

BOOKS

I Sang the Unsingable: My Life in Twentieth-Century Music, Bethany Beardslee with Minna Zallman Proctor. Boydell & Brewer. £25

Bethany Beardslee was a composer's singer. Dedicated and accurate, she is best known for her beautiful realisations of new compositions from the thorny end of the new music spectrum. She premiered over one hundred works, including important pieces by Europeans such as Webern, Krenek, Stravinsky and Schoenberg. She also worked closely with a number of influential American composers. Several pieces composed for her voice have earned their place in the canon, including Milton Babbitt's *Philomel*. *I Sang the Unsingable* is a detailed account of a life in twentieth-century music, plainly conveyed with humour and humility. The author tells her story in a tone that flirts almost with gossip – but in an endearing and reverent way. Reverence for the composers with whom she worked is the thread that binds this book.

Beardslee features an impressive roster of celebrity cameos in her memoir, providing ample opportunity for zingers, portraiture and good-natured lampooning: 'I have often wondered if Stravinsky would have tried twelve tone when the master [Webern] was alive? I doubt it. Composers have huge egos'. (p. 112) John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Rudolf Nureyev, Glenn Gould, Jackson Pollock, Edgard Varèse, Frank Zappa and Martha Graham also make good showings. Through her stories, Beardslee invites readers to understand the traits and habits she observed in her colleagues. She candidly relays the contrasting asceticisms, anxieties and misbehaviours that set in motion destinies ascendant or obscure. She respected the music of Pierre Boulez but 'singing under him was disappointing' (p. 228) and she was unimpressed by his business-like approach to his career. She paints a nuanced picture of Martha Graham, describing her as 'quite a gal', simultaneously fascinating, vital, authoritarian and 'perfectly lovely' (p. 169) then later details an incident in which Graham used Beardslee's work without permission or compensation. A special category might be allocated to the beneficent role played by Milton Babbitt who was, almost through the

entire length of Beardslee's long career, a guiding light. His work takes up the greater part of the discussion amongst the many composers with whom she worked.

Published by Boydell and Brewer, this memoir is featured under their *Women and Gender Studies* subject area. Beardslee doesn't fully unpack the obstacles she experienced as a woman in twentieth-century music, leaving space for analysis on that account to the reader. The book begins with a dedication: 'To all 'girl singers', past, present and future, for keeping alive the music of their time'. Speaking as a representative 'girl' and a 'singer', this reviewer feels Beardslee's address quite personally. From her current vantage point Beardslee is powerful, a senior artist and a true giant of her field. Through the course of this memoir she also reveals the vulnerable 'girl singer' in a personal narrative about realising difficult music while battling to be heard in a male-dominated space.

Beardslee spends much of this book detailing the personal relationships and musical activities that took place between herself and her most frequent performing collaborators (Robert Craft, Lukas Foss, Richard Goode and Robert Helps, amongst others) as well as her husbands the composers Jacques Monod and Godfrey Winham. The centrality of these characters is clearly conveyed, right down to the choice of chapter titles: Part 1: Childhood. Part 2: The Monod Era. Part 3: Godfrey. Part 4: New Music. Part 5: Farewell and Farewell.

Family relationships and traditional gender roles create frictions in many aspects of Beardslee's professional and private life:

When I was on stage singing I left little, dutiful Bethany Backstage. I became *Bethany*, my crazy, true self. With Jacques [Monod], I was so over-rehearsed that I could have almost, in a flash, stood to the side and just watched this woman sing. She was the 'other one', lifted completely out of herself, and carried away by the music. Who was this person gliding on wings of song? She was me – but what about afterward, offstage? Where did she go? (p. 116)

Beardslee goes into detail about the intense rehearsal habits of her first husband Jacques Monod, as well as their hectic musical life in the new music scene of 1950s New York.

Monod was influential in shaping Beardslee's professional beginnings; she credits him with introducing her to new music and instilling learning methods in her that she would continue to use for decades to come. Their marriage, however, was fraught. Her reflections upon that relationship provide some of the most touching and complex passages in the memoir.

I started to understand that I'd been complicit. I had been too dutiful. I'd lost myself in an effort to please Jacques, to win his approval. I started to wonder if Jacques had ever loved me in the way I had loved him, or whether we'd had a domestic professional arrangement – the kind of collaboration he would have formed with any singer. Did it even matter that we were romantically drawn to each other? Or would he have teamed up with anyone, no matter who she may have been? (p. 138)

She draws much contrast drawn between the rigours and tensions of 'The Monod Era' and the more peaceful life and symbiotic relationship Beardslee enjoyed with her second husband, the composer-theorist Godfrey Winham. The home and family life they made in the bucolic surrounds of Princeton are described very warmly. During the years of their marriage Beardslee's career went from strength to strength. While balancing the responsibilities of motherhood she toured the world, forged new collaborations, premiered many new works and established a place for herself at major institutions for standard repertoire too.

In 1975 Godfrey Winham died of cancer at the age of 40. This event, unsurprisingly, had a profound effect on Beardslee's life and career 'I have never really recovered from Godfrey's death' (p. 301). Beardslee goes to great pains to memorialise her husband and his music. The beginning of the memoir's final part: *Farewell and Farewell* begins in describing the *Solo Requiem* which Milton Babbitt dedicated to Godfrey Winham's memory. From this point forward, new music begins to play a reduced part in Beardslee's career, though she did take things in new directions. The balance of her projects swung towards self-produced work and more collaborations with women. She became close with the renowned pedagogue Jo Estill and deepened her long-established friendship with the composer Arlene Zallman. During the 1980s and 90s Beardslee simultaneously wound down her touring and performing career while taking more artistic liberties to please herself. 'I became a producer, a teacher, a benefactor, an organizer'. (p. 315) She started new projects of her own instigation and founded the record label, Pierrot Records.

I Sang the Unsingable features descriptions of a great many concerts, telling the 'who, what, when and where' from the performer's outlook. It gives a strong sense of the era's workaday operations in the music business, the conventions of the concert-going public, and provides the too-seldom heard perspective of the performer in the process of getting new music onto the stage. Numerous concerts are represented here via elegantly worded print reviews, which are quoted at length. It reminds the modern reader that there was indeed a time where, in cities all over the US, concerts of new music received significant professional press coverage.

Another theme throughout the book is money. A child of the great depression, Beardslee has a conscious relationship with the scarcity of resources. From early deprivations, to her wealthy late life, she speaks about money in a frank and open way that some may find surprising in a memoir of this genre 'It would be guileless to think that artists and their art inhabit a sanitized bubble uninflected by the world of commerce'. (p. 321) Beardslee gives insights into how money and privilege played (and continue to play) a significant role in who is given a platform in new music and demonstrates how the economic realities of the genre affect who is empowered to play and compose it. She describes the tiny audiences for new work and a milieu in which it was much harder to be paid for new music than classical repertoire. Her early career as a recitalist, scratching out a living on the road between college towns, is contrasted against the large fees she was able to command at major concert venues at the height of her career.

Though Beardslee is most famous for performing some of the most difficult new work of her time, she loved traditional repertoire. Throughout her career a tension between the genres is evident: 'I was split by diverging desires for my career. Should I abandon new music for traditional concert formats, which would mean more engagements and reviews that would focus on my singing? Or should I stand strong and uncompromising? Would I be the singer who gave my audience something different, something it couldn't get elsewhere?' (p. 165) Beardslee's early training focused upon classical art-song and, even at the height of her new music powers, she continued to sing the classics, regularly debating with herself about whether she had potential for a career in opera.

Much has changed in the world since the long decades of Beardslee's career. That said, a surprising constancy remains in institutional

practices and concert venues. Most of the large classical music organisations with whom Beardslee worked are still going strong. The trajectories and recital programmes described by Beardslee, as she jets from Tanglewood to Ravinia, Carnegie Hall to university concert halls (in towns like Chicago, Los Angeles, Wellesley and Beloit), remains much the same as the current classical performing circuit.

For those interested in the inner machinations of the creative relationships and decision-making that catalysed some of the most important classical vocal music of the post-war period, Beardslee's memoir will make for a good resource. This book (and its index and appendices) give detailed accounts of her musical preparations, and often clues to where to look for further information. It gives deep insights into some of the pieces in her repertoire and the artists with whom she worked. The descriptions of learning methodologies and composer-performer negotiations could be useful to a variety of readers. *I Sang the Unsingable* is a book about music, but just as much about people, that tells us a lot about how far we've come and how far we have yet to travel.

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Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise Affect and Aesthetic Moralism by Marie Thompson. Bloomsbury. £23.99

In *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect, and Aesthetic Moralism*, musicologist and media theorist Marie Thompson takes a critical and theoretical approach to deconstructing the notion that noise is always negative, and posits an 'ethico-affective' framework for understanding noise's inherent neutrality and necessity. Thompson asserts that, 'Noise is ubiquitous. It is present in every space, every milieu. It infests every medium, modifies every sound-signal, takes part in every musical event. It is an inescapable, unavoidable, inextinguishable component of material existence' (p. 175). The book opens with a discussion of 'what noise has been', detailing several socio-political and theoretical frameworks in which noise has been considered including subject-oriented and object-oriented perspectives, noise as unnatural, and noise as loudness. In the chapters that follow, Thompson 'perturbs' a series of dualisms – noise and signal, noise and silence, and noise and music – and proposes a relational approach to understanding noise.

In Part 2, 'The parasite and its milieu: Noise, materiality, affectivity', Thompson outlines an 'ethico-affective' approach to understanding noise, which draws from philosopher Baruch Spinoza's affect theory (as interpreted by Gilles Deleuze) and Michael Serres's figure of the parasite to position noise as a node network of relationships that affects and is affected by the other nodes in the network. She states, 'rather than characterizing noise as a type of sound or a value judgment that is made of sound, I recognize noise as a perturbing force-relation that, for better or for worse, induces a change' (p. 42). Thompson critiques Bell Telephone Laboratory engineer Claude Shannon's general model of communication; although Shannon depicts noise relationally, as an inherent part in any communication system, he nonetheless considers noise a 'necessary evil' that must exist in order for communication to take place. By reading Shannon through Spinoza, Thompson demonstrates that Shannon considered the relationship between noise and signal affective.

To further explore the affective nature of the system-signal-noise relationship, Thompson introduces Serres's parasite. Like noise, the parasite is a generative force that affects relationships; it also represents a network of relationships. As a 'third term' the parasite also points to the medium/milieu, or the thing that stands between the sender and receiver in all communication. Here Thompson focuses on the material medium in which all messages must pass through. She states, 'the medium is always noisy insofar as it acts upon the signal, transforming it in some way' (p. 61). Therefore, she maintains,

noise is something other – and something more – than an extraneous thing that needs to be subtracted from an intended signal-message. Rather than being a secondary and unnecessary nuisance ... the parasitic noise is an ineradicable and constitutive element in any communication process, and of relations more broadly. (p. 62)

To demonstrate the 'noisiness' of all media, Thompson considers works by Christian Marclay, Maria Chavez and Yasunao Tone because, 'rather than bringing noise into music, [these artists] amplify, extend and foreground the noise that is always already within the techno-musical system' (p. 6).

In this chapter, Thompson frames noise as a *function*. Like the parasite, noise is as noise does; it causes change. In doing so she conflates noise, sound and medium, often to productive – but occasionally to confusing – ends, leaving the reader wondering to what extent this ethico-affect framework applies to sound in