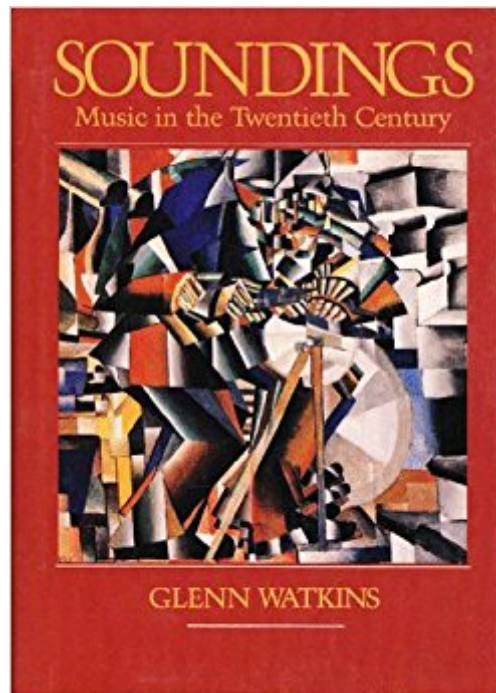




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Soundings: Music In The Twentieth Century



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This book is extremely full of information and very detailed. Lots of primary sources and makes an excellent college text book.

This is a unique and important book. It provides a comprehensive overview of art music in the twentieth century; a topic that is not given the attention it deserves. Mr. Watkins demonstrates a unique breadth of knowledge of the music of the last hundred plus years and he also possesses a rare depth of insight into the wonderfully rich flowering of musical styles and the connection of those styles to the larger artistic culture in painting, sculpture, literature, poetry, theatre, and dance. This book is so rich in explanation and insight that it is impossible to take in all it has to offer in a single front to back reading. It is one of those texts that rewards deep and repeated study. You will want to return not only for its texts, musical examples, and images, but also for its rich notes and references. The book opens by giving us wonderful background in the cultural movements in Vienna and Paris from 1885 through the first year of the First World War. The next two parts lay out the way new movements and views arose in Europe from 1909-1930. The next two sections brilliantly demonstrate the rise and aims of national movements and the way the first and second world wars caused artists to create works aiming beyond nationalism. Serialism and the search for new sounds are the subjects of the next two sections. The book closes with a survey of the art music of the late twentieth century including its movements in synthesizing earlier composers into new musical movements and the way classic forms were re-used and re-interpreted. Mr. Watkins tells us these great stories by providing wonderful readings of aptly chosen works that connect and illuminate all these movements. It isn't a continuous narrative of one thing after another. Instead, we get the benefit of seeing great works up close and in their proper cultural context. For me, one of the great benefits of this book was the way it opened up the connections between painting, sculpture, and literature to the music of this period. I had studied that for the Baroque, Classic, and Romantic periods, but had not been given that insight into the twentieth century. And this book does it better than anything I have seen for those previous centuries. Reading this book was an electric experience for me. It is just so intensely packed with insight and revelation. At least it was for me.

Watkins seems to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the first half of the twentieth century, and does a very good job of encapsulating stylistic trends. However, his examples sometimes do not support his conclusions, although they seem sound. Often, a few logical steps seem to be left out.

Finally, this book is marred by shoddy editing. Figures do not match the text, there are factual errors, and the reader is constantly being referred to "pp. 000-000".

I took a class from Prof Watkins in the early 1980s, and our text was a photocopy of a working version of this book, which I still have in my bookshelf. It was a marvelous class that informed me about a lot of music I had not heard before that time. It was enjoyable to think about music in the context of other arts of the time. He was a great talker and polymath. If I hadn't just read Alex Ross's masterly "The Rest is Noise" I might run out and get the published version of this.

The initial printing, with the described editing problems, was corrected almost a decade ago. Readers are encouraged to see the result for themselves. The book has been widely and successfully adopted as a text throughout the United States.

Soundings is a good book with a great many examples and a great deal of information, but the format often leaves the reader in quite a quandry, as the author titles a chapter "Alan Berg Before Wozzeck," and the reader expects such. Then the author goes on to talk about Berg, but keeps referring back to Webern and Mahler and Schoenberg, and the reader at many points is left wondering exactly who this piece of music and that particular quote is by. Once again, much information in a format lacking in organization.

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