

# Jean-Jacques Nattiez and British Ideas about Musical Sense

Arnold Whittall

The mid-twentieth century was a time of special turbulence in British higher education. It is not simply that a rapid transformation from parochial to international concerns was required. Before 1950, the Cambridge Music Professor Edward J. Dent had played a prominent and productive role not only in the professionalization of historical musicology but also in the newly established International Society for Contemporary Music. But fresh challenges arose with the rapid expansion of higher education after 1950 and with the potentially fractious interrelationships evolving between the Oxbridge elite and new universities and conservatoires offering music degrees that required penetrating intellectual curiosity as well as the practical professionalism manifest in Oxbridge college choirs and instrumental ensembles.

During this intensely unstable phase, the possibility of treating music as a phenomenon inseparable from other contemporary cultural and theoretical initiatives—not just about expressive character but also about the technical details of construction and the intricate social forces at work in musical communication—needed ultra-persuasive advocates if they were not to be dismissed out of hand. It is in this context that Jean-Jacques' early visits to conferences and other university-sponsored events in the United Kingdom provided vital and innovative examples of the inestimable value of an advocacy based on an infectious curiosity about what could seem at first glance to be entirely abstract ideas and systems, with their semiotic roots in linguistics and anthropology. From the outset, Jean-Jacques has always made it abundantly clear that those ideas do not require solemn aridity of exposition in order to be taken seriously. In this respect, following the Nattiez model has remained a regular and cherished aspect of serious British work in music theory and analysis ever since, and especially for those like myself who share his particular enthusiasm for the twin peaks of Wagner and Boulez.