

BOOKS

Ed McKeon, *Heiner Goebbels and Curatorial Composing after Cage*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, 68 pp. £17.

It's the summer of 2011, and the *Horrible Histories* troupe has taken over the BBC Proms. In a prologue to their first ever concert – a selection of greatest hits from the musically adept children's TV series – the show's frenetic historian Bob Hale delivers the Orchestra Report. Even the grumpiest academic would be hard-pressed not to raise a smile at a character who manages to cram so much history, social context and sheer fun into a five-minute account of the entire history of the orchestra. And, after outlining moments and works from history – Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 16 and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony – Hale, played by Laurence Rickard, concludes with a John Cage joke, involving the presenter jiving along to 4'33".

This is the sort of instance that Ed McKeon describes in his short book *Heiner Goebbels and Curatorial Composing after Cage*, as Cage is brought back within the structures he sought to deconstruct. McKeon borrows from musicologist Lydia Goehr the idea that Cage's most famous piece reinforces rather than deconstructs the idea of the musical work; it's therefore entirely reasonable for Hale to draw a line that tangentially connects Mozart and Beethoven to Cage, despite their obvious aesthetic differences and diversions. With 4'33", McKeon writes, 'Cage may have weakened the discourse of music's essence, the work-concept's "internal" articulation, but its external border – its separation from the everyday – remained firmly secure.'

McKeon's thesis involves introducing, fleshing out and eventually embedding the idea of curatorial composing to understand a particular moment where compositional concerns shifted from ideas orbiting the work-concept to a concern for composing public encounters. McKeon doesn't quite form a polemic on the modern-day phenomenon of 'curationism', but you feel that giving a more thorough elucidation of a word often trendily and uncritically deployed might have been a motivating factor in his writing. A problematic characteristic of the field of contemporary gallery arts, McKeon writes, is the curatorial practice where authorship is sovereign: 'a

kind of silent partner to the artists on display – especially for solo or duo shows – or, more often for group shows, becomes herself an author of the exhibition, signing it off as a work in its own right'. McKeon's research is focused on exploring, interrogating and reframing curation in a musical context, and he lists three more of his texts on similar topics in the bibliography.

In order to achieve his aim – while critiquing the curator-as-programmer position in music today – McKeon detaches composing from the idea of the musical work by paying close attention to Goehr's seminal book on the work-concept, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. While Goehr's thesis – that, following philosophy's castigation of music's ephemeral, emotional essence and owing to a desire to solidify the status of music as an artform capable of revealing universal truths, *werktreue* emerged as a foundational concept on which an ever-shifting selection of galleries containing what is considered a musical work was built and future considerations were regulated, fundamentally shaping Western classical music and its structures for years to come – has become an essential text in the past 30 years of musicological thought, the secondary argument – about what happens to music after the work-concept – has been less successful in formulating a radical new world.

One example of a way out of an aesthetic dilemma, which retains the idea of musical value while questioning the authority of the work-concept, is, McKeon suggests, shown in the work of Heiner Goebbels, in a mode of curatorial composition that rejects both the singularity of the Foucauldian 'author function' and its medium specificity – that is, works of *music* – while maintaining some of the characteristics of compositional practice through which – and by switching focus to empowering audiences – new forms of authority can be consolidated. He compares Goebbels' practice to late-period Cage, whose musicality after *0''00* (1962) became 'less "about" time. . . and increasingly an articulation of relations *through time*'.

The example he gives across Goebbels' diverse artistic practice is his directorship of the

Ruhrtriennale from 2012 to 2014. McKeon is expansive, even a touch nostalgic, about a staging of Andriessen's *De Materie* and the length to which it goes to dislodge the work-concept. As Goebbels takes Andriessen's idea that 'music is always related to other music' to the extreme, McKeon explains how he is able to maintain consistency and coherence through an 'absent centre', in this case the continued backdrop of the Ruhr basin's post-industrial landscape and the huge, almost limitless warehouses of the festival (plus the range of encouraging yet hands-off support from relevant bureaucratic structures), allowing 'a limited set of possibilities from which a space for improvisation – for something unanticipated – [can] appear'.

McKeon's book is dense yet short, and thus an accessible way into concepts that are difficult to grasp. It also makes me a little sad, realising that the kinds of things made at the Ruhrtriennale (and the atmosphere which they are made in) are almost impossible to imagine happening in the UK any time soon. It could do with a finer copy-edit, and yet conversely could be a bit more expansive than its svelte 68 pages allows. Nonetheless, it's admirable in its concision, and I hope that composers who don't fit into the mould – sonically or philosophically – find some solace in it, and take some inspiration from the distinctive outlook of Goebbels. On page 46, McKeon includes a footnote from Goebbels' *Aesthetics of Absence*:¹ 'What we urgently need in addition to the repertoire theatres are laboratories for theatre and music-theatre, in which *everything* can be called into question'. Amen to that.

Hugh Morris

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wtRobina, *Technical Manifesto for the Deviant Sound Engineer*, independently published, 2021, 110 pp. £5.99.

wtRobina's *Technical Manifesto for the Deviant Sound Engineer* is an elegant, playful and vital piece of writing for engineers and performing musicians alike. One thing it is not, really, is (that) new. Having been published in 2021, I am frankly a little furious with anyone out there who was aware of this book and did not alert me to it. Now I am here to ensure that you cannot hold the same charge against me:

¹ Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theater*. Edited by Jane Collins. Translated by David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao (2015), p. 80.

over its bristling 110 pages, wtRobina ranges from succinct and unimpeachable explanations of the tools at sound engineers' disposal to rhetorical flourishes about the conditions of performance, to deep observations about the relationships between performing musicians and the engineers who connect them to an audience. If I were you, I would stop reading this review here and simply go read the book.

For those of you already ignoring my advice, I want to dwell briefly on how virtuosic a writer must be to define gain, equalisation, PFL, compressors, gates, auxiliary sends and output faders in *fewer than two A5 pages*. Such an author must be utterly clear, in their own mind, about what these tools are. Throughout the book – but especially in places like this – I was struck repeatedly by an altogether urgent desire to hear wtRobina at a mixing desk. That is because, on top of being virtuosic and clear, the writing is everywhere just so damned musical.

The first half of the book is largely the placement of such technicalities amid a taut, compelling argument that quickly comes to the point: with these tools, the engineer has everything they need to distort sound beyond all recognition. Yet while art has evolved beyond any desire for simple representation, the engineer works in an industry that demands that the engineer avoid abstraction and instead attempt to preserve some illusion of sonic 'reality':

To create an optical analogy for what the sound engineer is expected to achieve, imagine: *visual* elements travel to separate channels of a mixing desk – here comes the sun, a tree, the sky, the sea. . . The engineer collects the isolated elements, foreground and background, arranging them into a visual scene, taking care that the tree does not obscure the woman, and the sky is located as usual overhead. The house ought to be positioned on land, not in the sea, because absolute expectations have to be met. . .

Because the time it takes for the engineering process to occur is so short the 'action' (musical voice/action of the performer) and its 'replica' (the sound emerging from the audio system) are perceived as one and the same thing. But this is the crux of the matter: *they are not the same thing*:

The overarching point comes into focus: the sound engineer is fundamentally constrained by the *expectations* of both the performers and the audience. Whether it is the voice of an actor on stage, a band or a full orchestra, the engineer is expected to reproduce a preconception of the sound everyone else thinks they *ought* to hear:

But is it engineering, or is it, in fact, art? . . . Performers behave as though the sound-person is fixing their