THE NEW MUSIC, by Reginald Smith Brindle
Oxford University Press, 1975 (£3.95)

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The progress of new music in the 30 years since 1945 has been astonishingly rapid, fertile and diverse, and we may now expect the appearance of books devoted to charting this post-war era. Reginald Smith Brindle's study is the first to be published in Britain aiming specifically, as the author says, "to give a concise picture of the more adventurous evolutions of music since 1945".

Already available is Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music* (London: Studio Vista, 1974) which, for the Cage-oriented music with which it is concerned, is distinctly preferable. Nyman deals intentionally with a limited field, but then so, we find, does Brindle (but from a different standpoint) whose book is, by his own admission, far from comprehensive. Other books which a prospective purchaser might wish to consider are *Music in the Modern Age*, ed. F.W. Sternfeld (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), containing piecemeal coverage of composers and works up to 1970; *New Directions in Music* by David Cope (Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1971), a useful if jerky guide unfortunately not marketed in the UK., John Vinton's excellent and fascinating *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Music* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974) which, although commencing at 1900, has numerous articles, some of them outstanding, relevant to the post-war scene; and Eric Salzman's *Twentieth-Century Music: an Introduction*, the second edition of which (London: Prentice-Hall, 1974) allots about two-fifths to 'The Avant-garde and Beyond'. Salzman's book has more American emphasis and more objectivity than Brindle's, so that the two (indeed all that I have listed) largely complement each other. None provides a full picture of these eventful and turbulent years.

Of course, for any potential author, his very closeness to the birth-pangs, to the multifarious unsifted dross and achievement of the period, makes for many difficulties. How exhaustive should he be? How far should he attempt to evaluate? How can he impose order on the confusion of cross-currents whose stormy controversies have scarcely subsided? What degree of involvement, prior knowledge and understanding may he assume in his reader?

Faced with such problems, Brindle's preface reads, understandably perhaps, like a table of escape clauses. There is to be no mention of the more conservative composers, no biographical details, no attempt to discuss the total output of any one composer. Furthermore, Brindle writes, "my approach has been highly selective, . . . the book is made up of personal musical experiences and judgements". To a certain extent, of course, this is inevitable. But when it allows him to omit any mention of such composers as Birtwistle, Carter, Crumb, Lutosławski, Petrassi and Reich, and to avoid reference to a single piece of music, let along discussion of it, by, for instance, Henze, Takemitsu or Xenakis, then the very title of the book becomes questionable. As far as it goes, Brindle's study rests firmly on a Central European-Italian axis with a minimal coverage of America (mainly Cage, Brown and Feldman).

Given this rather narrow European viewpoint, there is some useful information, particularly concerning the immediate post-war years. The zealous, partisan attitudes of the late 40s and early 50s are well conveyed, and Brindle is surely right to suggest on page 23 that the rhythmic revolution brought about by total serialism was its most significant aspect. It is interesting to learn, for example, what recordings of Webern's music were available prior to the complete Craft set issued in 1957. There are competent chapters on 'Electronic Music' and 'Vocal Music — The New Choralism', a useful list of 'Some New Notation Symbols' and eloquent exposition of a handful of contemporary classics: *Stimmung, Passaggio* and *Il Canto Sospeso* especially.

The warmth which the author evidently feels towards these works reveals itself elsewhere, alas, all too rarely, whilst one continually finds oneself wishing for more thorough and comprehensive documentation, for illuminating explanation and insights. The brevity of the individual chapters (which follow a reasonably satisfactory sequence of 'isms' and techniques) aided by an effectively direct style, makes for admirable readability. Yet often they provide less than half the picture. More seriously, Brindle's frequent unwillingness to offer explanations for the strange manifestations of recent music constitutes an important opportunity lost, especially since, without them, sceptical readers may be further alienated rather than assisted towards a better understanding of the music itself. Chapters on 'Indeterminacy, Chance, and Aleatory Music', 'Improvisation — Graphic Scores — Text Scores', 'Numbers', 'Concrete Music' and 'Cage and Other Americans' tend to be mere catalogues of phenomena with far too little unfolding of the artistic, philosophical and social currents giving them purpose and meaning. For the uninitiated, the musical purpose of the activities described is likely to remain inexplicably baffling, whilst the author's critical, sometimes hostile tone towards the music discussed (he is surprisingly censorious for a composer who is himself hardly a conservative) provides slender advocacy to persuade the poorly-informed or antagonistic listener that any of it is worth his attention.

This lack of enthusiasm is disappointing. Despite it, there are useful things in the book, and if it fails either to convince the sceptic or to satisfy the keen follower of the avantgarde, it should, nevertheless, be helpful to the student with a newly-acquired curiosity about contemporary music but limited experience of it. Readers will find valuable the numerous music examples, all of them carefully explained (but, incidently, none of them numbered although they are referred to by number in the text!). Presumably their provision is partly responsible for the high price of this 206-page paperback.

One would like to commend this book more warmly, but there are also, unhappily, some lapses in its authority and conviction.

On page 184, for instance, Brindle writes that "Eastern Europe is the last refuge of great religious music", citing Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion* and Ligeti's *Requiem* and *Lux Aeterna* as examples. Yet the first was written for Münster in West Germany, and the two Ligeti works long after their composer had settled in the West, the *Requiem* in response to a commission from Swedish Radio. Perhaps the author's reluctance to suggest answers to the many questions posed by new music betrays his own uncertainty. For not only is his chapter on 'The Avant-garde and Society' confused and inconclusive, it also seems to contradict assertions he made in Chapter 1. Whereas on page 1 we read that "In this century [music's] progress follows the history of peoples and societies as never before, and this close association of music and society is particularly evident since the Second World War", on page 182 we find that "The musical avant-garde . . . has not shown itself to be particularly interested in politics or sociology. If one excludes certain works . . . one must record that the work of the avant-garde, particularly that of leaders such as Boulez, Stockhausen and Cage, is singularly dissociated from this world". Similarly, on page 142, Brindle contends that "in the *Sinfonia* Berio's musical idiom, usually so constant and incorruptible, has for once failed him", apparently forgetting that in his contribution to Sternfeld's *Music in the Modern Age* he described the work as "a fine conception" of Berio's "full maturity". Although such contradictions are fairly infrequent, they do undermine one's confidence in the author's judgement. The field is still wide open for somebody to write a definitive and objective study of the last 30 years, explaining not only what has happened, but why, what it means, and how it reflects the social and artistic currents of the time.