
CORE ISSUE – MUSIC AROUND FIRST WORLD WAR AND STEVAN ST. MOKRANJAC

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GUEST-EDITOR'S NOTE

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INTRODUCTION

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
We had everything before us, we had nothing before us,
We were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in
short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest
authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative
degree of comparison only.*

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It is, of course, Dickens. And they are, of course, the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel about the French Revolution. It would therefore be difficult to blame the readers of this introduction, if they began wondering if they are, after all, holding in their hands a special issue of a musicological journal on the topic of World War I.

However, I could not think of a better way to describe the period this thematic issue of *New Sound* is set to deal with. The early 20th century: an age of social, cultural, individual transitions and contradictions, and an age when these contradictions were big in size, loud in sound, fast in time. An age when people witnessed daily revolutions of nearly any sort: cars in the streets; one or two airplanes in the sky; psychoanalysis, department stores, great exhibitions; entire social (anthropological, in fact!) categories, like women or workers, claiming, shouting their right to play a role in society; artists of any field questioning nearly any existing preconception of what arts should look or sound like; capitalistic actions and socialist ideas reaching the dramatic, yet poignant, peak of their confrontation... and, along with all of this, phonographs, *café chantants*, noise-intoners, hexatonic scales, microtonal works. *It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity.*

Then came the war, the *Great War*. The war that invented globality: the loudest and biggest of them all, but not the fastest. It was *supposed* to be the fastest, it ended up in a tragedy the world had not yet witnessed, and would hardly witness afterwards. And the contradictions went on: those who opposed the war, those who welcomed it; the artists who portrayed its tragedy, the artists who celebrated its *grandeur*; the social classes that profited from it, and the social classes that were sent to the Front.

This special issue of *New Sound* attempts to explore a number of different relations between musical phenomena and the Great War. When I say “different relations”, I actually mean that what the readers will find here is not just an analysis of the music of World War I, but also *about, during, before, after, towards, despite, stemming from, leading to, reflecting on, representing* and so forth.

My decision as guest-editor was to place the contributions in alphabetical order, by author. More than a Solomonic action (which would anyway be justified by the very high level of the scholars involved, so that the unwritten rule of placing the most important contributions in the first and in the last position cannot really be applied), my intention was to deprive the sequence of any possible “narrative” setting (be it chronological, thematic, or anything). In doing so, hopefully, one may convey the message of the remarkable “polifunctionality” of these articles.

Let us take the most evident example: Paolo Ribaldini's article deals with the topic of the *representation* of WWI in the heavy metal genre, that is, a style of music that emerged a good fifty years after the end of the conflict. In a logical narrative order this article should *conclude* the issue, as a kind of "years later..." coda in a movie. However, Ribaldini says more than this: he argues that the very ideological paradigm of the classic heavy metal is in fact *rooted* in (the crisis of) some of the social/moral/cultural values which emerged during WWI. An argument like that transcends the chronological axis and brings to the centre of the discussion the question of the historical foundations of the 20th century as a whole. Which is, at the end of the day, what several scholars agree about World War I: keeping up with the rhetorical anachronisms I introduced by mentioning Dickens, if Jack the Ripper, in one of his letters to Scotland Yard, could boldly claim that he would be remembered for having *invented* the 20th century (and had a bit of a point there), there is no doubt that, in many ways, the Great War *defined* it.

Another example is Joan Grimalt's contribution, which stands as a *prequel* as much as Ribaldini's article stands as a *coda*. Grimalt deals with military musical topics in concert music that, *before* WWI, set the almost opposite musical tones to the idea itself of "war", "fight", "heroism", and the like. As Grimalt himself puts it, "until World War 1 (...), the martial genre, even sublimated to its spiritual essence, denotes positive forces, linked to 'our side' [...] In most of the music after the bloody conflict, however, the march represents the dark side of humanity's aggressiveness".

To understand the relation between music and WWI means also to understand the society of those days, in their direct or less direct impact on music, as an artistic phenomenon and as an industry (the latter term being exactly one of the many things for which this early 20th century historical period ended up setting the tones). We mentioned transitions and contradictions: Monteiro and Povilionienė's contributions help us to become acquainted with a few of them, chosen among the most important ones. Monteiro describes the "radical and important change in the history of both music and the phonographic industry, gradually putting popular rather than classical music under the spotlight and shifting the axis of entertainment music production across the Atlantic into the New World". Povilionienė, through the case-study of the Lithuanian musical press, offers us a significant glimpse into what musical life was like, during the war, with its daily struggles and also with its forms of adaptation to such an exceptional event (an increase in nationalistic repertoires, to begin with).

Finally, and of course, this thematic issue also offers a *direct* approach to the question, as we see it best-embodied in Jeffrey Wood's article, which consists in

a thorough analysis of the processes and dynamics of the “memorialization” of WWI by classical composers. Needless to say, an enterprise of this kind implies taking into account the different tones and descriptions of the event – which Wood identifies in four different “modes”: from the “heroic” to the “elegiac”, from “denunciation” to “reconciliation”. *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.*

I would like to express my gratitude to the five contributors to this issue, Joan Grimalt, Ricardo de Castro Monteiro, Rima Povilonienė, Paolo Ribaldini and Jeffrey Wood: I am extremely pleased with the final result of this collection of essays, and I believe each of them made a very precious contribution to this research area. I also would like to thank the whole editorial team of *New Sound*, for having been gracious hosts and for the friendly and productive atmosphere of this collaboration in general. Finally, I am also grateful to the Lithuanian Research Council for having supported my work on this enterprise, within the framework of the “Music and Politics” research project I am currently conducting (No. MIP-14172).