

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives for Contemporary Music in the 21st Century. Edited by Dániel Péter Biró and Kai Johannes Polzhofer. Hofheim: Wolke, 2016. [218 p. ISBN 9783955930721 (paperback), €24.] Music examples, author biographies.

This book contains a series of essays from the conference “New Tendencies of Contemporary Music in Germany,” held in 2015 at Harvard University and at Boston’s Goethe-Institut. The gathering brought together composers (both well established and less experienced), musicologists, and cultural critics from Europe and America. A significant contribution from women composers and scholars brings a very welcome diversity to the resulting collection published here. Ranging broadly in scope within the new-music culture of Germany, the essays vary considerably in depth and in breadth. Although several remain in their original German, most of the essays are in English.

A few common threads run through the book. In addition to providing a lively cultural critique of music’s function in society and its relationship to institutions, it examines timely questions, such as the way the Internet has changed contemporary music and our ability to make aesthetic judgments about new musical works. Many of the authors reveal anxiety over the commercial influence of popular culture. The book paints a picture of new music that is mainly viewed from the position of those who have enjoyed some success within the established, institutional system of musical production in Germany—for example, composers Helmut Lachenmann, Brian Ferneyhough, Gérard Grisey, and György Kurtág. Although it stems from the earlier work of Luigi Nono, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and John Cage, the book represents a variety of perspectives and provokes new questions.

Many concerns that the authors express have become exponentially more

urgent following the 2016 United States election and the serious difficulties experienced in Germany when forming a governing coalition after the Alternative für Deutschland party won nearly 13 percent of the vote in September 2017. In retrospect, it may seem that the essays emerge from a time “just before the storm,” at a point in history when the cauldron was about to boil over. What kind of economic and cultural conditions gave rise to the renewed popularity of right-wing political organizations? Allan Antliff’s unusual contribution, “Glamourized,” does not deal with music at all but rather analyzes the way in which the American visual artist Jeff Koons has earned immense profits, in a bizarrely distorted art market, by fabricating pieces from readily available commercial objects and working on grand commissions within a pop-art aesthetic. By way of the economic theory of Fredric Jameson, Antliff’s analysis of the conditions that led to Koons’s spectacular rise result, somewhat predictably, in a cynical conclusion: “postmodernism serves a social purpose, namely to repress critical thought on the part of the public, whom [Koons] regards as infantile” (p. 41). This essay might have seemed out of place in this book had it not been for the unexpected rise of Donald Trump in the political sphere. Instead, Antliff’s analysis is surprisingly prescient, even though it does not directly engage with music.

The collection includes an interesting series of artist manifestos that have become something of a specialty for the Wolke publishing house. Ming Tsao’s essay “Dialectical Composing” ranks as the most significant. Central to

Tsao's philosophy is the synthesis of Lachenmann's concept of *Strukturklang* with Ferneyhough's idea of the "figure" into an approach Tsao calls "lyric subjectivity." The goal is to "discover beauty, violence and desire within a complex exterior world of sounds placed under formal pressures that are dialectically mediated through simulacra invention and discursive reference" (p. 88). Tsao's approach does not only revolve around his own music but also is sensitive to the performers themselves. His desire to open the "path to their dignity and freedom" and to interconnect performers by imbuing their actions with "a larger sense of musical communication" (p. 90) is an admirable ethical statement, but it borders on the utopian. Littered with pithy quotations from a dizzying variety of sources, Tsao's essay touches upon many important threads of Continental philosophy. His essay does more than elucidate his own music; it also provides a larger context for some of the thornier problems in composing today.

Another artist manifesto comes from the American composer Suzanne Farrin. Residing in New York City, Farrin has enjoyed considerable success in the United States and Germany in the past few years and is known for frequently transforming the sounds of acoustic instruments through electronic means. The main question she poses at the outset is how to be an "American" composer without overemphasizing stereotypical musical signs or symbols. She tries to answer the question by providing examples from her own music. In one work, she imaginatively juxtaposes a phonograph player with acoustic instruments such as the viola. Her goal is to "create an art of compassion within the boundaries of the country" (p. 109). But instead of imagining a boundary as somewhere to build a wall, Farrin follows Martin Heidegger's notion that it is a site where something "begins its presenc-

ing" (Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell [New York: Harper Collins, 2008], 356).

A third compositional report by Manuela Meier moves the question of borders towards a narrative of periphery, or, in her words, "the inconspicuous in the outskirts of one's attention, the fragile and irregular, the fleeting" (p. 96). Her string quartet, *if only it were not bound to*, harnesses the interference and interaction between multiphonics and harmonics created by fragile "streaks" and "flickering textures" on the instruments (p. 97). The result is a sound that is, so to speak, on the edge of sound: always "on the brink of involuntarily vanishing or breaking off" (p. 99). Meier's contribution to the book is brief but important, for her fleeting and airy music effectively deterritorializes listeners, forcing them to negotiate spaces "outside . . . the influence of a solely dominating center to which everything tends to yield" (p. 96).

Inspired by the light-design works of visual artist James Turrell, Martin Iddon analyzes some of his thinking behind the composition *Danaë*, which won the British Composer Award in 2014. Taking its name from both Greek mythology and an eponymous work by Turrell, *Danaë* is scored for string trio. Each player needs two bows, leading to "impossible" textures" (p. 155)—perhaps analogous to the impossible spaces suggested by Turrell's light pieces. Iddon's writing brings attention not only to the sound of the piece, but also to the unusual actions required to produce that sound. To paraphrase Turrell, his art has no image, object, or specific place of focus, and therefore the effect can be described as "seeing yourself see" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVoMJHSNyI0> [accessed 15 February 2018]). Perhaps when Iddon says that his goal is to enable the listener to "*hear* the body" (p. 160), he means he wants us to "hear ourselves listen."

Apart from providing composers a platform to write about their music, the book contains several essays that are more aligned with the field of aesthetics. Writings by Ferdinand Zehentritter, Christian Grüny, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Kai Johannes Polzhofer, and Gunnar Hindrichs engage the more theoretical side of new music. For many English-speaking readers, this fascinating world will be out of reach, since only Mahnkopf's essay was translated from German.

In his examination of Charles Baudelaire's concept of the *flâneur*, Zehentritter interrogates the way in which composing exists as a kind of art in itself. Drawing from work by Hannes Seidl, a composer who has used a great deal of electronic technology in his electroacoustic music, Zehentritter ultimately concludes that the process of creating artwork exists in tandem with the act of converting reality into abstraction. Proceeding from the statement "Music is special" (p. 119), Grüny argues that because of its unique position in the cognitive realm as both a medium for artistic expression and a form of communication, music has the unusual potential (but not necessarily the obligation) to enjoy a more autonomous existence than other forms of art. Instead of judging music on the basis of its perceived structural complexity, it might be evaluated on its ability to interact with the other arts. Returning to a critique of music's place within a neoliberal economic structure, Polzhofer draws from writings of Peter Bürger and Hanno Rauterberg and argues that the current system of producing art music tends to sacrifice the individual artist, instead rewarding those who are ethically indifferent or cynically pragmatic. This analysis clearly feeds into Antliff's biting criticism of Koons's work. Polzhofer even suggests that art's ability to resist repressive politics is under stress in current times. To

make music relevant today, at least one solution is necessary: to embrace aesthetic autonomy. Both Hindrichs and Mahnkopf concern themselves with the question of aesthetic determination or evaluation of the quality of music. Hindrichs draws a distinction between value and aesthetic judgments: the former is a personal opinion, so the latter—hinging on an appreciation of musical autonomy—should take precedence, since value judgments are subject to one's own personal idiosyncratic musical tastes, whereas aesthetic judgments focus on the autonomy of music itself and thereby transcend the realm of the senses. Mahnkopf outlines four criteria for judging the quality of new music, including reflectiveness, capacity for critique, utopia, and "messianicity" (p. 139). He also levels a critique against "fun society and event culture," contrasting it with the "lived life" of reflection, conviction, faith, and the Derridian idea of "art without condition" (p. 145).

Organized into thirty aphorisms in the rhetorical tradition of Guy Debord, Michael Pisaro's essay examines the institutionalization of composition and its ramifications. His essay is positioned somewhere in between the world of the artistic manifesto and the cultural critique. Focusing on the concept of the "event" and what it means, Pisaro argues that institutions are not good at recognizing significant stylistic innovations, which have the "capacity to create and populate a world, by the change they create" (p. 68). An event is only recognizable *after the fact*, not at the time it occurs. Furthermore, events "are measured and judged by their wake." Shifting gears, Pisaro examines the idea of the "concept" as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. One wonders how well Pisaro's thesis that "at some point in the process of making art, *there will be material*" (p. 70, italics in original) ultimately fares when con-

fronted by Turrell's colorful light sculptures, which seem to call into question the need for any physical material at all. By arguing that art requires some form of reduction or abstraction, Pisaro echoes Zehentreiter's thesis that artistic creation is a process of reducing or converting reality into an aesthetic form.

Situated at the very end of the book, Dániel Péter Biró's essay takes many of the threads that have run through the earlier essays and weaves them together into an eloquent conclusion. His criticism of the Internet as a form of repression in present-day Hungary prefigures recent revelations of the wholesale penetration of social media platforms by malicious "bots" in the United States. According to Biró, the music that accompanies the newest Internet "revolution" is principally " 'entertaining' music, which is often funny, seemingly socially critical, very masculine and, most importantly . . . totally 'cool,' fashionable, while keeping emotion and depth at bay" (p. 200). From this perspective, the Internet has induced a new element of superficiality in today's smartphone-obsessed culture. Biró proposes some criteria for critical composition. He argues that music should be *accessed*, rather than *accessible*—that it should simultaneously stimulate the imagination of listeners and connect to history. The current culture of distraction works against the kind of focused, reflective listening that is so urgently needed today. Concluding with a Talmudic theological swerve, Biró calls for a rediscovery of ourselves, challenging composers with the idea of creating "other music," not necessarily "new music" (p. 207).

As with many collections of this type, the essays fall into several categories. It would have been beneficial for the reader to organize the pieces along those lines, by grouping together essays on composition, critical theory, and

cultural theory. Although the translations by Zsófia Surján and others are generally excellent, annoying typos abound and occasionally distract the flow of reading. The general quality and interest of the individual essays, however, is very high. This book will be an important resource for anyone who struggles to understand both the deep fractures and the astounding creative opportunities of our time.

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Environmental Sound Artists: In Their Own Words. By Frederick Bianchi and V. J. Manzo. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. [xxvii, 204 p. ISBN 9780190234614 (hardback), \$105; ISBN 9780190234621 (paperback), \$36.95; ISBN 9780190234645 (e-book), varies.] Figures, tables, illustrations, index.

The concept of the "soundscape" received its language from R. Murray Schafer's *Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977; 2nd ed., *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* [Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994]). And yet much of contemporary sound art eschews the term *soundscape* in favor of language that is less lauded with polemical notions of sacred versus vulgar sounds. Experimental musical practices that incorporated environmental sounds were further explored by Pauline Oliveros, who was famous for her practice of deep listening and a holistic approach to composition that drew from elements of the environment. Uniquely, sound art has developed across sectors in radio, film, anthropology, music studies, and media arts. Accordingly, writing about sound studies effectively is writing from an interdisciplinary network that values creativity and critique equally. Bringing together perspectives of those who might count themselves as sound-studies