
Book reviews

Mine Doğantan-Dack, ed., *Recorded Music – Philosophical and Critical Reflections*, Middlesex University Press, 2008. ISBN 978 1 904750 277

What does a recording of music instantiate – and what can it destroy? And how can we use it? In her introduction to this fascinating collection of writings on aspects of ‘recorded music’, Mine Doğantan-Dack asserts that despite an increase in published work within the broader field of the ‘musicology of recording’, there has to date been no single book exploring ‘the philosophical and critical issues surrounding the nature and uses of recordings from the multiple perspectives of listeners, composers, performers and ethno/musicologists in the form of an anthology’ (p. x). This rather wordy assertion might convey that slightly desperate *post facto* ‘corralling’ that anthologies often understandably require when it comes ‘writing the intro’ time, but this is certainly a diverse and multifarious collection. Yet in this case, to my mind, the benefits yielded by the diversity of the subjects covered by the 17 chapters far outweigh the rather patchy coverage of some of those issues. An inspiring read in many respects, this cannot be an authoritative reference. There is reflection on early sound recording history, but no significant reflection on the sea-change in listening wrought by recorded music mobility for the iPod/download generation. There is much reflection on how the existence of recordings effect, and afford, changed perspectives in musicology but somewhat less on how technological advances have changed – or expanded – definitions of music itself. There are philosophical critiques of recording of jazz and rock, and some discrete ventures into electroacoustic matters, but there is very little to investigate what ontological differences might be teased out between ‘recorded music’ and digital music where – one might assert – the concept of ‘recorded music’ is irrelevant, since the work exists only as digitised sound.

The 17 chapters of this book are grouped into five ‘thematic’ sections: ‘Questions of Ontology and Aesthetics’; ‘Genre-specific Studie’s; ‘An Ethnomusicological Interlude’; ‘Sound Recordings and Naturalized Epistemology’ and ‘Practising Music, Recording Music’. Of these, the ‘ethnomusicological interlude’ by Robert Reigle is largely a chronological

listing of ‘landmark’ ethnomusicological commercial recordings. Of particular interest to readers of this journal, the inclusion of two chapters explicitly approaching electroacoustic topics (one by Tony Gibbs and John Dack, the other by John Young) implies there is a relationship between ‘recorded music’ and the acousmatic work. If anything, the chapters in which electroacoustic music is mentioned and perused are the most straightforward, and perhaps the least informed by external philosophical reflection (not necessarily a bad thing, but perhaps somewhat indicative of the rather constrained theoretical preoccupations of many writers on the ‘genre’). Another chapter, by composers Sabine Schäfer and Joachim Krebs, is a philosophical discussion of the compositional processes they developed using digital sampling technology.

Where this book succeeds admirably, and I think best, is in those chapters that consider what recorded music – or more properly, recordings of music performed – enables in terms of scholarship and reflection. Ultimately most chapters tend to fall towards recorded ‘performances’ in some respect – so Andrew Kania’s well-ordered comparative study of classical, rock and jazz recordings prisms open the ontologies of each tradition, pointing to the artifice of most rock recorded tracks as effectively ‘sonic sculptures’ by comparison to the documentation of live performance traditions. Jazz is also the focus of several other chapters, most notably Tony Whyton’s consideration of historical (recorded) jazz as reified object, via discussion of Coltrane recordings, and Bruce Ellis Benson’s *Stealing Licks: Recording and Identity in Jazz*.

Colin Symes’s journey through the ‘factional’ constructions of early recorded instrumental music and the histories of production was illuminating, and Thomas Gracyk’s adroit consideration of ‘Documentation and Transformation in Musical Recordings’ proceeded from a comfortably mature grounding in music and general philosophy to challenge some of Benjamin’s pronouncements on the recorded artefact. He instead argues the case that recorded music changes our relationship to music itself. In making his case Gracyk references Evan Eisenberg, perhaps one of the most eloquent of thinkers in the field, and sadly omitted as a contributing author here. Another strong

chapter, Simon Trezise's 'Distortions and Masks: Transmutations of the "Performing Breath" in the Studio Take', examines the notion of the live performance (as 'performing breath') by comparison to its transformation and subversion through technological mediation, in particular by editing practices in early studio recordings of the late 1920s and after. For this reader, the amount of intervention apparent in even the most primitive commercial recording studios – as evidenced in studio cue sheets and rehearsal notes – was both ear- and eye-opening. We forget how willingly we accommodate the limitations of technology – as a teenager I thought little of the mild inconvenience of having to turn my cheap recording of Beethoven's 9th over during the middle of the slow movement, but had no idea until now that in the era of the 78 rpm record it was common for arrangers to rewrite Wagnerian cadences to allow for a quick flip of the disc. Now that we are well into the era where the 70MB CD no longer defines how much time we have to play with, and online digital real estate is increasingly cheap, we are becoming accustomed to the fact that (recording) time is no longer money. Another ontological shift is taking place when it comes to defining what recorded music is, in relation to us.

But the dilemma of contradictory understandings of recording and performance, and indeed of music, remains. Doğantan-Dack's own chapter is an impassioned defence of performance studies, and the performer's essential role in creating music, in line with her stated observation, *vis-à-vis* Cook and Clarke (2004), that musicology is moving from a score-based conception of music to 'in essence a performance art' (p. 293). One might argue that whole swathes of musicology and philosophy remain firmly entrenched in a work-based (and by implication score-based) mentality while the opposite camp, from Small's musicking to new musicology and beyond, has been beaver away on the other side of this ontological divide for quite a while now – to an outsider, scholars still teeter on various points of the musical see-saw. Nevertheless, as a musically educated reader rather than an -ologist of any breed, I found this one of the more satisfying chapters in the book in that it was written convincingly from 'inside' the field, ably supported by the recorded musical examples provided, and not afraid to retain its focus.

The chapters on acousmatic and technologically mediated music (rather than recorded music) are perhaps a little out of place here, though interesting in themselves. Doğantan-Dack's concluding sentence that 'Performance studies will thrive to the extent that ... those who ultimately make musical experiences possible, namely performers' (p. 308) hung somewhat uncomfortably in the air as I commenced the next chapter, John Young's 'Inventing Memory: Documentary and Imagination in Acousmatic

Music'. This begins with a musically educated layperson's introduction to acousmatic music, and specifically to sound source recognition in relation to Schaeffer's *écoute réduite* and Wishart's 'sonic landscape', before embarking on an examination of listening and experiential memory via sound. Extrapolating from Walter Benjamin's oft-cited (much too oft, perhaps inevitably, in this book) notion of 'aura', Young posits the idea of the authenticity of an 'aura of experience' that is, he contends, 'made possible by recorded media' (p. 317). From here, and via a reference to a few relevant works, Young proceeds to an explicatory description of various compositional decisions in his work *Ricordiamo Forlì*. This unusually personal work is, as John Young describes it, an attempt to 'reconstruct the wartime story of my own family through historical and contemporary recordings and an oral history narrative' (p. 324). In the description of the compositional process and background history that follows the composer reaches towards how he chooses and changes aspects of the materials personally relevant sound sources to provide a more 'universalising' element in the work. While this is interesting, I feel the writer is here constrained both by the need to adapt to a readership perhaps unversed in the 'normal' compositional decisions in the day-to-day life of many an electroacoustic composer, but also somewhat – in my opinion – by the decision to concentrate on his own work. Perhaps this once again illustrates the 'electroacoustic' world's somewhat self-referential theoretical base, where composers are most often also the ones doing the theoretical writing, and writing about their own work or their peers. If this goes on, we run the risk that electroacoustic music will eat itself, rather than flourish as a banquet of philosophical and critical delights.

Tony Gibbs and John Dack contribute a thoroughly readable chapter on documentary recordings of 'place' resituated as music, dividing their chapter into consideration of 'classical', 'rock and pop' and 'electroacoustic' music. They are perhaps strongest in their discussion of electroacoustic music, through descriptive analysis of works by Thomas Gerwin and Luc Ferrari, preceded by an introductory description of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology and 'soundscape' composition in general. This chapter would make a good introductory-level reading assignment for undergraduates interested in this area but does not compare, in intellectual 'pitch' with, say, the chapter by Theodore Gracyk. I imagine that the authors were, like Young, of the opinion that most general musicological readers would be unfamiliar with the territory – and quite possibly they are entirely right (a problem that needs to be addressed – how?). Similarly, Marc Battier's excellent chapter on 'Phonography and the Invention of Sound' is not, ultimately, about 'recorded music' at all, but is rather

a sophisticated survey of the development of phonography (as in recording and recording technology), that outlines the concomitant 'liberation' of sound as material for art. This was, for me, another outstanding chapter in terms of its integration of philosophical and literary-artistic concerns.

There are questions to be asked of this book perhaps. But a book that raises questions and interested enquiries rather than hackles, and which celebrates diversity rather than monothematic affirmation, can often be, as here, a joy. And there is more than a sufficient wealth of fascinating and mutually enlightening observations between chapters, most of which do not overlap significantly (a credit to the editor's guiding hand at the planning stage). *Recorded Music* emerged from my clutches with margins full of pencilled asides, agreements and queries, and numerous pages folded down for future return. I emerged thinking hard, more knowledgeable on areas that I might not have encountered otherwise, and looking forward to encountering them again (for the record).

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Katja Blomberg (ed.), *Peter Ablinger, hearing LISTENING*, Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2008. ISBN 978-3-86828-003-6

Ingrid Beirer (ed.), *Bernhard Gál, Installations*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2005. ISBN 3-936636-53-2

Brigitte Digel and Bernd Künzig (eds.), *Kristof Georgen, Sound*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2009. ISBN 978-3-86828-050-0

Ingrid Beirer (ed.), *Douglas Henderson, playback. no rewind button*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2008. ISBN 978-3-86828-015-9

Wulf Herzogenrath (ed.), *Christina Kubisch, Electrical Drawings*. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2008. ISBN 978-3-86828-013-5

Kehrer Verlag has published a long and interesting list of books on sound art over the years, ranging from genre-defining theoretical works and extended exhibition catalogues to artist monographs. These publications discuss different aspects of sound art, from those found in silent or nearly inaudible expressions, to clearly articulated and strong attacks on our auditory brain. Germany has a particularly strong tradition of sound art, and Kehrer plays an important role in developing and presenting discourse that springs from the genre.

From Kehrer's catalogue, five recent books have reached *Organised Sound*. The books present the work of five artists: *Peter Ablinger, hearing LISTENING*, published in conjunction with a Berlin exhibition

at Haus am Waldsee; *Christina Kubisch, Electrical Drawings*, published for a retrospective exhibition shown in Bremen in 2008 and Marl in 2009; *Bernhard Gál, Installations*; *Douglas Henderson, playback. no rewind button*; and *Kristof Georgen, Sound*, published on the occasion of three recent exhibitions. The books are richly illustrated, well designed, delicate to the touch, and are published in both German and English. Three of them (Gál, Georgen and Henderson) also contain CDs with excerpts of the artists' works.

Ablinger, Henderson, Kubisch and Gál are all professional musicians and composers, while Georgen's biography shows a fine arts background. These artists have all reached beyond the constraints of the common concert situation to be able to focus the audience on qualities of sound other than timbre and rhythm, and on different modes of listening. Their projects are in many ways related to the electro-acoustic project of listening within the sound for timbral and structural experiences outside of the pitch-based paradigm, but their interest in context, reference and the act of listening itself has moved the sonic constructions away from the specifically musical arenas and into galleries and other spaces for installation. The artists share an attention to 'non-musical sound', and use this focus to interest the listener in complex auditory situations in quite different ways.

The book on Peter Douglas Henderson is edited by Ingrid Beirer, and features texts by Frank Gertich and Louise S. Milne. Henderson emphasises the sculptural aspects of his works, objects that occupy space while at the same time producing sound. Several of these works are concerned with strings and rock culture, and it is tempting to believe that Henderson draws on his background in punk bands in the 1980s and 90s described in the biography. These references are particularly clear in the works *Stop, What Could Replace Opus?* and *playback. no rewind button*. Henderson has also been an active acousmatic composer, as Louise Milne refers to in her essay when she writes that he 'restages' the human subject's experience of itself in the world. Sculptural elements are paired with this sensitivity, and the perhaps most extreme example is found in the work *pages of illustrations*, where he constructs the sound of wind flowing through a tree, from individual recordings of rubbing leaves. His approach is one of composing with the found sounds rather than leaving them relatively untouched, which is so often the case in soundscape works. However, Henderson has chosen spaces more conducive to listening than normal concert venues. His works are also structured differently from most music: they have no fixed duration, thus opening for a listening experience more controlled by the visitor than the producer of the event. The accompanying CD provides exquisitely