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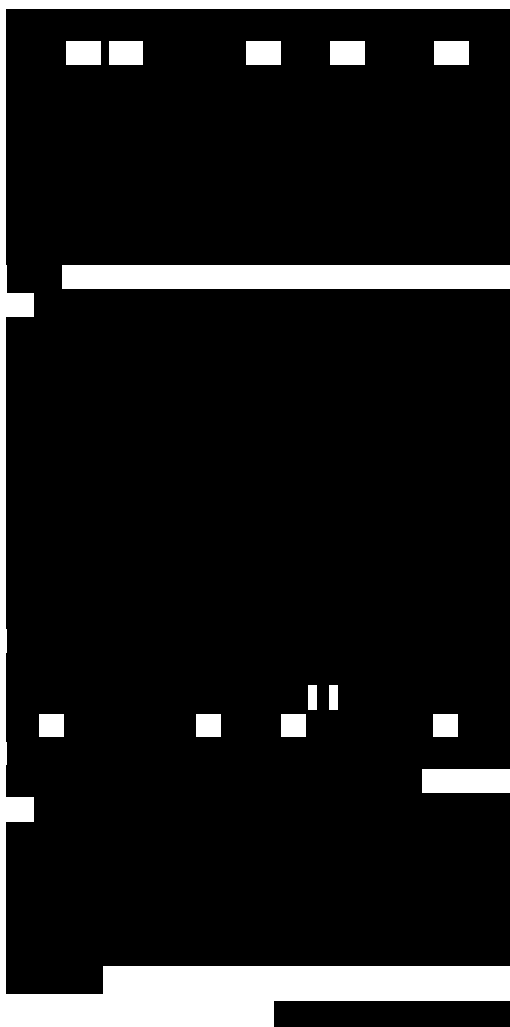
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Théories de la composition musicale au xx^e siècle (2 vols)
edited by Nicolas Donin and Laurent Feneyrou.
Symétrie, 2014. €395.00

This very substantial collection of 67 essays in two volumes gives the lie to the notion, currently fashionable in musicology, that European Modernism was a temporary aberration. Herein we see that the Grand Narrative is still very much alive. The book charts its course from Schoenberg's methods through some choppily relativistic waters to its present-day restitution in the 'new concepts' of Helmut Lachenmann, Brian Ferneyhough, Gérard Grisey, Salvatore Sciarrino, Wolfgang Rihm and others.

Théories de la composition musicale au xx^e siècle is a mind-boggling account of human inventiveness in sound and music in the twentieth

century. Each essay is, in its own way, quite fascinating. What comes across most clearly is the determination and ambition of those composers or groups who have sought to theorise their work, often in the teeth of considerable opposition from both the prevailing orthodoxies of their time or place, and even from within themselves, as they grapple with the implications of their innovations. Some composers are idealists, some are rationalists, some are naive, some are outsiders, some trumpet their systems as a total solution, some make a great contribution as if by accident. They are united by a spirit of musical enquiry that drives them to seek out and understand new means of expression.

These characteristics are well conveyed across the two volumes, to the extent that it is hard to take in the full scope of the diversity of solutions on offer. Reading the book is quite an overwhelming experience, although it is of course not intended to be read from cover to cover. It is a reference tome whose main readership will be music students. For them, it should provide an excellent research resource, with painstaking accounts of the various systems and many useful historical perspectives and critical insights.

The general critical approach occupies an intriguing territory somewhere between the decompositions of the music analysts and the personal statements of composers who, as Nicolas Donin points out in his essay, have become increasingly concerned to auto-analyse. As one reads, these two groups seem to become shoulder angels, the analysts hissing into one ear, 'we can do a much better job than these musicologists at showing how the works are constructed', while the composers whisper into the other, 'these theories are not just a set of dry procedures to be analysed – they are the very essence of our spirit!'. Treading a middle path between these two positions is not straightforward, and the best essays are those that adopt a critical position in both regards. Those that simply summarise the available information about a particular individual or idea run the risk of being little more than an echo chamber for composers' theories. Similarly, those that treat the composers' theories as merely a pretext for a dry analytical essay tend to understate the passionate creativity that has produced some of the great works of the twentieth century.

The premise of the book is to examine only those composers who have developed theories of composition. This immediately eliminates many important individuals. Debussy, for example, with his insistence that he did not know how he composed and his generally

anti-theoretical stance, is an early casualty. However, the book relaxes its own rules to accommodate composers, such as Bartók, who have had an impact on the evolution of compositional theory, albeit largely through musicologists' subsequent uncoverings of their systems. There are several such examples of justifiable 'reverse engineering', where the musical evidence clearly demonstrates the presence of an underlying theory that has had a consequent effect. In many cases, these compositional theories are not the work of a single individual, but rather the result of a cultural evolution linked to place or technology, or to some particular aesthetic stance.

The editors address the latter tendency by organising the book into sections grouped around evolutionary themes, as follows: Music of the future and re-readings of the past; Between practice and theory; Collectives; The serial knot; Trajectories; Notions and genres; Conquests of sound; New concepts. These sections are only broadly chronological. 'New concepts', the final section of Volume Two, is the one that gives the sense of a renewed straight line being drawn into the future by reverting to a parade of individuals. Here the Grand Narrative reasserts itself, in a rather more self-conscious and knowing way than previously, but still with a strongly progressive impulse.

'New concepts' follows on from two sections that cover theoretical developments arising from more general cultural activities. 'Novelties and genres' includes non-western music, heterophony, the poetics of *alea* (i.e. chance), algorithmic music, music theatre, mixed music, orality-improvisation-writing, spatialisation, live electronics and postmodernisms; whereas 'Conquests of sound' covers timbre, just intonation, psychoacoustics and spectralism, both as a way of thinking and as a compositional practice. In Volume One, only 'Collectives' adopts a similar approach, examining Dadaism, surrealism and futurism, polytonality, socialist realism, the New York school, computer music (mainly the history of its development), electroacoustic studios, musique concrète, the Polish school and minimalism.

These more thematically organised sections are in some ways the most challenging, because the premise of an identifiable theory of musical composition can become difficult to discern as it emerges from such disparate sources. To take but one example, the computer appears as both the instantiation of a theoretical idea and a compositional tool, resulting in some obvious uncertainties surrounding the extent to which

technical developments may also be considered to be theoretical innovations.

The remaining sections feature a roll-call of composers who have left behind influential theories: Schoenberg, d'Indy, Scriabin, Sabaneïev, Roslavets, Ives, Seeger, Cowell, Busoni, Berg, Webern, Hindemith, Carrillo, Partch, Wyschnegradsky, Varèse, Janáček, Bartók, Stravinsky, Eisler, Weill, Koechlin, Messiaen, Takemitsu, Schaeffer, Dallapiccola, Maderna, Nono, Babbitt, Barraqué, Koenig, Pousseur, Huber, Holliger, Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen, B. A. Zimmerman, Xenakis, Ligeti, Berio, Carter, Lachenmann, Ferneyhough, Grisey, Sciarrino, Rihm. These are just the headline names: there are many more composers examined individually in considerable depth within the essays. The result of all this is to consolidate an account of the evolution of music in the twentieth century that privileges those composers most susceptible to musicological exegesis. It is clearly well suited to universities, but that is not to say this is only an account of academic music. Some of the composition it considers is really opposed to the academy, but it is all work that is theorised.

Unsurprisingly, it is an essay on Schoenberg that kicks things off; but, lest we think that German music theory is to dominate proceedings entirely, this is immediately offset by the second essay, on Vincent d'Indy's *Cours de composition musicale*. This theoretical work was published in 1903–05, and was drawn from his experiences of teaching at the Schola Cantorum during the late nineteenth century. The juxtaposition of these two essays initiates one into a number of apparently unintended omissions, since the welcome early appearance of pedagogy is not fully followed through in the rest of the book. It would have been interesting to read a critical essay on the impact of educational theories on composition: Kodály's *Method*, Orff's *Schulwerk* and several other theoretical systems, have been taught in schools since the 1920s and have presumably influenced many composers, but they are not mentioned. Instead, the book adopts a 'top-down' approach, focusing only on those compositional theories that have emanated from the leading lights and cascaded down to the rest of the musical world.

Of the very small number of women composers in the book, only a handful is given any kind of in-depth treatment. No detailed discussion of this apparent lack of theoretical developments by women is offered. From a UK perspective, there are also some surprises. Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, for example,

are not mentioned at all, despite the existence of rather abundant theoretical accounts of their work, whereas Michael Nyman makes several appearances and Brian Ferneyhough gets an essay all to himself. This may be a sign of the musical times, or perhaps Max and Birtwistle exclude themselves by failing to auto-analyse sufficiently. Britten appears only briefly, which is more understandable by the latter reasoning. But the overall impression is of an account that places Franco-German theory at the centre of things, with some input from other European countries or the USA.

Other omissions are the result of deliberate editorial decisions. Non-western music appears only as an influence on the central tradition, and jazz, which has spawned quite a body of theory, is similarly marginalised. Even highly developed jazz theories such as Joseph Schillinger's system or George Russell's 'Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation' are ignored, whereas free jazz and improvisation are discussed in some detail. On page 1326, that wise saxophonist and composer Steve Lacy reflects on why free jazz developed from be-bop: 'Les

formules sont bien connus, et tout le monde les joue' (The formulae were well known, and everyone was playing them). Such a living archive of compositional theory is evidently incompatible with an account that relies so much on written texts.

There are also some duplications. Harry Partch, for example, has his system explained twice, albeit in different ways, and some of the discussions of computer-based music cover the same ground more than once. Spectral composition is given a somewhat disproportionate coverage across several essays, although this is a French book, so naturally the editors anticipate particularly high interest in this area.

These reservations, however, should not diminish the scale of the achievement that emerges from the pages of these two volumes. This is an immensely valuable resource that should hold its place on the library shelves for several decades to come. An immediate English translation would be a welcome addition to research and scholarship.

Andrew Hugill