



**Hugill, A. (2015) 'Boring, formless nonsense: experimental music and the aesthetics of failure by eldritch Priest', reviewed in *Tempo*, 69 (271): 98-99.**

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The citation is from Christian Bök,<sup>1</sup> and the word 'hyperstitious', which is discussed at length, is a kind of pataphysical extension of 'superstitious'.

Despite this relatively limited use of *the word*, the book as a whole inhabits the same spiriform world of infinite regress in which pataphysicians are comfortable. Ceaselessly avoiding definition by deploying the energetic oscillations inherent in wilful self-contradiction, self-annulment and self-ambiguation is an engaging strategy, reflected in a title that is positively seductive in its allure.

This is a courageous book, because it takes as its *prima materia* the stuff that most people would barely acknowledge, and attempts to travel the dry path to its transformation into a Philosopher's Stone that could deliver ... eternal youth.<sup>2</sup> Keeping going is the hardest thing, since in almost every paragraph the book presents us with reasons to stop reading. What is reached at the end, however, is a kind of creative writing that transcends criticism and aspires to the state of music itself.

The alchemical apparatus for this effort is provided by a parade of critical theorists-cum-philosophers-cum-musicologists: Heidegger, Adorno, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Ngai, Mann, Massumi, Kahn, Hegarty and several others. The author does a spectacularly good job of assimilating and parsing all this, offering numerous original insights that derive from his own critical readings of these critics: he repurposes them for his discussions in ways that are frequently quite brilliant. The language is consequently difficult to follow, but repays multiple readings.

Into the alembic goes a collection of works predominantly by Canadian composers. Bleeding chunks of scores by Eric km Clark, Devin Maxwell (an American), Chedomir Barone, G. Douglas Barrett, Josh Thorpe, Hugh Peaker and John Mark Sherlock are passed through the apparatus, along with detailed accounts of works by several other Canadians. A few of the examined composers stand out as different: Warren Burt because he is resident in Australia, Turf Boon because he is Irish and Karen Eliot because at first glance she appears to be a woman. The latter turns out to be an

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*Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure* by eldritch Priest. Bloomsbury, 2013. £18.99

Although it is mentioned on the dust jacket, the word 'pataphysics' only appears once in eldritch Priest's *Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure*:

When you see the world as a series of exceptions and happenstance, as the hyperstitious person does, the ruse of metaphysics that makes us "believe in the true" is supplanted by the superior ruse of 'pataphysics which "lets us pretend to be untrue".

<sup>1</sup> Christian Bök, *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The true purpose of the Philosopher's Stone was to deliver an elixir of eternal youth. Turning base metals into gold was only ever a test for its efficacy. In this analogy, the book seeks to connect us with something that is ever youthful in our spirit.

illusion, however, since she is in fact the collective pseudonym of a group of (mostly male) composers. The final sections of the book are devoted to 'her' work.

A stylistically coherent body of Anglophone and mainly Canadian instrumental music consequently emerges that seems to epitomise the attributes given in the book's title. Which is not to say that Canada has cornered the market in boring formless nonsense – there is plenty of experimental music elsewhere that is just as boring, formless and nonsensical as this – but what is particularly missing (and surprisingly so, given the pataphysical aspirations) is a Francophone voice. Perhaps it is because of that absence that the book seems to lack a sense of humour. Some of the work discussed is ridiculously funny, yet the discussion is po-faced to the point of becoming glassy-eyed. It would be good to assume that this is because 'pataphysics, 'the most serious of all the sciences'<sup>3</sup>, is, according to Alfred Jarry, 'imperturbable in aspect'<sup>4</sup>. But those statements are full of irony. No, this book seems to be deadly serious and the meta-ironic content that is explicit in the music is shorn of its *jouissance* by a process of critical theorisation that effectively neutralises any hint of comedy. This is the dry path: *merde* without the *merdre*.

Despite this, there is great pleasure to be had in many of the revelations and diversities of this book. Since the music considered is almost exclusively instrumental, its focus in relation to digital culture has an appealingly old-fashioned quality. Kim Cascone's much-cited essay on the aesthetics of failure<sup>5</sup> is ruled out early on: 'Cascone's expressions of failure ... are judgements made according to the way they skew the assumed functionality of the digitally instrumentalized artefact' (p. 9). Digital failure is binary, whereas the experiments examined in the book are analogue, existing on a sliding scale of becoming failure. It is agreeable to see pages of score in a book that so clearly inhabits a post-digital age: heresy within a heretical position.

Behind all this sits the rather enigmatic figure of the author himself, with his lower-case first name that seems as though it might be an anagrammatical pseudonym. The first person is

increasingly used in the book as the writing becomes gradually less 'critical' and more 'creative', and we get occasional glimpses of the actual person behind the critical position. He recounts a story, for example, of how his wife, trying to engage him in conversation in an airport, found herself overpowered by the surrounding din. While he became entranced by what he heard as experimental music, she rather frustratedly pointed out that it was a 'stuck' CD and wished it could be turned off. His consequent disillusionment, which (once again courageously) he describes in some detail, may have been a revelation to him, but was presumably quite annoying for her.

Given his authorial stance, it is not surprising that he avoids the 'self-indulgent' mistake of considering his own music in the book. Yet the whole text reads as much like an artistic manifesto as an analytical discussion. Some of the passages elaborate musical ideas that gather into potential compositions. Even the form of this book about formlessness seems to speak of a compositional intention. The section headings play with multiple parentheses in what at first glance looks like an echo of Raymond Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, but which on closer inspection turns out to have more in common with the conventions of Deleuzian orthography. This impression of a 'compositional' approach to the form of the book is confirmed by its drifting into a concluding Appendix that comprises a statement by Karen Eliot. Here we seem paradoxically to capture the authentic voice of an artist, as 'she' declares:

Even the most significant of writings, modified or left alone, is unable to finally and completely say anything certainly (p. 285).

Apparently unaware of the oxymoron, 'she' goes on to demonstrate this principle in the subsequent text. As an example of failure, it is complete. It is also redolent of that youthful absolutism which is probably the prerequisite for any artist or composer setting out along the dry path to their own particular failure.

Andrew Hugill

<sup>3</sup> Sandomir, I.-L. *Opus Pataphysicum: Harangue Inaugurale* (Paris: Collège de 'Pataphysique, 1959). Translation by Roger Shattuck (1948), cited in *Evergreen Review*, 4/13 (1960), pp. 169–173 --.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et Opinions du Docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1911), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Kim Cascone, 'The Aesthetics of Failure: Post-digital Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music', *Computer Music Journal*, 24/4 (2000), pp. 12–18 --.