

**Surprised by Beauty: A Listener's Guide to the Recovery of Modern Music**, revised and expanded, by Robert R. Reilly, with Jens F. Laurson. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016, 510pp., \$34.95 paperback.

### The Comeback of Beautiful Music

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The state of the contemporary music world is problematic. For that matter, the general health of music is not good. Or perhaps what I should really say is that the place that classical, or high art, music finds itself in is—almost nowhere.

Audiences are dwindling for concert music presented by our nation's orchestras. CDs or downloads of classical music represent a minuscule component of market share. While there are still music schools and music represented in the

academy, its place, like all of the humanities and arts, is at the very margins. Students come to university never having heard of Bach or Beethoven (I kid you not), and they will leave just as musically ignorant. Performers get technically better and better, but in the main, have less and less to say. The market for classical music can seem to handle just one star at a time, similar to the arena of sports. After Yo-Yo Ma is there another cellist? There might have been when Rostropovich was alive, but that is because he had that great Russian street cred. Joshua Bell represents the “younger” generation of violinists, but is hardly as well-known as Isaac Perlman, now a shadow of what he once was. If the performance scene is atrophying, what of the New, of those works being created in our own time or composed in the recent past, meaning the last hundred years, give or take.

You might blanch were you to go to hear a new or recently written piece. Would it be of that unlistenable sort, reminiscent of the fifties, sixties, or seventies, the music of blips and bleeps colloquially known as “squeak-fart music”? Would it go on and on—with little change—as in much minimal music? Or might it provide respite or nourishment for the soul?

At one time music was considered the highest of the arts. Regarded as

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the revealer of the working of the spheres, as a guide to the soul, music was thought to be man's best way of understanding himself because it addresses the mind, the heart, and the senses. For at its deepest level, every great work of music, unlike almost any other art, is a metaphor for our own life experience, as both have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and reside incorporeally and only in time. Music's ephemerality reminds us at the deepest level of our nature that there is more to us than we can know. It is part of the divine.

But if the past sixty years have been tough, where are we now? Or maybe what we must ask is, were they really so tough, or were we simply not listening? Remember, Bach was dismissed in favor of Telemann in his own time; he didn't receive his due until Mendelssohn resurrected his music in the nineteenth century. So is it possible that the music history of the twentieth century really has yet to be written, that what was purveyed as the only legitimate music, that is, the unlistenable sort, will disappear, or is already in the process of becoming irrelevant? Or are we at least beyond such definitive teleological pronouncements as that of Pierre Boulez, who claimed that any composer who has not experienced the "necessity for the dodecaphonic [twelve-tone] language is USELESS [*sic*]" and "his whole work is irrelevant to the needs of his epoch."<sup>1</sup>

Or finally, have we emerged from the musical experimentation of the twentieth century and maybe, just maybe, come back to our wits and senses?

These questions and this perspective lie at the heart of the new edition of *Surprised by Beauty: A Listener's Guide to the Recovery of Modern Music*, written by Robert R. Reilly, with Jens F. Laurson. I review this book as it is now twice the size of the first edition, published in 2002, and so is an almost entirely new opus. Like many good musical compositions, *Surprised by Beauty* has an introduction, a main body, and a coda, or conclusion. Both introduction and conclusion address the central question of music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Is music meant to be beautiful and/or sacred, or is it meant to present us with a view of the truth of our times—including the state of our embattled inner spirit—and thus possibly revel in ugliness?

Reilly comes down on the side of the former. Being an active Roman Catholic, and having written most of his entries in *Surprised by Beauty* for the Catholic magazine *Crisis*, this outlook should not come as a surprise. Reilly also treats the Death of God movement

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Boulez, "Possibly..." (1952), in *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, comp. Paule Thévenin, trans. Stephen Walsh, intro. Robert Piencikowski (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 113.

of this period as problematic, as, of course, do many of the composers he cites.

The main section of *Surprised by Beauty* (part 1) is an alphabetic review of composers who represent the “other history” of twentieth-century music, whose works continued to provide perceptible rhythms and structure, recognizable and memorable melodies or motivic materials (a clear if surprising journey), and that unique contribution of Western music, the interweaving of individual lines that together create something we call harmony. The book also includes an addendum, which contains conversations the author has had with various composers or interpreters of their music.

The composers Reilly discusses can be grouped into several categories.

First are the well-known composers, including Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, Edward Elgar, Leoš Janáček, Hector Villa-Lobos, Frank Martin, Francis Poulenc, Jean Sibelius, Michael Tippett, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, among others. These names will be recognized by most people who have engaged, at least at some level, in mainstream musical life, in other words, those who regularly attend orchestra or chamber music concerts.

Next we have the composers, living or recently dead, who are leaving or have left a major mark on the music of the twentieth century: John Adams, Stephen Albert, Dominick Argento,

John Corigliano, Henryk Górecki, Einojuhani Rautavaara, George Rochberg, Benjamin Lees, and John Tavener, among others.

Then there are those composers who are not well-known, but whose mark is being made as I write, including Kenneth Fuchs, Daniel Strong Godfrey, Stephen Hartke, Jennifer Higdon, Stephen Jaffe, Libby Larsen, Lowell Liebermann, George Tsontakis, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

We must add those whose music was forbidden, composers who were exterminated by the Nazis or Stalin or excommunicated or left in limbo by the European and American avant-garde or Academy. These would include Hans Gál, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Franz Mittler, Othmar Schoeck, Karl Weigl, Mieczysław Weinberg, and Erich Zeisl.

And finally—and this is a small percentage—there are those who wrote nice but less than original music, and whose music should be listened to only if you have exhausted the other possibilities.

The reviews follow a useful pattern. The composer is identified and located in history. His music is then explored in a simple, accessible manner. Reilly often identifies his favorite pieces, and then refers to various recordings, with their relative merits and demerits identified. Thus the entries are formulated to give the interested listener easy access to the music of each composer, with a clear track of

greater to lesser, more accessible to less accessible, works. One need not read them in order, but dip in serendipitously anywhere in *Surprised by Beauty*.

While Reilly is a devout Catholic, the ghosts of two Jews hover over the book. The first is the twentieth-century nemesis Arnold Schoenberg, who developed the twelve-tone method of composition. The other is George Rochberg, who came to compositional maturity as a twelve-tone composer, later famously abandoned it to reenter the world of his musical forebears, particularly Brahms, Beethoven, and Mahler, and then, at the end of his life, produced a unique synthesis of both.

Schoenberg moved away from tonality because he felt it could no longer contain what he wished to express, that the extension of chromatic harmony had gone as far as it could, and that twelve-tone music is a logical and historical need. Rochberg moved away from twelve-tone music because he felt it did not provide the means for what he wished to say, that it is emotionally too restrictive, and that it is a denial, a cutting off, of the artist from the past, and all that tonality holds in regards to musical memory. Schoenberg was a musical and artistic revolutionary in his early years; he matured as he developed. While as a young man he said that his new method would insure the supremacy of German

music for the next one hundred years (by the way, he never held German citizenship), later in life and certainly towards its conclusion Schoenberg wrote tonal music, or “in the old style,” as he called it, without any pejorative notion to it. He also did not abjure composers who did not appropriate his method, and found greatness in other composers’ music that was tonal.

It was Schoenberg’s descendants, namely Boulez and his acolytes, who became downright totalitarian in their understanding of what he had created and, by the way, figuratively killed off their artistic progenitor, as Boulez did when he said “Schoenberg is dead.” Why did Boulez say this? Because Schoenberg didn’t go *far enough* in ridding his music of any relationship to the musical past. Boulez and his followers desired a complete break from the past—and a new beginning starting from ground zero.

The composers whose work is discussed in *Surprised by Beauty* sought and seek to be continuers of the tradition. Defying the notion of rupture and a new beginning, they see themselves as individuals upholding and contributing to a great musical tradition. These composers write symphonies, concertos, and sacred music. Most of it is tonal or has strongly tonal elements and is written in known forms and for familiar forces, as in orchestras, string quartets, chamber ensembles, and the

like. Surprisingly, however, that imp of the twentieth century, John Cage, does make an appearance, as Reilly finds some of his earlier music of interest.

The structure of the book leaves it open for readers, if they wish, to find fault with Reilly's choice of composers to feature in *Surprised by Beauty*. For example, of the American symphonists, Roy Harris and David Diamond are included, but not Walter Piston, William Schuman, Peter Mennin, or Vincent Persichetti. Leonard Bernstein and Lukas Foss are not to be found. Reilly shows a certain bias toward second- and third-tier Europeans at the expense of better American composers. The holy minimalists—Arvo Pärt, Górecki, and Tavener—are overly lauded, almost in a supersessionist manner, over their Jewish counterparts, who, while considered pivotal and primary, don't quite seem to have the sacred stuff. And there are a number of younger American composers I would have included instead of those featured, but all this will shake out in the coming years.

A few other minor faults. Reilly loves the word “beguiling,” which he employs abundantly. An index would be useful. And, as would be expected in a book of this size and encyclopedic nature, a certain sameness sets in if read in large chunks.

For anyone interested and willing to explore the wonders of music of the recent past and present, *Surprised by Beauty* is a fine guide and companion. As Reilly writes in the preface to the second edition, “[I]t's okay: The war is over. You can come out now. The army of noise emptied its lungs screaming its loudest and then whimpered away. Today's composers have returned to tonality, melody, and gorgeous harmonies.”

The academic world tends to stick to tried-and-true formulas. After all, established professors are reluctant to rework their notes. But it just might be that the history of the music of the twentieth century will indeed be rewritten by a younger cadre of musicologists and theoreticians, as it already is by conductors and musicians who are programming and performing the music of these “other” composers. In that regard, this book will be a source and a starting place for those willing to entertain such a change in their understanding of the course of classical music of the recent past.

The famous Jewish sage Hillel told the prospective convert, who asked him to explain the entirety of Torah while he stood on one foot, “Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you. Now go study.” My suggestion is to read *Surprised by Beauty* and then do what Reilly is really asking you to do: Now go listen.