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British Musical Modernism Defended against its Devotees

Abstract

This thesis forges a strong connection between British music of the early to mid-twentieth century and the prestigious concept of modernism. In one important tradition of criticism, modernism has increasingly been regarded as a tendentious concept, or even as a dangerous ideological disguise for what is simply the exclusion of much art from the so called peripheries of Europe and non-Western cultures. An expansion of the concept in literature and music studies has, however, resulted in the indiscriminate application of modernism and in consequence has led it to lose whatever rigour it had formerly – however problematically – enjoyed. The thesis suggests that parts of modernist exclusivity and rigorous definition can be saved, while at the same time the canon of modernist music can be expanded with a solid methodological foundation it has not possessed so far. To this end, this study articulates a new theory based on a model proposed in philosopher Alain Badiou's recent work, which relates a concentrated, high-modernist core to 'marginal' music of the twentieth century. By 'logicalizing' this model, the thesis achieves the goal of offering a new engagement with modernism without surrendering to new ideological premises. The theory is put into practice in three case studies of music by British composers with a claim to reconsideration as modernists: Gustav Holst's orchestral *Egdon Heath* (1927), Elisabeth Lutyens's cantata for soprano, mandolin, guitar, harp, and string orchestra *O saisons, ô châteaux!* (1946), and William Walton's cycle for reciter and instrumental ensemble, *Façade* (1921–79).