



Musical Modernism and the  
Representation of Disability

# BROKEN BEAUTY

JOSEPH N. STRAUS

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*For Sally, as always*



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## PREFACE

Modernist music is centrally concerned with bodies and minds that deviate from normative standards for appearance and function. The musical features that make music modern are precisely those that can be understood to represent disability. Modernist musical representations of disability both reflect and shape (construct) disability in a eugenic age, a period when disability was viewed simultaneously with pity (and a corresponding urge toward cure or rehabilitation) and fear (and a corresponding urge to incarcerate or eliminate). Disability is right at the core of musical modernism; it is one of the things that musical modernism is fundamentally about.

The most characteristic features of musical modernism—fractured forms, immobilized harmonies, conflicting textural layers, radical simplification of means in some cases, and radical complexity and hermeticism in others—can be understood as musical representations of disability conditions, including deformity/disfigurement, mobility impairment, madness, idiocy, and autism. These features of musical modernism can, of course, be understood and explained in many different ways. Disability is only one of many forces at work, but I will argue that it is a central one, and that it has been generally overlooked.

In making this argument, I draw on two decades of work in disability studies (sometimes known as cultural disability studies or critical disability studies) and a growing body of recent work that brings the discussion of disability into musicology and music theory. This interdisciplinary enterprise offers a sociopolitical analysis of disability, focusing on social and cultural constructions of the meaning of disability, and shifting our attention from biology and medicine to culture. Disability is simultaneously real, tangible, and physical and an imaginative creation whose purpose is to make sense of the diversity of human morphology, capability, and behavior. Against the traditional medical model of disability, which sees it as a bodily defect requiring diagnosis and normalization or cure (under the direction of medical professionals), this new sociocultural model of disability sees it as

cultural artifact, something that is created by and creates culture, including musical culture. Disability is simultaneously a material reality and a cultural manifestation. Its impact on modernist music and the ways that modernist music in turn shapes disability are the subjects of this book.

Along the way, I will try to reclaim a number of formerly stigmatized terms. The first of these is *disability* itself. In the disability/ability system, there is no overarching term, like gender (for male and female) or sexuality (for straight and LGBTQ). Instead, disability itself acts as both the overarching category and one of its terms. And the stigma is built right into the term: its *dis*. A central premise of this book, as of disability studies in general, is that disability marks a difference, not a deficit. I will thus use the term in the spirit of *biodiversity* and *neurodiversity*, as entailing a welcome and enriching variation in human embodiment. This book claims disability.

For the disability conditions I will be exploring, I prefer traditional, common-language terms to their medicalized counterparts. Thus, I will speak of *madness* (not mental illness) and *idiocy* (not mental retardation). And I will speak directly of *deformity* and *disfigurement*, without euphemism. In the case of *autism*, there is no common-language equivalent—this was a medicalized category from the outset, split off from earlier classifications of madness and idiocy. In every case, my goal will be to strip the term of stigma and to claim it as a positive and enriching human identity, as well as a resource for artistic and musical creativity.

At the same time, I will fully acknowledge and explore the contradictions, conflicts, and paradoxes at the core of musical modernism's representations of disability. Musical modernism draws on traditional tropes of disability representation, sorting disabled bodies into a small number of stereotypical categories. Some of these tropes are explicitly stigmatizing, like the Obsessive Avenger or Demonic Cripple. Others seem laudatory (the Sweet Innocent, the Saintly Sage, the Mad Genius), but are no less dehumanizing. These tropes have arisen from and encouraged critical responses that marginalize and enfreak disabled bodies. Within modernist music, the disability representations we will explore very often embody pernicious stereotypes and encourage sentimentalizing, exoticizing, or more directly negative responses. Modernist music claims disability as a valuable resource, but does so in a tense, dialectical relationship with medicalized, eugenic-era attitudes toward disability.

Music is both blessed and cursed with a technical language that permits us to describe musical objects and relationships with wonderful precision but that can be an impermeable barrier to comprehension for the uninitiated. In the text for this book, and in the brief descriptions of specific musical passages it includes, technical terms are generally kept to a

minimum, and used more for their suggestive metaphorical and figurative implications than their precise definition (consonance and dissonance, harmony and counterpoint, sentence, phrase, inversion, symmetry, development, cadence).

Instead of the traditional musical examples in staff notation, this book incorporates more than one hundred short analytical videos. These videos are designed to guide readers into the musical representation and narration of disability.

The analytical videos were directed and engineered by Tim Mastic, a brilliant graduate student at the City University of New York. Other wonderful graduate students—Megan Lavengood, Simon Prosser, and Kristi Hardman—assisted in the preparation of examples in music notation and with proofreading. Also at CUNY, I am grateful to my colleague, William Rothstein, for guidance in Schenkerian matters.

In writing this book, I benefited enormously from the incisive critique offered by two anonymous readers for Oxford University Press, as well as from conversations over many years with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Jennifer Iverson, William Cheng, Bruce Quaglia, and many other scholars in the emerging field of music and disability.


An earlier, highly condensed version of chapter 1 appeared as “Modernist Music and the Representation of Disability” in the colloquy “On the Disability Aesthetics of Music,” in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69/2 (2016): 530–36. Earlier versions of chapters 3 and 6 appeared in the *Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* as “Representing the Extraordinary Body: Musical Modernism’s Aesthetics of Disability” and “Autism and Postwar Serialism as Neurodiverse Forms of Cultural Modernism.”

The *Oxford Handbook* was the brainchild of Suzanne Ryan, whose advocacy for scholarship on music and disability has been crucial for the development of the field and for the writing of the present book. I am deeply grateful to Suzanne, and to the entire editorial team at Oxford University Press. As with my previous books, my deepest debt of gratitude is owed to my beloved life partner, Sally Goldfarb. This book is gratefully dedicated to her.



## ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

Instead of traditional musical examples in staff notation, this book incorporates more than one hundred short analytical videos. These videos include musical scores in staff notation, analytical annotations, and audio recordings, all with the author's narrative voiceover. Each video is available in two versions: with captioning and without captioning.

These videos are available on the Companion Website that accompanies this book at the following link: [www.oup.com/us/brokenbeauty](http://www.oup.com/us/brokenbeauty). Videos available online are indicated in the text with Oxford's symbol .



## Broken Beauty





## CHAPTER 1

# Representing Disability

*Modernist music is centrally concerned with the representation of disabled bodies. Its most characteristic features—fractured forms, immobilized harmonies, conflicting textural layers, radical simplification of means in some cases, and radical complexity and hermeticism in others—can be understood as musical representations of disability conditions, including deformity/disfigurement, mobility impairment, madness, idiocy, and autism. Although modernist music embodies negative, eugenic-era attitudes toward disability, it also affirmatively claims disability as a resource, thus manifesting its disability aesthetics.*

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## DISABILITY AESTHETICS

*In their search for new kinds of beauty, modernist artists claim disability as a valuable resource.*

Disability scholar Tobin Siebers contends that modern art espouses a *disability aesthetics*, finding new sorts of beauty in bodies that are fractured, disfigured, and otherwise extraordinary in comparison to bodies that are presumptively normal. According to Siebers (2010, 3), the representation of disability is one of modernism's "defining concepts":

Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body—and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty—as the sole determination of the aesthetic. Rather, disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful but more so, as a result.<sup>1</sup>

Whether one thinks of the still-shocking depictions of wounded World War I veterans by Otto Dix; Picasso's cubist portraits of fractured bodies; the asymmetrical, disfigured bodies in the Viennese expressionism of Schiele and others; or the large number of paintings and sculptures in the first half of the twentieth century that depict strange or distorted bodies, it does seem as though Siebers is right to ask, "To what concept, other than the idea of disability, might be referred modern art's love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh?" (2010, 4).

For Siebers and other scholars of modernism in the arts, disability functions as an artistic resource: a source of images and an impetus for narrative. Disability is not a deficit to be filled, an obstacle to be overcome, or a deviation to be avoided; rather, it is a desirable and defining artistic quality. To put it most simply, disability enables artistic modernism. Disability scholars and activists speak of claiming disability, that is, of

1. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), provided the impetus for this book, and his reference to "beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken" provided its title. For related studies of the representation of disability in modern art, see Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (2010) and Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (2007). For a related perspective on disability and aesthetics, one that takes full account of the modernist dalliance with eugenic ideas of degeneration, see Michael Davidson, "Aesthetics" (2015a) and "The Rage of Caliban: Disabling Bodies in Modernist Aesthetics" (2015b). Like Davidson's discussion of Zemlinsky's opera *Der Zwerg*, this book treats modernist music "as a site for studying musical representation of bodily difference."

destigmatizing it and choosing it as an affirmative political, social, and cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, modernist art claims disability.

Modernist art aestheticizes disability into new forms of beauty. Aestheticizing disability does not mean prettifying it or normalizing it to conform to traditional standards of beauty, however. Rather, it means the significant broadening and, in some cases, the radical subversion and disruption of traditional notions of beauty. Artworks that exemplify an aesthetics of disability may thus “turn traditional conceptions of aesthetic beauty away from ideas of the natural and healthy body” (Siebers 2010, 134) and toward bodies that are deformed, disfigured, fractured, fragmented, and thus disabled. In short, modernist art bends beauty in the direction of disability.

Siebers claims bluntly that “the modern in art manifests itself as disability” (2010, 140). Is it possible to make a similar claim about modernist music? Can we say that the modern in music manifests itself as disability? Can we say that modernist music has a fundamental interest in representing the disabled human body? Can we say that modernist music claims disability?

This book will argue the affirmative for each of these questions. The sorts of qualities that make music distinctively modern—forms made of discrete blocks, stratified textures, immobile harmonies, radical simplification of materials, juxtaposition of seemingly incommensurable elements, extremes of internal complexity and self-reference—can be understood as representations of disabled bodies. Modernist music does many things, of course, and for many different reasons, but it maintains a fundamental interest in disability. In moving disability representation from a stigmatized periphery to a valorized center of artistic expression, modernist music claims disability.

Modernist music claims disability by making it a central concern and drawing on it as a valuable source of new kinds of musical combinations and musical effects. But the specific manner in which it stakes that claim varies quite a lot. The claim of disability is made amid—sometimes in defiance of and sometimes in compliance with—traditional stigmatizing attitudes toward disability, given added weight during a eugenic era. As a result, modernist representations of disability are often complex, riven with conflicts and internal contradictions. Amid these cross-currents, however, we often find in modernist music some sense of pleasure in and celebration of the disabled body.

2. On the idea of affirmatively “claiming disability” as a personal and political identity, see Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998).

## DEFINING DISABILITY

*Disabled bodies (and minds) make up a heterogeneous category whose members are marked as abnormal with respect to local norms of appearance and function, provoking the questions: What happened to you? What's wrong with you? How did you get this way?*

Disability is a broad category with poorly marked and permeable boundaries. Even in comparison with other expansive “minority” identities (like woman or Latinx or queer), disability is notably heterogeneous, embracing a wide range of differences in bodily functioning and appearance, including (but not limited to) facial deformities, unusual bodily proportions, missing limbs, chronic diseases, sensory impairments (like deafness and blindness), mobility impairments, psychiatric and developmental disorders, and cognitive or intellectual impairments. We might imagine disability as a category with central, prototypical members: more peripheral members enter the category based on their degree of resemblance to the prototypes. Just as the category of “bird” is populated by prototypical members (sparrow and robin) and less typical members (penguin and ostrich), we might think of disability as having prototypical members like blindness, deafness, facial or bodily deformity, mobility impairment, madness, and intellectual or developmental disabilities. For the most part, this book will be concerned with the relatively central and uncontroversial members of this category.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than attempt to impose and enforce a clear boundary on this category based on the bodily (dis)qualifications of its members, this book shifts attention away from the inherent qualities of bodies and toward the social and cultural contexts in which some bodies are understood as disabled. In thinking of disability this way, I follow a broad consensus within the field of disability studies. For Mitchell and Snyder, disabilities are “cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function.”<sup>4</sup> For Garland-Thomson, disability is “a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of

3. On general philosophical and cognitive issues associated with categorization, see George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (1987). For exploration of specifically musical categories, see Ian Quinn, “General Equal-Tempered Harmony” (2006) and Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (2002).

4. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Disability Studies and the Double Bind of Representation” (1997), 1.

bodily variations.”<sup>5</sup> In similar terms, this book will understand disability as any culturally stigmatized bodily difference.<sup>6</sup> By “difference,” I refer to deviation from whatever is understood as normal in a particular time and place. By “bodily,” I refer to the full range of physical and mental differences to which the human body is subject, whether congenital or acquired, including physical and mental illnesses or diseases, temporary or permanent injuries, and a variety of nonnormative bodily characteristics understood as disfiguring. By “stigmatized,” I refer to any negative social valuation (Goffman 1963). By “culturally,” I embrace a conception of disability as socially and culturally constructed, a historically contingent term whose meaning varies with time, place, and context. Disabled bodies are marked as abnormal with respect to some prevailing normative standard for bodily functioning or appearance.

The concept of the normal (including related terms like abnormality, norms, normative, and normalization) is central to this broad conception of disability. Disabled bodies are perceived as abnormal, as violating norms of appearance and functioning, and as therefore in need of normalization. In the real world, such bodies typically provoke a series of familiar questions: How did you get that way? What happened to you? What’s the matter? What is wrong with you? Disability creates a commotion, a disturbance in the norms that regulate bodily appearance and function, and these sorts of questions are a common response. Indeed, we might define a disability as any bodily condition (including appearance and/or behavior) that leads people to ask such questions. Disability seems to require an explanatory story, and it is the telling of the story, rather than any inherent quality of a mind or body, that signals the presence of disability.<sup>7</sup>

5. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” (2004a), 76.

6. This broad definition of disability underpins my previous study of disability in music: *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (2011), 9–11.

7. The role of the concept of “normal” in constructing disability is the central theme of Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995). For Davis’s more recent reconsideration of normality and disability, see *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (2013). The sorts of questions evoked by nonnormative bodies, and the range of possible responses to these questions, are explored in three important publications by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: “The Story of My Work: How I Became Disabled” (2014); “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography” (2002); and *Staring: How We Look* (2009). The idea that disability creates a commotion comes from Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (2005).

## DEFINING MUSICAL MODERNISM

*Modernist musical works make up a heterogeneous category whose members are marked as abnormal with respect to the normatively sounding and functioning music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provoking the questions: What happened to you? What's wrong with you? How did you get this way?*

Like disability, musical modernism is a broad category with poorly marked and permeable boundaries. Rather than seek firm starting and ending dates, or a definitive list of shared style characteristics, we might take the same route as with disability, imagining it as a category with central, prototypical members; more peripheral members enter the category based on their degree of resemblance to the prototypes. The category of musical modernism might be conceived with reference to prototypical composers and works, including Schoenberg (*Pierrot Lunaire*, String Quartet No. 2, String Trio); Stravinsky (*Petrushka*, Three Pieces for String Quartet, *Rite of Spring*, Piano Concerto, *The Rake's Progress*, *Requiem Canticles*); Ives (String Quartet No. 2); Bartók (String Quartets No. 3 and No. 4, Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta); Webern (*Bagatelles*, Op. 9, Piano Variations, Op. 27); Berg (*Wozzeck*, *Lyrical Suite*); Ruth Crawford Seeger (String Quartet); and Babbitt (*Composition for Four Instruments*). These prototypically modernist works will be the focus of the disability-oriented interpretations in this book.

In addition to whatever musical qualities these works may share, they are united in their agonistic relationship to the conventionally tonal, classic-romantic music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With that in mind, we can define modernism in music as we defined disability a moment ago, not as a quality that inheres in a body or work, but rather in its relationship to a regulating, normative standard. Modernist music is marked as abnormal with respect to the normatively sounding and functioning music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Like disabled bodies, modernist music causes a commotion and seems to require an explanatory story. Its deviations from musical convention are shocking and profound and have provoked endless critical response to the implicit questions, How did you get that way? What happened to you? What's the matter? What is wrong with you? Modernist music in general seems to provoke those questions, as (synecdochically) do lots of specific features of modernist music.<sup>8</sup> As Maus (2004, 156) observes with respect to atonality, "Non tonal music seems almost to require a story about how it

8. Standard accounts of modernist music that implicitly seek to answer these questions include Robert Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (1991); Brian Simms, *Music of the Twentieth Century: Style and Structure* (1996); Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early*