

'Make It Old': Retro Forms and Styles in Literature and Music

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Edited by

Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart



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Preface

If one were to look for a common denominator of Western histories of literature, music and other arts, the Poundian principle of ‘making it new’ would be an obvious candidate. However, underneath this arguably dominant trend there is also a subdominant, opposite one, which may be labelled ‘make it old’. This does not refer to the inevitable fact that new developments are always based on previous traditions, from which they depart more or less, but rather to the phenomenon of a conscious attempt at imitating past stages in the development of the respective arts and media. Like the afore-mentioned trend towards innovation this is a very old phenomenon. The ancient Romans harked back to Greek architecture, sculpture and literature (about music we do not know), and the various renaissances and (neo-)classicisms from Charlemagne to the eighteenth century, whose first part is tellingly termed ‘the Augustan Age’ in English cultural history, in turn tried to revive elements of classical antiquity. Yet, since the late eighteenth century ‘making it old’ appears to have grown in importance in the wake of an intensified historical awareness. This awareness is one dominant feature of a new episteme which characterizes the recent past if not also our age, in Foucault’s term, as “l’âge de l’histoire” (1966: 229; ‘the age of history’). Historicist architecture with its various neo-styles (starting with the eighteenth-century Gothic revival) is in this context perhaps the most conspicuous art, which has contributed to shaping in particular the inner districts of European cities to a considerable extent; but, as the present volume shows, literature and music also have had their share in this trend. Remarkably, ‘making it old’ did not die with the nineteenth century but rather seems to have reached unprecedented popularity in contemporary culture, from propagating traditional ‘back-to-nature’ trends in the food sections of today’s supermarkets and retro looks and devices in electronic stores to Neo-Victorianism and Neo-Modernism as recent literary trends.

The present volume, with its focus on ‘making it old’ in retro forms and styles in both literature and music, is thus highly topical. Like so many volumes of the book series *Word and Music Studies*, of which it forms volume no. 19, it originated in one of the biannual conferences of the International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA), more precisely its Twelfth Conference held at Graz from May 30 to June 1, 2019. It contains a selection of the papers given there, which were revised and supplemented by additional material (Frieder von Ammon’s contribution in particular). I am grateful to the WMA for adopting as a conference theme what I proposed at the preceding, 2017, WMA conference held at Stockholm in the section “Surveying the Field”, namely “‘Make It Old’: Retro Forms in Western Literature and Music since the

Eighteenth Century” (see Wolf 2021). Thanks to its contributors the present volume corroborates my impression, which I mentioned in the conclusion of said paper, that the manifold ways in which making it old has affected the history of both literature and music merit further research (cf. *ibid.*: 292).

The exploration of retro phenomena in this volume is divided into three sections. The first deals with “Historical Retro Forms and Styles”, that is, with retro elements in literature and music before our days. Frieder von Ammon’s contribution on “Forms and Functions of Retroization in German Literature and Music of the 1830s” offers a rich tandem exploration of retro tendencies of a particularly fertile period in German cultural history, with Goethe’s *Faust* and Louis Spohr’s *Historical Symphony* as his main examples. Peter Dayan, in his discussion of whether the reference to sonata form makes Kurt Schwitters’s *Ur-sonate* ‘old’, comes to an ambivalent conclusion, in which the gesture towards an indeed historical musical form as a way of musicalizing poetry is counter-balanced by playful Dadaist experimentation, an ambivalence between making it old and at the same time making it new, which appears again and again throughout the contributions to the present volume. David Francis Urrows’s essay on Rubbra, Brahms and Händel is a case in point. He discusses to what extent and with what functions the two later composers revive elements of Georg Friedrich Händel’s music in their respective compositions, which combine ‘retroization’ with innovation. Something analogous is explored by Adrian Paterson with respect to Ezra Pound’s poetry, in which medieval music notation makes a striking appearance both innovative and reminiscent of the medieval troubadours’ synthesis of word and music.

The next two sections, unsurprisingly, concentrate on contemporary retroizations in essentially intermedial, or rather plurimedial,¹ genres that combine words and music, with Section Two specializing on opera. Taken together, Michael Halliwell’s and Bernhard Kuhn’s contributions highlight retro phenomena in four recent operas, two of which date from the 1980s and ’90s (Dominick Argento’s *The Aspern Papers* [1987], and John Corigliano’s *The Ghosts of Versailles* [1991]) while the other two premiered as recently as in the last decade (Jake Heggie’s *Great Scott* [2015], and Salvatore Sciarrino’s *Ti vedo, ti sento, mi perdo* (*In attesa di Stradella*) [2017]). Section Three, then, offers discussions of retro forms and styles in various segments of popular music: the ‘resurgence’ of fado by contemporary Portuguese fadists (explored by Pénélope Patrice), punk music (investigated by Gerfried Ambrosch with regard to the quest for authen-

1 Plurimediality (the combination of different media in one text, work, etc.) is a sub-form of intermediality (which generally refers to phenomena involving more than one conventionally distinct medium).

ticity), and hip hop (highlighted by Ingeborg Jandl with an emphasis on post-communist music in Russia and Bosnia-Herzegovina).

All in all, the contributions showcase a remarkable variety of retro elements from the nineteenth century to the present in both ‘high’ and popular art originating from various countries and cultural contexts. They also show that retroization is functionally not restricted to a nostalgic harking back to the good old days but is frequently a springboard for the integration of the old in an innovative new.

As has frequently been the case in past WMA conferences and subsequent WMS publications, the present volume also has a part “Surveying the Field”. This time it contains a contribution by Thomas Gurke, who interprets a recent experimental novel (Matthew Herbert, *The Music* [2018]). This text, as shown by Gurke, adds to the corpus of musicalized fiction explored by myself decades ago (see Wolf 1999) in a highly innovative way.

The present volume is the fruit of joint efforts of several persons, all of whom I would like to thank for their cooperation. First of all, as in so many volumes which we have co-edited (this being the tenth and thus the occasion of a small jubilee), I am grateful to my co-editor and friend Walter Bernhart, who contributed both his expertise in the field and his incredible meticulousness in the editing process. Next to praise is my expert secretary, Jutta Klobasek-Ladler, to whom I am grateful for her share in the organization and editing process. Last but not least, my thanks are due to the contributors for their thought-provoking texts and patience with various editing requests. For their sake I wish the volume, which is not only relevant to word and music studies but also to memory research at large, many interested readers.

Werner Wolf

Graz, autumn 2020

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