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The Act of Musical Composition: Studies in the Creative Process edited by D. Collins.

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Composition is an intensive activity requiring significant committal of cognitive resources for those involved; or else some of what constitutes composition is 'on-going, involuntary', and 'ideas lie abandoned, forgotten amidst the turmoil of everyday existence' (Wiggins, p. 234). These polar states may explain why the exact moment of composition remains elusive, despite the promise of this text and the impressive range of methods deployed in the pursuit of the 'act of musical composition'. Each of the eleven chapters undermines the singularity and instantaneity implied by the title of the book – but to a valuable end: the scope for understanding this 'act' is broadened; the real-time of compositional activity is stretched beyond the summary instant of pen meeting paper. Instead, the moment of composition is explained as a convergence, a contingent enactment, of socio-cultural and cognitive forces.

Indeed, the concept of composition as score-based and the preserve of the singular genius creator is interrogated, nuanced and/or abandoned in varying degrees. While this is certainly not a new idea, the general tone of the writing in this book is poised in alignment with the prevailing idea of creativity (or creativities) as multiple and situated. Pamela Burnard addresses this theme directly, introducing Chapter 5 thus: 'there is no single creativity for all musics . . . different contexts give rise to different types of music creativities and involve practices as diverse as the musics themselves' (p. 111). She elucidates this position by explicating the work of a DJ/turntablist, a contemporary classical composer and an audio designer

working in the computer games industry. This dynamic, fluid view of creativity is set up effectively in the editorial and is reflected in the sum of the range of research methods, musical styles and compositional tools included in the text as a whole.

Although the 'multi-perspective view' (p. xix) may allow readers to navigate the chapters in any order (though the logic of their order of presentation is as good as any other route), Chapter 10 by Geraint A. Wiggins makes a good starting point because he interrogates the boundaries of studying musical composition (as proposed by this text) and establishes cognitive and conceptual foundations. He explores what might precede and lead up to an act of creativity via the highly charged (and prized) notion of inspiration. Based on intelligence modelling research, he proposes a hypothetical framework (though one grounded in empirical evidence) for the flow of possibilities between non-consciousness and consciousness that could be described as the experience of being inspired. Musical style is understood as a cultural phenomenon that operates on the cognitive basis of expectation – a survival mechanism built from experience of the world. Through experience of the world, of which culture (read: music) is a part, a set of expectations forms a 'conceptual space' for understanding a phenomenon (including equally our interaction with the physical environment and music culture or musical styles more specifically). This conceptual space, which could include a set of rules or patterns, can be learned and then explored or transformed through creative activity. By considering to what extent the rules, techniques and materials of a musical style (or conceptual space) are internalised and then proposed by the non-conscious, we may begin to account for moments of inspiration, or 'spontaneous creativity' as Wiggins re-designates it

(p. 248), demystified (though certainly, and thankfully, not simplified) as they occur in relation to the complexity of an ongoing social, experiential existence.

Freya Bailes and Laura Bishop (Chapter 3) ask what the functions of musical imagery or imagination are as part of the compositional processes. A crucial subtext of this chapter (and much of the rest of the book) is the tension between familiarity and novelty. While music can be 're-experienced with high precision and accuracy' (p. 53), the liberation from the physical world and the transcendence of perceptual experience that human imagination affords can enable germination, elaboration, refinement, recombination and, possibly, the renunciation of the familiar. The composer's repertoire of musical imagery is at once fed and constrained by experience. The poles of familiarity and novelty, embodiment and imagination, constraint and freedom, limitation and liberation are core issues in compositional creativity (see also the discussion of improvisation as 'real-time composition' in Chapter 8 by Simon Rose and Raymond MacDonald). Bailes and Bishop usefully bring these pairings into focus while drawing attention inward to the imagination, expressed as the intertwining of perception and imagination (p. 67), and addressing the crucial process of how the imagined can be translated into the real (or, at least, the empirically available).

Andrew R. Brown and Steve Dillon (Chapter 4) set the threshold of compositional activity as that which is 'meaningful' – a heightened state of intensity that leads to some sort of 'satisfying involvement in the act of composition' (p. 94). Compositional activity involves *types* of actions that take place in *contexts*, which, when taken together in this state of increased awareness, enable the composer to connect with their intuition. The 'Meaningful

Engagement Matrix' is a grid-based structure that captures the characteristics of given moments in the process of compositional activity by cross-referencing *type* and *context*. There are five types (or modes) of engagement with compositional activity (attending, evaluating, directing, exploring and embodying) along with three contexts for these actions (personal, social and cultural). Points in the matrix are then exemplified with original interview material from respected composers (including Steve Reich, Paul Lansky and David Cope). Once the dimensions of the grid have been understood, it is easy to plot a given instance of compositional activity. Over time, this approach could describe a composer's general approach and, by understanding what the most prevalent mode of engagement is, suggest new approaches to try. In the context of teaching composition, this would be an accessible and revealing tool in tracking students' activity, while encouraging increased awareness and diversity of their own practices.

All of the chapters mentioned so far acknowledge the role of wider experience in shaping compositional activity, but Shira Lee Katz (Chapter 7) makes the issue of extra-musical influence explicit. In three case studies, the properties of landscape garden design, poetry and architecture are traced in resultant compositions. Apart from the generalisation that these influences are inherently modular, that they have discrete elements correlating with potential structural designs for emerging music, Katz maintains and elucidates the idiosyncrasies of each composer's working process. These are useful insights that capture the tension between the macro- and micro-levels of compositional activity, which is a prevalent theme in several other places in the book (for example, the tension between plans and action, or abstraction and pragmatics, in

Chapter 1 by Nicolas Donin). The extra-musical inspirations Katz describes were of interest to the featured composers long before their compositional activity began (see also Miranda's account of modelling cellular automata in Chapter 9 and the appeal of games and game theory for Cope in Chapter 11). This is a useful perspective because it reminds us that any act or moment of composition is situated in a much broader, lifespan-scale trajectory. Similarly, Bennett (Chapter 6) neatly situates the collaborative process of writing popular song in terms of the musical and literary constraints imposed by commercial market forces, akin to a democratic or 'quasi-evolutionary process' (p. 139), that is inherited by those working in the musical and industrial context of popular music.

The study of the process of composition is undoubtedly difficult, evidenced perhaps by the paucity of texts on this particular inflection of human creativity. Since Sloboda's oft-cited initial foray (1986), the tools and materials available for composers and for researchers wanting to study this activity have developed significantly. This text, reflecting such advancements, draws together (and advances again) an impressive range of approaches (derived from cognitive psychology, phenomenology, intelligence modelling, aesthetics and literature about

creativity) and applies these to a range of music reflective of the diversity of current music making. As promised, we can observe 'a range of experts grappling with notions of creative thinking in the context of musical composition' (p. xix); and grapple they might because the continual flux inherent in musical creativity (even just for one composer) makes it an elusive moving target. The balance between idiographic insight and methodological rigour makes for a text that is valuable for the composer (by potentially helping them to understand the nuanced character of their own situation and practice) and for those involved in teaching composition in a range of educational contexts or for those studying composition at university level (by drawing the student's attention towards their imagination, acknowledging their extra-musical interests and by showing them the diverse ways of meaningfully engaging with many types of compositional activity).

Reference

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