

The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music. Edited by James Saunders. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. xviii, 394 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6282-2. \$144.95 US

In his introduction, editor James Saunders observes that “it is meaningless to define experimentalism in a closed way.” He suggests instead that “a series of indicators might suggest where much of this work is located” and offers several criteria. They include “not trying to build on the past, but starting from scratch...not working with traditional formats...challenging our assumptions about music, art and life, and the apparent boundaries between them...[and] accepting circumstantial outcomes as readily as planned outcomes” (p. 2). The slippery nature of a music that, by definition, redefines boundaries and makes radical departures in technique is thus acknowledged immediately. Its elusive nature is addressed in the binary division of the book: part one consists of nine chapters exploring issues central to experimental music, while part two documents the work of contemporary figures to demonstrate a broad scope of practices and possibilities.

The difficulty in establishing the defining features of experimental music is the focus of Christopher Fox’s opening chapter, “Why experimental? Why me?” Fox revisits Michael Nyman’s 1974 book, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, to challenge as overly simplistic its central thesis, “that a music called ‘experimental’ existed in a directly oppositional relationship to another music called ‘avant-garde’” (p. 8). The disparity between experimental and avant-garde traditions is also addressed in chapter six by Edwin Prévost. Noting that the act of improvisation allows for an immediate moment of discovery, he contrasts this with the embedded “capitalism” of a chronological avant-garde in which sound is appropriated and maintained by the composer/controller-genius.

The intervening chapters focus on the relationship between composition, notation, and performance. Michael Pisaro examines the act of notation and argues that “the writing of the score, the process of its creation and the object of the score, in all its materiality, are seen to play a decisive role in the music itself” (p. 27). Philip Thomas questions “what a performer does in response to a score (in the broadest sense of the term) of experimental music” and attempts “to understand whether or not that response—generally termed ‘interpretation’ —is significantly different to a score of music which might not be considered experimental” (p. 79). Ronald Kuivila focuses on the possibilities of a live electronic approach as an aspect of sonic experimentation and Andy Keep discusses the notion of instrumentalizing, a practice in which a performer “seeks to discover the performability, intrinsic sonic palette and possibilities for sonic manipulation of objects” (p. 113). By examining the sonic potential of, at times, even banal objects, Keep aims “to outline a practical method that can offer new performers and interested listeners an

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insight into this, all too often elusive, artistic practice” (p. 114). The final two chapters by Will Montgomery and John Leveck Drever explore different aspects of the soundscape and soundwalking to illuminate the ways in which environmental sound has been approached by a broad spectrum of artists.

A central strength of this book is the obvious engagement of the authors in the experimental tradition. All, in some way, are active in the creation and performance of experimental music and their observations are clearly informed by their practical experience and personal familiarity with the subject. Their insights allow for rare glimpses into a scene that is often marginalized and not fully understood. Still, although the authors are adept at conveying the issues surrounding experimental music, they are not always successful in conveying the sounds. The text contains surprisingly few musical examples. Moreover, the relationship between the verbal descriptions and the musical examples is often unclear and lacking explanation. Given the unconventional nature of this music, examples could have been more numerous and better integrated into the text. Similarly, readers wishing to pursue experimental music performances in more detail are largely left on their own. At twenty-five items, the list of recordings in the bibliography is disappointingly and inexplicably brief.

The book’s second part consists of interviews with fourteen musicians that explore the ways in which representative individuals approach experimentalism in music. Established figures such as Alvin Lucier and Christian Wolff are placed alongside younger musicians such as Jennifer Walshe, Manfred Werder, and Christopher Fox. Interviewer James Saunders decided to forego the more traditional face-to-face format in favour of a series of email interviews. Although this potentially precluded the spontaneity of a live interview, it allowed participants more time to consider the questions and formulate responses in a thoughtful way to provide a clearer view of their work. The interviews display an impressive variety of responses to the issues outlined in the first part of the book and, as Saunders observes, “provide a snapshot of experimental musical practices at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (p. 229).

For Canadian readers, a serious concern with this book is the presentation of an overwhelmingly British viewpoint. In the book’s foreword, English composer Gavin Bryers identifies the three major new musical developments since the Second World War as: “(i) the music of John Cage, (ii) American minimal music, and (iii) English experimental music” (p. xiii). Although clearly an opinion that would strike many as debatable, this statement appears to inform the overall conception of the book. The editor is British, seven of the nine chapter authors are British (the remaining two are American), and eight of the fourteen interviewees are British (of the remaining six, three are American, two are German, and one is Swiss). Canada boasts a vibrant experimental music scene, but there is almost no mention of Canadian music or musicians.¹ The sole exceptions occur in the soundscape and soundwalking chapters in which the philosophies of R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and Hildegard Westerkamp are mentioned, yet none of their compositions is discussed or even identified. In 1977, John Beckwith wrote:

¹ For example, see *Sounds Provocative: Experimental Music Performance in Canada*, <http://www.experimentalperformance.ca>.

“Read a book on Canada and you will find little in it about music. Read a book on music and you will find even less in it about Canada.”² Has there been so little change in the past thirty years?

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² John Beckwith, *Music Papers: Articles and Talks by a Canadian Composer, 1961-1994* (Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 1997), p. 50.