces these critics' values in music, specifically their admiration of classicism within late modernism, which she conceptualises as 'an expression of isolation and self-creation, an absence of history and a cultivated attitude of untimeliness' (p. 31), rather than as a specific reference to eighteenth-century style. For these writers, lateness as a value is '*epistemology* (shaping how an artist comes to his artistic creation), a *critical method* (determining the standards by which a work may be judged), and an *ethos* (involving the cultivation of character)' (p. 32). Different from 'the modernist mandate of rupture,' lateness gives 'the artist the freedom to pursue a *sui generis* relationship with convention' (p. 32). The remaining three chapters examine the relation of lateness to the self, politics, and history, each focusing in on the relationship between a literary figure and one of the three music critics.

Chapter Three ('Impersonality and Vividness: *Le Gai Savaire*,' Philip Heseltine and D.H. Lawrence') explores Lawrence's thematisation of the self in temporal terms and its influence on Heseltine, both through Heseltine's reading of Lawrence and then later by their short-lived friendship. In this ethos—influenced by the reception of Nietzsche in England and developed by Lawrence most explicitly in 'Study of Thomas Hardy' (1914)—the artist's timeliness was judged 'according to his ability to be "vivid" or fully himself,' and artworks were judged by their vitality rather than 'newness or innovation' (p. 35). Here, the artist's desire for timeliness means a desire for the 'simultaneity of time—or past, present and future viewed as one which found expression in a turn towards a spatialized conception of time' (p. 50). For Heseltine, this ideal art and conception of time and the self was most apparent in the music of Delius, which he outlined in his book-length study of the composer.<sup>2</sup> Like Lawrence's symbol of the poppy, 'Delius's art had the attributes of "lateness" in that it was not the apotheosis of a golden age, nor a blazing herald of a new age, nor an expressionist disintegration—Delius's art was on the very crest of decline, occupying a moment of pure intensity just prior to the excess of decadence' (p. 59). Heseltine also valued what he heard as the impersonal nature of Delius's music—it was 'always one step removed from intimacy,' in that it 'recollects emotions rather than being overcome by immediate emotion,' was not 'the culmination or rejection of tradition,' and took 'no part in the requirements of the contemporary' (p. 72). This focus on the temporal enables Collins to connect Heseltine and Lawrence's brand of modernism with that of T.S. Eliot, particularly as related to Eliot's emphasis on the relationship between the purposeful impersonal practice of the artist with history—developed in 'Tradition and Individual Talent' (1919)—a point which enables Collins to link Heseltine and Lawrence's 'vividness' with the development of New Criticism.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Warlock [Philip Heseltine], *Frederick Delius* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; rev. ed. with annotations by Hubert Foss, Oxford/New York: OUP, 1952).

Chapter Four ('Modernism, Democracy and the Politics of Lateness: Kaikhosru Sorabji and *The New Age*') centres on this milieu's disillusionment with modernism's emphasis on 'the new' and glorification of abstraction. This disillusionment was itself a consequence of modernism's ageing and commodification, due in part to the expansion of public access to art in Britain. Collins explores Sorabji's explication of these 'radical conservative', anti-democratic ideas in the journal *The New Age*. She connects these ideas to interwar politics and reactions against liberal progressivism's advocacy of state education and 'other egalitarian measures aimed at increasing access,' and what they saw 'as the bureaucratization of authority and the ruling power of a reformist elite' (p. 15). Sorabji lauded Busoni as an ideal artist because he resisted the modernist forms of analytical abstraction in favour of a classicism and aloofness—features that, in the words of Sorabji, 'kept him undefiled and untainted by popular success, or, what is worse, fashionable success among the Art Snobs and the high Bohemia Circus Riders' (p. 103). Collins connects these ideas to T.E. Hulme and his characterisation of the 'classical' and the 'romantic' temperament, which he maps onto the distinction between 'human fallibility' and 'human perfection' respectively (p. 108). For Sorabji, modernist abstractions in art, as in liberal progressive and egalitarian political and economic initiatives, had led to 'a malevolent compulsive repetitiveness' or mimicry in composition and in British musical life—from the mechanistic practicing of music-loving amateurs to the increase of music students in colleges—which left concert life mechanistic and devoid of vitality and true spectators.

In the fifth chapter ('Cycles, Rotation and the Image: Cecil Gray's Music History and H.D.'s Imagism'), Collins examines ways in which lateness informed ideas of music history, specifically through its conceptual link with a theory of poetry. As in the other chapters, the personal relationship of the figures involved—here, Gray and the poet and novelist Hilda Doolittle (known as H.D.) who was connected to the Imagist movement—is just as important to her argument as the writings by the figures themselves. Collins connects Imagism, which purported the idea of poetry as 'a visual art conceived with direct communication rather than description or narrative' (p. 124) with this milieu's cyclic conception of history. She argues that it informed Gray's philosophy of history (developed across several books) and his construction of a counter canon of composers with Sibelius at its heart. Gray's 1931 study of Sibelius poses important historiographical questions about the relationship between art or artist and their contexts.<sup>3</sup> In Gray's view, over-emphasis on 'the new' and the avant-garde ethos of experimentation had become a victim of success and even commercialisation. Sibelius was the ideal alternative and the embodiment of the 'lateness' of late modernism, because his classicism in Gray's cyclic view of history 'stood outside the quotidian developments of the day' (p. 129). Gray argued that 'the ahistoricity of classicism made it permanently out of sync with its time—it was forever "too late"—but yet it was also future-oriented as the impossible ideal always aspired to but never reached' (p. 129); 'it was untimely; and its untimeliness meant that it would be forever new' (p. 130).

Some musicologists might find that *Lateness and Modernism* talks too little about music. Indeed, in its focus on the political views and artistic attitudes of literary people like Lawrence and minor musical figures like Heseltine, music does get lost at times. Collins does not examine musical style or pieces of music by Heseltine, Sorabji or Gray, nor the composers

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<sup>3</sup> Cecil Gray, *Sibelius*, 2nd ed. (London: OUP, 1945).

they discuss; rather, she is primarily concerned with how lateness was expressed in a critical tradition: ‘in ideas *about* music or ways of evaluating music’ (p. 12). And, as Collins writes, these critics’ understandings of composers and their music ‘should not be viewed for their truth content, but rather for their position within a wider discursive field’ (p. 72). While lateness is a form of relation that she traces across music, literature, painting and history, Collins warns against making ‘intermedial analogies’ across these cultural expressions, which would be ‘akin to the ambiguous ascription of “impressionistic” features to music’ (p. 123). But while there is no discussion of actual pieces of music—indeed, there is more in-depth reading of novels like Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920), and philosophical essays like Eliot’s ‘Tradition and Individual Talent,’ than of symphonies—much in Collins’s book resonates with larger interests in musicology.

In many ways, *Lateness and Modernism* contributes to the growing body of musicological literature on the First World War and the interwar period, which has grown exponentially since the start of the centenary in 2014. While it does not feature prominently in the book, the war does loom in the background, as the milieu Collins illuminates is in many ways the product of it—from the places its members socialised to their aesthetics and politics. Though the majority of these figures did not fight in the war (for example, both Lawrence and Heseltine were exempt on medical grounds), Gray, Heseltine and Sorabji all came of age just as the war began and ‘bore heavily the mark of thwarted promise, which conditioned their ingrained and life-long sense of belatedness’ (p. 30). While members of this milieu were disgusted by the war’s promotion of jingoism and mob mentality, and for its stupefying effect on the arts, they also were not conscientious objectors. Rather, their ‘inaction and inability to engage in political action was a central and necessary element in shaping the ethos of lateness’ (p. 81). By extension, Collins’s book offers a fresh reading of the interwar period and classicism. She is careful to distinguish between the classicism of Sibelius and Delius and the neoclassicism of Stravinsky. Indeed, the critics discussed loathed the latter. It is interesting to compare this study with Jillian Rogers’s new reading of interwar France, which also focuses on a ‘milieu’ of musicians impacted by the war and modernist music with classical tendencies, but through the lens of trauma and emotion.<sup>4</sup>

The richness and usefulness of Collins’s mapping of lateness onto musical thought in Britain—from ideas of vividness and classicism to autonomy, impersonality and untimeliness—through complex connections made between music, politics, philosophy and literature, demonstrates the value both of music criticism and of studying networks of people. In the process, *Lateness and Modernism* contributes to the ongoing reassessment of modernism, in which Schoenberg and Stravinsky are the culmination of evolutionary progress in music history. Of course, modernism in British music has been debated many times already.<sup>5</sup> But Collins’s study is important in this regard because it shows that some Edwardian critics recognised divergent trends from the master teleological modernist metanarratives. They posed counter

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<sup>4</sup> Jillian C. Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries: French Music and Trauma between the World Wars* (Oxford/New York: OUP, forthcoming 2021).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, J.P. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012); J.P. Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar, Modernist* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006); Charles McGuire, ‘Edward Elgar: “Modern”; or “Modernist?”’, *Musical Quarterly* 91, no. 1–2 (2008): 8–38; Matthew Riley, ed. *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

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canons and espoused the importance of political and social contexts in understanding art and musical style: attributes that we have come to associate as being novel with the advent of 'new musicology' in the 1990s.

**About the Author**

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