

BOOK REVIEW

Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music. By Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

This is the inaugural volume of a series of four designed to give a vivid and rounded sense of the vibrant energy that impelled American twentieth-century music. A must-read for anyone who cares about the foundations of that music, *Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music* contains a series of transcriptions from interviews housed at Yale University in their archives of the oral history of American music (OHAM). These interviews were conducted either directly with those composers—Ives, Eubie Blake, Copland, Gershwin, Cowell, Varèse, Ellington, and others—who collectively shaped our nation's music in the first decades of the twentieth century or with others who knew them firsthand. The latter range from persons we might expect (fellow musicians, family members, and business associates) to those who leap from the page as wonderful surprises—for example, Ives's barber! Rarely have five hundred pages of musicological text contained such richness of information combined with such liveliness of presentation. So candid are these interviews, so electric in rhythm, preserving the “jumpiness” of live speech, that it is hard to put the book down.

This is *not*, per se, a comprehensive history. Although the editors do their best in their generally excellent chapter introductions to convey a coherent sense of the development of American music in the decades on which this volume focuses (roughly 1900 to 1940), they choose not to festoon the interviews with the hundreds of scholarly notes required to “clear up” the many semitruths (or outright falsities) the interviews contain. Likely they felt to do so would swell the book to unmanageable length. As a result of this editorial decision, it is best read by those who already possess substantial knowledge of the history of this music and are savvy enough to realize that many statements need to be taken with a grain (or more) of salt. The American twentieth century, after all, was as replete with expressions of “personal politics” as any other century—and some of the interviewees plainly have axes to grind and agendas to advance.

As an example of where the text might lead some readers astray, consider this assertion by Irving Mills, Ellington's early manager. The composer, he says, “never made an arrangement. He knew how to construct at the piano because the boys knew what he wanted. . . . [H]e didn't leave anything behind” (381). And just pages later, the producer George Avakian seems, at least partially, to support Mills: “Duke . . . had musicians, at the beginning especially, who were very poor at reading. And I guess Duke himself, if he had been pinned down to paper, wouldn't have done so well” (398). One could forgive those not steeped in Ellingtonia from getting the impression of a barely literate young composer who chose equally untutored sidemen and who left few manuscripts for us to study. Yet none of this is true. There are hundreds of scores in the Smithsonian archives in Ellington's own hand, some as early as 1926 (“Birmingham Breakdown”). And though Johnny Hodges, it is true, struggled with notation his entire life, he was the exception. Even early on,

Ellington's players read—they had to. There was simply too much music coming too fast from this productive dynamo, often needing to be performed “live” that very day, to teach to each musician by rote.

Occasionally, the compactness of prose the editors employ in their introductions can also give rise to slight distortions of the full historical reality. Returning to Ellington, an impression is given that the 1956 Newport Festival almost miraculously restored the fortunes of the band, and that “[a]fter the comeback in Newport, . . . *Time* magazine featured Ellington on the cover, and Columbia Records offered the band a contact.” (364). Yet the *Time* cover story was in the works before the Newport triumph and would undoubtedly have buoyed the band all by itself even had Newport never occurred; moreover, Columbia had begun recording Ellington months earlier—on 23 January of that year. Newport merely accelerated things, for Ellington and the band were already on an upswing.

Accompanying the book are two audio CDs that give the reader a chance to hear, directly, the voices of many of the people interviewed. This is perhaps the book's most wonderful feature. The recordings illustrate what Vivian Perlis observes early in the preface: “The voices of the composers on the CDs are at the heart of this publication. . . . The sound of a voice holds an intensity and spontaneity that the written word cannot fully convey, just as a page of written music only hints at the emotion and profundity invoked by the sound of the music” (x). Adding to the delight are the many excerpts of works by these composers, quoted in the background. Unfortunately, as early as track 1 of CD 1 a slight discrepancy appears: on page 452, in a list of music credits, we are told that we are hearing a recording of Ellington's “It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing.” Unfortunately, the passage is from “Jubilee Stomp.”

I have mentioned some slight blemishes; however, they are truly minimal and overall, this is an expertly prepared volume. The book focuses, sequentially, on Ives, Blake, Ornstein, Varèse, Ruggles, Rudhyar, Charles Seeger, Cowell, Gershwin, and three students of Nadia Boulanger, Thomson, Copland, and Harris, as well as an entire chapter on that pivotal French educator herself. It concludes with Ellington. Throughout there are dozens of illustrations and photographs—some quite rare, such as Henry Cowell playing the shakuhachi for Edgard Varèse (164), or the reproduction of correspondence between Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thompson from 1927 concerning the possibility of an opera on *Four Saints in Three Acts* (278–79).

The book also has a wealth of sidebars, carefully chosen to enrich the entire story. Many of these are statements by well-known contemporary musicians who knew the figures highlighted here as teachers; for example, Ned Rorem on Virgil Thomson, William Bolcom on Eubie Blake, or Andrew Imbrie on Leo Ornstein. Other sidebars are appreciations of these American pioneers by living composers who never had the opportunity to know them in person; for example, Steve Reich on George Gershwin or John Adams on Ellington. The impact of these sidebars—let alone the “secondary” interviews with such persons as Bernard Herrmann (on Ives), Lou Harrison (on Henry Cowell), and William Schumann (on Roy Harris)—is to make vivid the reality of an inter-echoing American musical tradition. If Brahms could still draw inspiration from Schubert (let alone

Schütz), Adams can inform us that “early on in my life” he took Ellington as his “model” (366).

Every reader will be surprised by this book, and for each the surprises will be different. This reviewer, for example, had no idea that Edward MacDowell praised Ragtime (49); that “I’m Just Wild About Harry” was originally conceived as a waltz (59); that Varèse considered Bernstein “a magnificent musician” (114); that Burt Bacharach studied with Henry Cowell (157); that the song “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” emerged from a conversation Ira Gershwin had with his brother-in-law, English Strunsky, as they discussed Strunsky’s tomato-processing plant in New Jersey (211–12); or how (at least according to Roy Harris) Nadia Boulanger was a personal friend both to Franco and Mussolini (338). And it may make for interesting speculation about the relation of physiology and music that Ellington had an astonishingly low basal pulse rate: 47, according to his sister Ruth, based, she says, on the observations of his doctor, Arthur Logan (373).

Finally, the book contains much wisdom. I cite only one example, from Carl Ruggles. This is from a sidebar interview with Henry Brant, who tells the following story about how Ruggles taught him the technique of true melody:

He believed that nothing is entitled to recognition as a melody unless it goes on for eight or ten bars and longer if possible, without repetitions or manipulation. His idea of asymmetrical rhythm and asymmetrical phrasing impressed me very much, and especially his illustration of it with maple leaves: He asked me to get some from the tree outside. I brought them in, and he put one on top of the other and said, “Look, they’re all maple leaves. They’re even all from the same tree. You show me two that are exactly alike—you show me one that’s symmetrical, that has similar measurements. Yet every one is identifiable as a maple leaf.” He said, “That’s melody” (125).

Edward Green