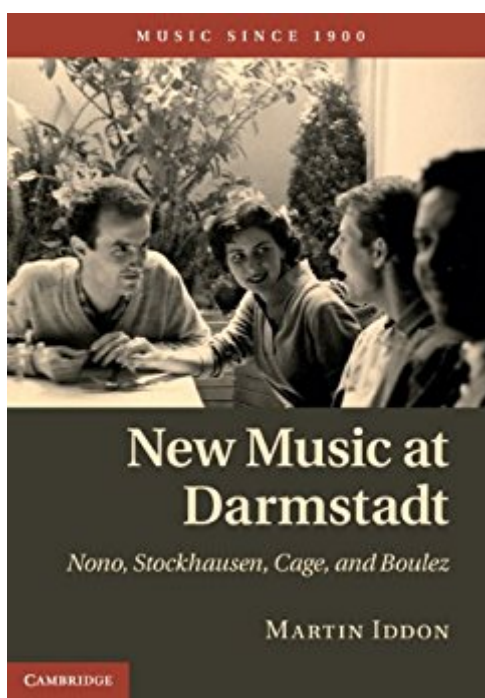


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New Music At Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, And Boulez (Music Since 1900)



Synopsis

New Music at Darmstadt explores the rise and fall of the so-called 'Darmstadt School', through a wealth of primary sources and analytical commentary. Martin Iddon's book examines the creation of the Darmstadt New Music Courses and the slow development and subsequent collapse of the idea of the Darmstadt School, showing how participants in the West German new music scene, including Herbert Eimert and a range of journalistic commentators, created an image of a coherent entity, despite the very diverse range of compositional practices on display at the courses. The book also explores the collapse of the seeming collegiality of the Darmstadt composers, which crystallised around the arrival there in 1958 of the most famous, and notorious, of all post-war composers, John Cage, an event Carl Dahlhaus opined 'swept across the European avant-garde like a natural disaster'.

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Customer Reviews

Martin Iddon, Associate Professor of Music at the University of Leeds, wrote a much-needed, fascinating book, "New Music at Darmstadt" (2013), regarding the "Darmstadt School," which was led by the dodecaphonic composers Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The "Golden Age" of the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik began somewhat after World War II and ended with the sudden death, in 1961, of its Founder, Wolfgang Steinecke. The book covers the exciting discoveries of the severest serial composers of the day, replete with bitter polemics and musical politics. Intellectuals like Theodor W. Adorno and Heinz-Klaus Metzger formed an important part of the scene. For this reviewer, this "School" was the true heir to the Second Viennese School, the great trio of Arnold Schoenberg, Anton von Webern, and Alban Berg. Listening to recordings of the various composers associated with that era at Darmstadt (also including Bruno Maderna, Luciano Berio, Iannis Xenakis, Olivier Messiaen, Milton Babbitt, Hans Werner Henze, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, and Humphrey Searle), one is astonished by the thrilling, uncompromising, and theatrical works produced. Difficult they are, to be certain, for both performers and audiences, but intensely dramatic, sometimes even transcendent. Iddon brings us through what was the degradation of the "Darmstadt School," with the pernicious influence of John Cage, who (according to Carl Dahlhaus) "swept across the European avant-garde like a natural disaster," with his puerile ideas of chance operations and his gradual artistic eccentricity. M. Boulez diagnosed the problem in 1957: "The most basic embodiment of chance is to be found in the adoption of a quasi-oriental philosophy in order to conceal a fundamental weakness in compositional technique: a cure for creative suffocation...." Nono noted that improvisation is self-centered, it "serves as the adjuration of a god, such that today it is one's own ego which is conjured up." The "abstract negation" (Adorno's words) of what Cage and his followers were doing cut into the trajectory of musical development, leaving us with the trivia and sterility (often fatally influenced by commercial music) we too often hear that passes for contemporary music in our concert halls and opera houses.

An excellent if somewhat pedantic study of the period that defines the end of classical music as we know it. Iddon points out common misbeliefs about both "total serialism" (there was a wide divergence in technique among these composers, and "fully pre-determined pieces of textbook multiple serialism are rare indeed") and aleatoric music (for example, the fact that David Tudor often prepared fully-realized scores even of John Cage's works for performance). If you can get through the dense prose, you'll come away with a much better understanding of the so-called "Darmstadt School" and the history behind it. By the way, the lovely young lady on the cover is Schönberg's

daughter Nuria, who married Luigi Nono.

A major contribution to the history of post-war music.

Wonderful. I didn't want it to end.

This book by Martin Iddon is a history of some of the polemics at the summer new music courses in Darmstadt from their founding right after World War II to the death of their first organizer, Wolfgang Steinecke in 1962. While Darmstadt is often looked back on as a "school", a group of composers united in a certain avant-garde direction, disagreement was in fact rife, with a number of divergent approaches at any particular time. After sketching the beginnings of the Darmstadt courses in the late 1940s, Iddon describes the rise and fall of two general modernist trends over the 1950s: multiple serialism, and after John Cage's arrival in Europe and especially his 1958 Darmstadt lectures, the adoption of musical chance procedures. Besides Cage, the composers Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Luigi Nono were some of the most forceful voices for what new music should be, which gives Iddon's book its subtitle. No less important in these debates, however, are critics like Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Theodor Adorno. In exploring this era, Iddon draws on a great deal of press coverage and personal correspondence. The popular image of Darmstadt -- a misconception even I, a longtime fan of mid-century modernism, had -- was that it was a perennial haunt of total serialists and dominated by Stockhausen and Boulez from nearly the very start. In fact, Darmstadt began with a great deal of Hindemith on the program, and even in the mid-1950s avant-garde premieres were just a slice of a larger program of older works. The first famous modernists to commit themselves to the Ferienkurse and make a splash were Bruno Maderna and Luigi Nono, with Karel Goeyvaerts being the first to raise a scandal through a total serialist piece. While Stockhausen and Boulez did serve as a lightning rod for critics of serialism, their Fifties heyday lasted only a few years, from roughly 1955 to 1958, and while Boulez was a respected figure in European music and well-known to Darmstadt's organizers and many participants, he was absent for a number of years in the 1950s. The main thrust of Iddon's book is how each composer took serialism or chance procedures in their own personal direction. For example, even within chance procedures, there was an enormous difference between John Cage's attempt to eliminate the ego by generating a piece by flipping a coin, and Stockhausen and Boulez's work that simply allowed the performer to choose the order that sections of more conventional music were played in. Often, while pursuing their own style, composers would disparage the way other composers did

things, such as Stockhausen's infamous complaint about Nono's "Il canto sospeso", or Nono's own 1959 anti-Cage lecture "Music and history". Critics' attacks on composers or composers' attacks on their peers were often based on misunderstandings of how the music was actually written or performed, and it often seems that certain composers were simply used as pawns in one critic's sniping at another critic, facts be damned. There was a widespread misunderstanding, for example, that pianist David Tudor was improvising when performing Cage, but in fact the elements of chance had been decided already by the composer, and Tudor had to prepare his performance carefully from the score. The section of the book on total serialism does look at a few pieces in depth, with extracts from the score and an expectation that the reader has a firm grounding in theory. However, the era of the "Cage shock" lacks that: while Iddon repeatedly mentions the fad of graphic scores, there are sadly none reproduced in the book. It is also worth mentioning that Iddon's coverage of stylistic trends ends with the "Cage shock", and while I understand that, say, the "sound mass" music of Ligeti is outside the scope of the book, I would have appreciated some mention in the afterword of what followed after Iddon's two 1950s trends.

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