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Title

Bernstein, Rock, and Bach: Constructing a Tonal Heritage for Modern Music

Abstract

In the late 1960s, Leonard Bernstein expressed disillusionment with much contemporary art music, instead arguing that pop music showed more promise. “Pop music seems to be the only area where there is to be found unabashed vitality, the fun of invention, the feeling of fresh air,” he wrote in 1966, continuing, “Everything else seems suddenly old fashioned: electronic music, serialism, chance music—they have already acquired the musty odor of academicism.” But in the Young People’s Concert “Bach Transmogrified,” from 1969, Bernstein attempted a reconciliation between recent popular and art music. He joined the vogue for Bach’s music with an eclectic program that included several remarkable interpretations: a taped Moog synthesizer rendition of the Little Fugue in G minor; a performance of Lukas Foss’ *Phorion*, which deconstructs the Partita in E major for Violin with electronic instruments, chance elements, and noise; and the New York Rock & Roll Ensemble’s loose translation of Bach’s Fifth Brandenburg Concerto.

In this paper, I argue that Bernstein used this Bach program as part of larger project to establish an esteemed lineage for the continued use of tonality in contemporary composition. By drawing connections among recent rock music, avant-garde techniques, and Bach’s unequivocally tonal idiom, Bernstein attempted to make the continued use of the tonality in new composition compatible with modernist compositional techniques. Bernstein’s lecture drafts, conducting score of *Phorion*, and other pedagogical materials help demonstrate that he constructed an argument linking both Bach and rock to neoclassicism and, by extension, to tonal writing as a counterbalance to twelve-tone and avant-garde music. His appropriation of Bach as an ancestor of modern tonal music thus paved the way for his *Mass* (1971), in which avant garde techniques and popular music in a tonal context make this work Bernstein’s own “transmogrified” version of a historically exalted musical genre.