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Jennifer Iverson, *Electronic Inspirations: Technologies of the Cold War Musical Avant-Garde*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2019

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Jennifer Iverson, *Electronic Inspirations: Technologies of the Cold War Musical Avant-Garde*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 303 p.

- 1 *Electronic Inspirations* charts the development of the electronic music studio at the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in Cologne, the central point around which *elektronische Musik* orbited for much of the 1950s and 1960s. This represents the first English-language monograph devoted to a studio that has long been regarded as seminal in the history not only of post-war New Music, but also of popular musical forms.¹ Rather than focussing her attention on proverbial great men and works, Iverson traces a history of techniques and technologies in which objects, ideas and collaborative networks are protagonists.
- 2 Iverson sets out the book's main themes early on in the introduction: 'the studio's centrality in the Cold War musical ecosystem, its heterogenous invisible collaborations, and its wartime reclamations' (p. 3). These themes are articulated to two guiding theoretical paradigms: Bruno Latour's account of the scientific laboratory, and a commitment to reading the 1950s avant-garde as an expression of the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. In the first case, Iverson follows the recent utilisation of Latour's actor-network-theory in musicological contexts by Benjamin Piekut, Georgina Born, and others.² In the latter case, she follows the gesture, more or less polemical and sensationalist in different instances, of recent books by Frances Stonor Saunders, Amy C. Beal and Mark Carroll.³ Putting to one side the validity of these different approaches

for the moment, they are clearly in tension; Latour's methodology seeks to bracket any general, *a priori* truth and problematise the ontological priority of such generalities as society, truth, or class, working from particular to particular, node to node, while the latter methodology seeks to uncover the general lurking behind the particular, in some sense reducing the particular to a token of the general.

- 3 That generality, when it appears, is indeed general. While the Cold War is mentioned countless times, it remains a monolith, a cartoonish clash between American values of freedom and democracy and Soviet aesthetic dictates of the Zhdanov doctrine.⁴ There is little mention of any actual historical events; stunningly, for a book that not only contains an extended passage on György Ligeti's music in the 1950s but also seeks to situate *elektronische Musik* against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 is only briefly gestured towards in the vaguest of terms (p. 95–96). It is this reductionism, the lack of autonomy granted to the superstructure, in other words, the determinism of this latter style of argument that the turn to actor-network-theory seeks to overcome.⁵ As such, despite appearances, Iverson does not really follow Latour particularly closely.
- 4 The first chapter provides detailed insights into the techniques of the WDR studio, with broad ramifications for the historiography of electronic music. Iverson's detailed analyses of early electronic works by Herbert Eimert and Robert Beyer, which trace the use of pre-composed sound effects and other material, allows the author to draw fruitful conclusions about the relationship between *elektronische Musik* and other, less rarefied forms such as the *Hörspiel*. It is at junctures such as this that Iverson's methodological wager pays off, as the fine-grained reading of material and technical continuities between high modernist music and middle-brow *Hörspiel* advocates for a wider reappraisal of the question of musical autonomy in *elektronische Musik* (as well as, as Iverson notes in passing, in *musique concrète*) and the relationship between the post-war avant-garde and the radio.
- 5 In the second chapter, Iverson gives a rich account of John Cage's reception in Western Europe at the turn of the 1950s. Informed, again, by a Latourian methodology, she attends to the personal and institutional networks established in this period. The author draws on the content of Eimert's radio broadcasts and the discursive alignments and framings carried out there, from which a particularly interesting reading of the significance of Cage's prepared piano to Western European composers emerges, suggesting that it 'provided an aesthetic model for Eimert—as well as for [Pierre] Schaeffer, [Pierre] Boulez, and [Karlheinz] Stockhausen—in their earliest attempts to create a new, electronic timbral world' (p. 58). This claim effects an intriguing and productive inversion of the recurring argument that the relationship between what Iverson terms the 'timbral utopia' and electronic technologies is one in which the latter gives rise to the former. Iverson advances a similar argument about Cage's use of square root form, suggesting that this is at least a partial source for the durational structures and interest in micro-macrocosmic unities in later electronic works including Stockhausen's *Studie II*, as well as suggesting—convincingly, though speculatively—that Cage and others' changing approach to duration was shaped by the affordances of magnetic tape.
- 6 The third chapter follows additive synthesis as both idea and practice at the WDR, examining the engagement with and appropriation of acoustic science, via such figures as Werner Meyer-Eppeler, that stimulated a vision of the synthetic creation of any

imaginable timbre. As Iverson's Latourian framework, in which technology possesses agency, is well-equipped to note, this idea quickly founders on the limitations of the available technology. Nevertheless, its conception of sound in terms of ratios and proportions between components allowed for an articulation of serial methods specific to the medium of electronic music. The chapter closes with an account of the influence of the additive synthesis paradigm on the electronic and acoustic music of Ligeti.

- 7 In chapter four, Iverson argues for the significance of new theoretical models borrowed from information theory to conceptions of form and perception in *elektronische Musik*. Following its dissemination through Meyer-Eppler and Abraham Moles, Iverson shows how thinking in terms of information and redundancy allowed composers to overcome the tendency of extremely determined methods of composition to result in monotonous musical works, allowing for greater differentiation in musical texture. It is here that Iverson's argument lends itself to what could be rather exciting new accounts of musical form in the post-war period, perhaps, in almost Adornian terms, aligning new conceptions of the relationship between part and whole in the musical work with changing conceptions of society as a statistical whole governed by probabilistic regularities rather than an organic unity governed by laws. Brian Kane has suggested something like this in his description of Iannis Xenakis as 'the first composer of biopolitics'.⁶
- 8 The final two chapters are, to my mind, the least convincing. In the penultimate chapter, Iverson charts the dissemination of chance procedures through Europe (which, for Iverson, functions as a shorthand for West Germany, France and Italy), arguing that the aleatory techniques of Henri Pousseur, Ligeti and Stockhausen, among others, emerge as a solution to the constraints and affordances of technology. The chapter closes with a tentative and fairly unconvincing argument that Earle Brown's graphic scores emerge from his encounter with magnetic tape. In the final chapter, Iverson follows the thread of phonetics through the electronic music of the 1950s and 1960s. As with much of the book, the detailed historical work is good and useful, here concerning a 'phonetic nexus' that includes Roman Jakobson, James Joyce and Meyer-Eppler, while the broader claims—about reclaiming military technology, or a clash between humanity and technology—miss their mark. As such, moments of real insight are tempered with more clichéd interpretative passages which rely on a notional humanist battle between man and machine.
- 9 Indeed, the book is peppered with a number of similar passages, the vagueness of which lessen the effect of Iverson's stronger claims, such as '[i]n the Cold War imagination, the studio is the place to address and redress relationships among technology, art, culture, and society, thereby advancing the human condition [!]' (p. 198). The fourth chapter concludes with an invocation of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': 'Electronic music hardly heals the gaping wounds left by the Holocaust. But in the studio, the European avant-garde composers nevertheless optimistically made do, allowing themselves like Benjamin's Angel to be swept into the future by the "irresistible storm of progress"' (p. 138). While this may appear a little hackneyed or glib, there may be the kernel of an argument here concerning the relationship between catastrophe and progress in the post-war imaginary; this is, however, not an argument that Iverson follows through.
- 10 Having spent the previous two hundred pages insinuating, but not spelling out, that there is something significant in the fact that the WDR studio made use of technologies

and concepts shaped by World War II, or that *elektronische Musik* was a hypersensitive seismograph for tectonic shifts between East and West, Iverson closes with a series of lacklustre rhetorical questions, abnegating responsibility for her insinuations: ‘Does it matter whether Stockhausen, Kagel, Ligeti, Berio, and others knew of Meyer-Eppler’s military entanglements? Are residues of violence sedimented into speech synthesis discourses, even when those dimensions remained latent and veiled? And need the mid-century avant-garde composers grapple with such ambivalence?’ (p. 192). These seem to me to be precisely the questions Iverson initially promised to answer.

- 11 *Electronic Inspirations* offers a number of interesting and worthwhile insights into the avant-garde electronic music of the 1950s, both in terms of historical detail and theoretical interpretation, synthesizing a great deal of published and unpublished material. Despite its flaws—its quantum leaps from particular to general and its unfounded speculations—it is suggestive of new ways of writing the history of experimental electronic music, avoiding the still-lingering tendency to figure it as a succession of influential works divorced from the context of their creation.⁷

NOTES

1. This fact in itself speaks to some of the historiographical problems Iverson seeks to address: there are, of course, monographs on many of the composers discussed in the course of the book.

2. PIEKUT Benjamin, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011; BORN Georgina and BARRY Andrew, ‘Music, Mediation Theories and Actor-Network Theory’, *Contemporary Music Review*, vol. 37, n° 5-6, 2018, p. 443–87.

3. STONOR SAUNDERS Frances, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London, Granta, 1999; BEAL Amy C., *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006; CARROLL Mark, *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

4. By the mid-1960s there were electronic music studios in Warsaw, Bratislava and Prague; as such, if this stark monolithic opposition ever held true, it was not for long.

5. ‘If connections are established between sites, it should be done [...] not by suddenly taken a free ride through all-terrain entities like Society, Capitalism, Empire, Norms, Individualism, Fields, and so on’. LATOUR Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 137.

6. KANE Brian, ‘Xenakis: The First Composer of Biopolitics?’, Sharon Kanach (ed.), *Exploring Xenakis*, Hillsdale, NY, Pendragon, 2012, p. 91–100.

7. The following serve as examples of these two tendencies, respectively: ‘The WDR studio remasculinized West Germany’s international reputation during the cultural Cold War, providing a positive foundation from which West Germany could reclaim its

hegemony' (p. 18); 'Audiences, critics, and composers may have wanted to embrace avant-garde electronic music for all the Cold War political cachet it carried' (p. 9).

AUTHORS

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Sam Ridout is a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds supervised by Professor Martin Iddon and Dr Scott McLaughlin, writing a thesis that explores the intellectual background to the development of *musique concrète* by Pierre Schaeffer, attending in particular to the aesthetic and political commitments that shaped Schaeffer's post-war musical experiments. More broadly, he is interested in the intersections of critical theory, aesthetics and sound studies, often in relation to electronic music.