

**Weinzweig: Essays on His Life and Music.** Edited by John Beckwith and Brian Cherney. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011. 420 pp. ISBN 13-978-1-55458-256-3. \$50.00

John Beckwith and Brian Cherney's co-edited book about the life and music of John Weinzweig is a valuable addition to the growing body of publications available from Wilfrid Laurier University Press devoted to Canadian music topics. Yet it is much more than a Festschrift study of one of Canada's most important art composers from the second half of the twentieth century. The sum total of the essays Beckwith and Cherney have compiled together is a stunning achievement (as I note below, they have also authored a couple of the essays), which will no doubt serve as the benchmark for future Canadian composer studies for years to come.

It is well known that Weinzweig played a vital role in introducing various avant-garde musical ideas to post-1950 Canadian audiences; he was also an important voice for establishing musical societies such as the Canadian League of Composers; and he had a long and prominent career as a teacher at both the Royal Conservatory of Music and the University of Toronto. However, prior to reading this book, I had not realized exactly how vital Weinzweig's contributions were. Simply put, Beckwith and Cherney make the case that Canada's musical landscape, in terms of the concert hall, the university/conservatory classroom, and government granting agencies, was profoundly shaped by Weinzweig, and the picture today would be markedly different without his influential voice.

The book is in three parts. Part 1, entitled "Biographical Themes," contains four musicologically oriented essays. The first ("Toronto") opens with Robin Elliott's admirable survey of the social environment—cultural, architectural, and musical—of Toronto during the 1930s and 40s, which thereby establishes the context where Weinzweig formed his artistic roots. In "The Activist," Brian Cherney next traces the origins of Weinzweig's activism—specifically, one who throughout his life passionately fought for the recognition of the artist in contemporary society. Cherney uses this background as the basis for a wonderful narrative about Weinzweig's support of the contemporary Canadian composer—arguably the most visible spokesperson throughout the second half of the twentieth century—and how Weinzweig's work led to the formation of the Canadian League of Composers. Cherney also explicates the rationale behind Weinzweig's many altercations with the CBC.

The next essay, "The Teacher," by John Rea, is in two parts. The first is a chronology of Weinzweig's years as an instructor, his various positions, and his views as a pedagogue. The second part essentially consists of reminiscences by former students on such themes as pedagogical approach, orchestration, and twelve-tone technique. What is evident from these various quotes is not just how generous a teacher

Weinzweig was, but also how open he was to the variety of compositional styles presented to him by his students throughout his long career.

The final essay in part 1 is Elaine Keillor's "Music for Radio and Film." The chapter is insightful on two counts. First, Keillor outlines what role Weinzweig's "functional" music for radio in the early 1940s played for this emerging art form. Second, Keillor rather provocatively suggests that Weinzweig's compositional experiments from this time, music which he would have heard almost immediately after completing a piece, built confidence for the emerging composer that he carried into his more expansive compositions.

Part 2 of the book, entitled "The Composer," is more analytical in focus; it contains five chapters and illustrates various aspects of Weinzweig's compositional output. The first chapter, "The First Canadian Serialist," authored by Catherine Nolan, traces Weinzweig's initial exposure to twelve-tone composition, the compositional approach for which he is celebrated. Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* and Ernst Krenek's 1940 treatise, *Studies in Counterpoint Based on the Twelve-Tone Technique*, are cited as seminal works in Weinzweig's largely autodidactic education. Nolan then describes in lucid terms the composer's utilization of this technique in a variety of pieces throughout his career. The discussion strikes that all-too-rare combination of technical insight placed within approachable narrative prose. A summary comment in the conclusion, in fact, could be held as a manifesto of Weinzweig the composer:

His insights into the potential for deeper levels of compositional coherence through serial methods grew continuously over some thirty years, but he never abandoned his underlying view dating back to his earliest serial works that serialism was ultimately an expedient for musical coherence and comprehensibility. (147-48)

Clark Ross's essay, "Naked and Unashamed," is, unfortunately, one of the weak links of the book. While the intent of Ross is no doubt to explain the characteristics that define Weinzweig's approach to orchestrating a work, in the end he is left with simple observations of musical events and descriptions of musical colours. Consider Ross's opening paragraph from the conclusion:

Weinzweig's desire to gain the confidence of performers ... resulted in at least three qualities that characterize his music:

- (1) Idiomatic writing;
- (2) Awareness of extended performance techniques (and in some cases discovery of new ones); and
- (3) Meticulous attention to detail in his scores. (169)

Surely these conclusions could be applied to virtually any composer of worth.

The next two essays are by Beckwith. The first, “Works with Texts,” presents an aspect of Weinzweig’s oeuvre that is less well-known than his instrumental or orchestral compositions. Beckwith makes a commendable case that these works are unjustly placed on a lower stratum, as they contain valuable and striking features of the composer’s style. Most importantly, they exemplify two features of Weinzweig’s personal aesthetic: the relentless experimentalist who was, at the same time, engaged in communicating with his audience.

Beckwith’s second essay is titled “‘Jazz Swing’ and ‘Jazz Blues.’” His thesis is that Weinzweig’s early exposure to jazz became more than a lifelong love of the art form; essentially, the influence became incorporated into what many other composers and commentators have referred to as “third stream,” and informs such important works as the 1966 Piano Concerto, the Divertimento No. 8 (1980) and the 1981 *Out of the Blues* for concert band.

The final essay in part 2 is James Wright’s magisterial survey of Weinzweig’s twelve divertimenti in “‘The Story of My Life’: The Divertimento Series.” The thrust of the essay is a study of the compositional techniques and styles found in a series of works that span fifty years of the composer’s life. Like Nolan’s essay, Wright finds that perfect balance of informed analysis and appropriate prose for the generalist reader.

Following two large sections that examine both Weinzweig’s influences and his works, part 3 is, appropriately enough, entitled “The Legacy”; it contains a series of four essays. The first, by Alan Gillmor, is “In His Own Words.” Gillmor presents a detailed perspective of Weinzweig’s views of contemporary music, as well as Weinzweig’s views of both his contemporaries and the younger generation of composers against whom he had to compete during the latter part of his career. This is a particularly compelling essay: despite the high praise that Gillmor has for Weinzweig, it is not hagiography, and he is not at all afraid to provide a balanced perspective:

That Weinzweig early on embraced modernism is not the issue. That he remained loyal to one aspect of the modernist project for much of his long creative life is problematic ... There is a poignant irony in the fact that this proud champion of contemporary music, this ‘radical romantic,’ lived long enough to become a symbol of the past. (276-77)

A must read for researchers on Weinzweig’s music is J. Drew Stephen’s essay, “Critical and Scholarly Views.” Stephen subdivides his essay into four categories: descriptions of Canadian texts and historical surveys; large-scale studies, including the five (to date) PhD dissertations that consider Weinzweig’s music in larger contexts; dictionary and encyclopedia entries and international reviews; and general articles and tributes. The annotated commentary of this material is indeed impressive and should serve as the entry point for future Weinzweig research.

While Stephen's essay deals with the reception of Weinzweig's work in the scholarly community, in the next chapter ("Ear-Dreaming: A Study in Listeners") Eleanor Stubley attempts to "ear-dream"—i.e., contemplate on the reception of—Weinzweig's music at five dates spread over his career (3 January 1943, 14 July 1948, 16 May 1951, 17 January 1963, and 11 March 1993). The idea is novel and quite imaginative. Ultimately, however, I found the ideas just too contrived for my taste.

The final essay in the book is by the celebrated flutist, Robert Aitken, entitled, fittingly enough, "How to Play Weinzweig." It is an absorbing study about ways to approach Weinzweig's music and some of the idiosyncrasies it contains. For instance, Aitken reflects upon the degree of specificity that Weinzweig put into his scores—especially, the care he placed with dynamic markings—and the particular challenges such notational features present to the performer.

The most logical comparison of the present book is with Elaine Keillor's authoritative 1994 study, *John Weinzweig and His Music* (Scarecrow Press), which dealt with the bulk of Weinzweig's career except for some of the later works. I would view Beckwith and Cherney's new book not so much as a replacement but a complement to Keillor's monograph. By bringing together such a diverse group of authors—composers, musicologists, theorists and performers—the editors have, at the same time, presented all three aspects of Weinzweig—the composer, the teacher and the activist—through a refreshing, new lens. It is a brilliant achievement leading to stimulating insights not just about Weinzweig, but also about our musical culture during the second half of the twentieth century.

The book contains several appendices: the first is a list of works by the composer, compiled by Kathleen McMorrow; the second is a complete discography by David Olds; next is a brief bibliography with annotations; finally, there is a series of notes and texts written by David Jaeger for the sampler CD included in the book. Overall, the production and editorial work is excellent. One feature worthy of praise is the impressive quality of the musical examples. As a final comment, the hard cover format contains very good quality paper and solid binding.

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