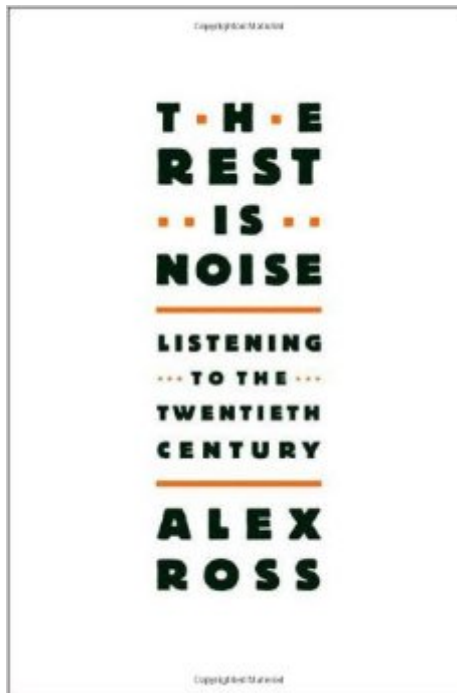


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# The Rest Is Noise: Listening To The Twentieth Century



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism  
A New York Times Book Review Top Ten Book of the Year  
Time magazine Top Ten Nonfiction Book of 2007  
Newsweek Favorite Books of 2007  
A Washington Post Book World Best Book of 2007  
In this sweeping and dramatic narrative, Alex Ross, music critic for The New Yorker, weaves together the histories of the twentieth century and its music, from Vienna before the First World War to Paris in the twenties; from Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia to downtown New York in the sixties and seventies up to the present. Taking readers into the labyrinth of modern style, Ross draws revelatory connections between the century's most influential composers and the wider culture. *The Rest Is Noise* is an astonishing history of the twentieth century as told through its music.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This magisterial book will, for many years, remain the definitive account of classical music (or art music, if you prefer) in the twentieth century, from the time of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler to the age of Steve Reich and John Adams. Ross situates his history of an art form within the swirl of contemporary developments in culture and politics. The many individual stories of composers and their chief works are unified through the use of literary themes, the philosophical musings of Theodor Adorno and a close analysis of Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faust*. Along the way, Ross gives us an absolutely riveting account of the musical scene in the Third Reich, covering the composers who stayed and were complicit with the regime, as well as those artists who either fled or perished. He covers music in the concentration camps and the life of composers under Soviet dictatorship. He makes links between modern performance practice and the rise of jazz, bebop and

adventurous rockers like the Beatles and Radiohead. His knowledge is encyclopedic and his research prodigious. Here and there his enthusiasms betray him. The heavy emphasis on German music as the spine of musical development turns Wagner into the main 19th century ancestor to modern music, a leit motive throughout the book; he scants the incipient modernisms of Tchaikovsky and the Russian School, the contributions of Liszt, Berlioz and other French composers. The chapter on Sibelius is so long it feels like a Bruckner symphony, ditto the scene by scene analysis of Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*; these sections are among the few longeurs encountered in a historical text that generally reads like a mystery novel. This book is highly recommended for anyone who is afraid of modern music but be warned, it will make you go out and compulsively expand your library of discs!

A history of 20th century music with the history left out, thankfully. Ross writes vividly about specific compositions and imparts his enormous enthusiasm. Everyone who dips into this book will compile a list of works to hear. His avidity is a model for other listeners: he approaches *Metastaseis* with the same eager expectation of enjoyment as the *Firebird*. And happily his enthusiasm is focused solely on the music--the ideologies, manifestoes, movements and politics of 20th century classical music he approaches with extreme scepticism. He is especially good at teasing apart a composer's words from a composer's music. Naturally he has preferences: he provides several full-length portraits of Strauss and Stravinsky at different points in their long careers, and movingly profiles Shostakovich and Britten, but Schoenberg and Cage appear more as instigators than artists, and Boulez is given up as an obnoxious enigma. But overall, I can't imagine a better guide. While modernism in the visual arts has been pretty much embraced by culture at large (e.g. the crowds at MOMA or Tate Modern), musical modernism, the tradition of 20th century classical music, has not. Whatever the explanation, Alex Ross thinks it's a shame that more people don't know it and love it. He certainly loves it, and it's prompted some of the best writing on music since Bernard Shaw.

Alex Ross' excellent book is what you might call a 'social' history. He doesn't ignore the analytical side (though following recent practice, there isn't a single bit of notation in the whole book) and gives pretty good prose evocations of how a lot of music was put together--Webern's partition of a twelve tone row into three-note segments, for example--but focuses rather on the whole flow of things, on the relationships between composers and with society. He isn't afraid to quote Webern's sycophantic praise of the Third Reich, for example. The book is non-ideological in the sense that he steps back and views the infighting and political jockeying for position from outside. It becomes clear

that virtually all 20th century music is political or politicized to a considerable degree. Or suffers from politics! The truth Ross isn't afraid to recount is that a lot of 20th century composers, especially among the 'progressives', were playing the avant-garde game of achieving fame through being merely annoying. Many accounts of 20th century music, when they weren't mere chronicles, are either dryly analytical or manifestos for one camp or another (such as Rene Leibowitz' book on Schoenberg and his school). Ross is particularly keen to rescue certain composers from the condescension of the 'progressives'. Three in particular are Sibelius, Shostakovich and Britten. Boulez comes across as a particularly nasty piece of work on the condescending side. There is a large section on Hitler's musical tastes which is surprisingly relevant because, as Ross points out, it was the Nazis and their love of certain music (and in return the loyalty a remarkable number of composers and conductors showed them, Karajan, for example) that cost 'classical' music its moral authority. He points out that, pre-WWII, classical music was coded in popular culture with higher things. But afterward, we find that every villain loves classical music. The example that springs to mind is Hannibal Lector and the Goldberg Variations. One interesting point Ross makes is that while there were few religious pieces written by major composers in the 19th century, the 20th century teems with them--everyone from Stravinsky to Messaien to Arvo Part. (He calls works like the Verdi and Berlioz Requiems concert music with Latin text, which is fair enough.) Ross' book reminds me that we tend to forget how really beautiful a lot of 20th century music is: Messaien, Stravinsky (Symphony of Psalms), Shostakovich, Part, Adams and on and on. I will forgo the near-obligatory list of people he left out or said too much about. This book is possibly the best history of 20th century music I have read and I have read most of them. It is refreshingly free of adherence to one camp or another and, while idiosyncratic, is enjoyably so. I would say that this would be the book on 20th century music I would most recommend even to a non-musician.

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