

---

# Book review

---

**Christoph von Blumröder, *Die elektroakustische Musik: Eine kompositorische Revolution und ihre Folgen*. Signale aus Köln: Beiträge zur Musik der Zeit, vol. 22, Christoph von Blumröder (ed.). Vienna: Verlag Der Apfel, 2017. 290 pp. ISBN 978-3-85450-422-1. doi:10.1017/S1355771819000396**

It may seem amazing to see a new book about electroacoustic music published in the year 2017. For most active musicologists and composers, it would seem that with the extant, sheer unending, list of available publications on the topic, everything in need of documentation would be long since covered. What does this book have to offer that would make it worth reading?

Starting with a cursory glance at the table of contents, the well-known, somewhat worn path of historiography is immediately recognizable:

- Paris: Musique concrète
- New York: Tape Music – Music for Magnetic Tape
- Cologne: Elektronische Musik.

So, what is new?

Starting at the music-historical beginning, the technological forerunners of electroacoustic music are presented over a good five pages: Thaddeus Cahill, the ramifications of Italian Futurism, gramophone experiments made by Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch at the Radio Experiment Center of the Berlin Hochschule für Musik Berlin, and so on and so forth.

Blumröder begins his description of electroacoustic music proper with musique concrète. He goes straight to work: history and its evaluation go hand in hand, sentence by sentence, and every statement is simultaneously verified with a network of footnotes. The numerous quotations are immediately commented upon, with the comments formulated in sentences that are, even by German standards, astonishingly long.

There are indications of inaccuracies and misprints in other, previous publications, and these are worthwhile as a means to prevent further circulation of erroneous information. Unfortunately, it is not always clear where precisely the errors lie. For example, on page 6 he chides André Ruschkowski (1998) with only the remark ‘whose occasional passages on music history are not always faultless’.

So, my main question is, who is the intended audience for this book?

The book is by no means an introductory text. On the contrary, every fact and every remark is documented with great detail in the footnotes. In short, this seems to be a well-validated music history, a reference work for future researchers. But as with any publication of this kind, an author must also make decisions about what to include and what not. And so it is intriguing to ‘read’ what has actually been ‘left out’. Necessarily, a publication such as this reflects the author’s personal concerns. The scholarly presentation used in the book, however, can easily give the impression to future generations of readers of being an ‘official’ history of electroacoustic music.

Blumröder’s primary interests are undoubtedly the developments in electroacoustic music coming from French-speaking regions, that is, musique concrète and acousmatic music. With the possible exception of writings by Rudolf Frisius, hardly any previous German-language publications have described the milieu and ideas of Pierre Schaeffer in such detail. The origins of musique concrète are laid out with compelling facts and with descriptions of an impressive number of compositions. The style is discursive, with sentences that seemingly never want to end. So it can sometimes require multiple readings to piece together the author’s intended meaning. The numerous quotations are often discussed in equally circumlocutory prose. Compositional sketches and score excerpts appear from time to time, but Blumröder avoids direct compositional analysis. Among these compositional descriptions there occasionally appears quite illustrative descriptions, some information regarding global realisation techniques, and information about the current personal circumstances of the composers.

Regrettably, Blumröder’s book also reflects certain presumptions of male-centricity from this earlier era. Until about 20 years ago, it was common for writings on electroacoustic music to continue from this standpoint, but current research has evolved. For example, the composer Beatriz Ferreyra, who today is certainly well known and who had worked in the GRM milieu, is not mentioned once. No mention either of Éliane Radique. Yet Hans Tutschku has no fewer than 22 compositions mentioned in the course of this publication. This seems, to my mind, something of an imbalance. Instead of writing about Ferreyra, why does Blumröder instead, when he does mention a woman,

seem to gleefully write about the 'naïveté' of Monique Rollin's *Étude vocal* (1952)? All things considered, it is perhaps a credit to her that Annette Vande Gorne is represented with all two compositions.

As noted at earlier in this review, there is no such thing as a comprehensive, objective historical narrative.

The sections covering 'New York: Tape Music – Music for Magnetic Tape' and 'Cologne: *Elektronische Musik*' are treated similarly to the section 'Paris: *Musique concrète*'. Facts established in previous research all find their place, but with additional scholarly substantiation of many aspects of 'conventional wisdom'. Regarding what is 'missing': no Gordon Mumma, no David Behrman, no Alvin Lucier, no Pauline Oliveros. On this last point, consider that she was a founding member of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, and Blumröder discusses the group and other of its members, such as Steve Reich, Morton Subotnik and Terry Riley; also consider that Oliveros's *Bye, Bye Butterfly* (1965) has long since taken its place in the canon of electroacoustic music. In fairness, Blumröder himself notes in the Preface to this volume that the text is 'not an all-inclusive, complete overview' and 'certainly neglects some American facts of the matter'. And some minor inaccuracies occur to the otherwise so-precise Blumröder: *HPSCHD* by John Cage and Lejaren Hiller uses 52 rather than 51 tapes (this error was probably taken from the liner notes of the original Nonesuch release, LP H-71224); in the index we find an entry for 'Tape music' but none for 'Music for magnetic tape'.

Blumröder lives and works in Cologne. The proximity to Westdeutsche Rundfunk (WDR) and to Karlheinz Stockhausen inevitably makes itself apparent. This is not meant as criticism, it is just that the reader must be aware of Blumröder's perspective. Stockhausen alone is represented by over 30 compositions; only ten works by John Cage are mentioned. Blumröder's main concern is, as it were, the triumphant advance of electroacoustic music and, in his view, specifically the advance of acousmatic music – the corresponding chapter is entitled 'The Triumph of the Acousmatic'. So, for example, it comes as small surprise that Francis Dhomont is represented with over 30 compositions. Blumröder's predilection for acousmatic music is indirectly established through a long description of the philosophy behind the music, and he justifies this approach

through the number of compositions discussed that, in one way or another, are acousmatic.

Despite the fact that Blumröder states, in his introduction, that he will not discuss software tools, the decision is regrettable. Institutions such as IRCAM or GRM have not only exercised aesthetic influence through the production of compositions produced in their respective studios. There have also been crucial – although possibly unintentional – aesthetic influences effected through software such as the GRM Tools and Max/MSP, the latter originally developed at IRCAM. The book's subtitle is 'A Compositional Revolution and Its Consequences'. These consequences could also be underscored by the influences exercised by the available software tools, influences hardly limited to the academic world. But that is perhaps materials for another book.

There is an excellent excursus on different listening for acousmatic music in the chapter 'Liberated Listening'. This approach to music audition may seem a matter of course nowadays, but it is worth reminding oneself that it was a change from earlier approaches.

To return to my opening question: who is the intended audience? I suspect the answer is twofold: on the one hand, researchers looking for additional material, especially regarding acousmatic music; and, on the other hand, composers who wish to pinpoint their own position in the broader landscape of electroacoustic music.

It is surprising that the book contains no bibliography. The numerous references cited are only documented in the footnotes strewn throughout the text. In place of a bibliography there are two indices: one index of persons and musical works, another of 'concepts and objects'. This practice of dealing with bibliographic documentation is used consistently throughout the book series *Signale aus Köln*. There is surely a profound rationale for this approach, but it escapes me.

Martin Supper  
[supper@udk-berlin.de](mailto:supper@udk-berlin.de)  
 Translated by Peter Castine

## REFERENCE

- Ruschkowski, A. 1998. *Elektronische Klänge und musikalische Entdeckungen*, 2nd revised and expanded edn. Stuttgart: Reclams Universal-Bibliothek No. 18722.