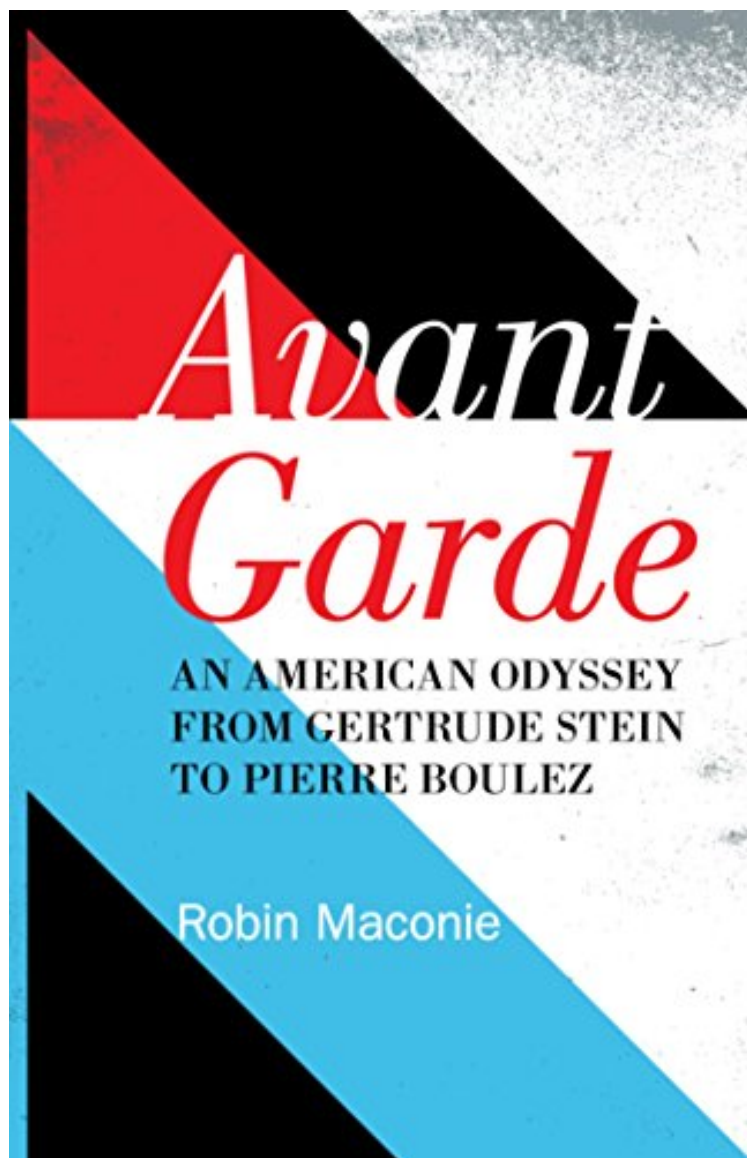


Avant Garde: An American Odyssey from Gertrude Stein to Pierre Boulez

Robin Maconie

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Robin Maconie : Avant Garde: An American Odyssey from Gertrude Stein to Pierre Boulez before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Avant Garde: An American Odyssey from Gertrude Stein to Pierre Boulez:

Gertrude Stein and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead were unlikely friends who spent most of their mature lives in exile: Stein in France and Whitehead in the United States. Their friendship was based on a mutual admiration for the philosophical pragmatism of William James and skepticism toward the European tradition of intellectual abstraction extending as far back as Plato and Aristotle. Though neither was musical, both were leading exponents of a new orientation toward time and knowledge acquisition that would go on to influence succeeding generations of composers. Through Virgil Thomson, Stein came to influence John Cage and the New York school of abstract music; through his teaching in the United States, Whitehead's philosophy of time and cognition came to be seen in America and abroad as an alternative to Newtonian neoclassicism, an alternative clearly acknowledged in the metric modulations of Elliott Carter and Conlon Nancarrow as well as the post-1950 total serialism of Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The seemingly unlikely influence of Stein and Whitehead on Thomson, Cage, Carter, and the minimalists tells a remarkable story of transmission within and among the arts and philosophy, one that Robin Maconie unravels through his series of essays in *Avant Garde: An American Odyssey from Gertrude Stein to Pierre Boulez*. Maconie explores, from Hollywood to Harvard, the way in which music functions as a form of communication across the boundaries of language, serving the causes of trade and diplomacy through its representation of national identity, emotional character, honorable intention, and social discipline. The study of music as a language inevitably became the object of information science after World War II, but, as Maconie notes, 60 years on, music's refusal to yield to scientific elucidation has generated a stream of anti-music propaganda by a powerful collective of celebrity science writers. In a sequence of linked essays, Stockhausen specialist Robin Maconie reconsiders the role of music and music technology through careful examination of key modern concepts with respect to time, existence, identity, and relationship as formulated by such thinkers as Einstein, Russell, Whitehead, and Stein, along with Freud, Schoenberg, Wittgenstein, and Marcel Duchamp. This foray into art, music, science, and philosophy is ideally suited for students and scholars of these disciplines, as well as those seeking to understand more deeply the influence these individuals had on one another's work and modern music.

Robin Maconie brings to these essays on the avant-garde a deep knowledge and understanding of contemporary music, including Boulez, Stockhausen, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Messiaen, Ives, Cage, Babbitt, Carter, Berio, Varèse and many others. From this core his investigations reach out to embrace other media and disciplines, especially literature (Artaud, Breton, Beckett, William Carlos Williams, e. e. cummings, Gertrude Stein), the visual arts (Picasso, Klee, Duchamp), film (Eisenstein, Bunuel, Disney), philosophy (Adorno, Wittgenstein, Saussure, Whitehead, Freud, McLuhan) and the information sciences. At the core of the book are profound reflections on the relationship between avant-garde music and philosophical investigations into the nature of time and knowledge acquisition on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the primary references are to twentieth century developments in Western Europe (especially France and Germany) and the United States, Maconie, because of his South Pacific origins, brings to contemporary culture a refreshing and sometimes surprising 'Klinton perspective on Western civilisation'. Lively, opinionated, witty, these essays continuously inform, entertain and engage; above all they constitute an impassioned defence of the utility, beauty and relevance of the avant-garde (especially in music) against its detractors in politics and science. (The Holloway Press) Maconie, a New Zealand-based writer and composer, covers a great deal of ground in this collection of 16 essays. The author studied with the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007) and has written extensively on the man and his works (cf. *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*, CH, Oct'05, 43-0850). It is thus unsurprising that Stockhausen figures prominently here. Maconie discusses Stockhausen's music alongside that of Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Milton Babbitt, and others. He pays particular attention to connections between music and language, especially as regards electronic music and the manipulation of recordings of the human voice. Maconie situates his comments on the musical avant-garde within a much broader context of art, philosophy, history, film, literature, language, and science. The subtitle is inapt; the author gives European composers, artists, and thinkers at least as much attention as their American counterparts. The speed with which Maconie moves from one subject to another occasionally makes his point difficult to follow. But this collection is interesting for the many interesting cross-disciplinary connections it brings to light. Summing Up: Recommended. (CHOICE) So much to tell, so little space — a mere 309 pages for all the facts, opinions and sidetracks Robin Maconie crams into *Avant Garde*, reaching out beyond what his subtitle, *An American Odyssey from Gertrude Stein to Pierre Boulez*, suggests. Maconie can be stimulating, searching and provocative on music and much else. It's that 'much else' that makes him stimulating. It's his distaste for any complacent listening that makes him provocative. It's his searching mind that produces sentences that start with 'Mozart's Magic Flute and by way of Captain Cook and Sydney Parkinson end up at James Cameron's movie *Avatar*. It all makes for 'high alert, keep your eyes on the logic' reading, so don't let your attention wander for a second or you'll need to read each sentence again, and then again with reference books, a good library and a stiff whisky close by. (New Zealand Listener) New Zealand native Robin Maconie [. . .] is considered one of the world's leading authorities on contemporary music. (Albrecht Thiemann *Opernwelt*, (November, 2012)) Over the course of this book's 309 pages, New Zealand author Robin Maconie takes the reader on a

decidedly idiosyncratic, but always stimulating voyage through 20th-century music and its environs. Although the book is unarguably musico-centric, Maconie's frame of reference is huge, taking in popular cinema, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the American writer Gertrude Stein and the mathematician/philosopher Alfred North Whitehead... Maconie's impressive zig-zaggeries of thought, his occasional witticisms (when they come, they're good) and his infernally wide frame of reference deliver an undeniably exhilarating ride. (Tempo) Avant Garde is a balance between these: a discourse focused on the relationship between the information and music communities as exhibited primarily in Stockhausen's music. In this book, Maconie works to draw connections.... The analysis... is clear and useful. (Music Reference Services Quarterly) About the Author Robin Maconie is a New Zealand composer and musicologist. He is the author of *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (2005), *The Way of Music: Aural Training for the Internet Generation* (2006), and *Musicologia: Musical Knowledge from Plato to John Cage* (2010), all published by Scarecrow Press.