

MARIANNA RITCHEY, *COMPOSING CAPITAL. CLASSICAL MUSIC IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). ISBN 978-0-226-64023-5, 213pp, €28.89.

The relationship between music, musical scholarship, and the political, social, and economic conditions in which both are embedded has always been a contentious one. The quasi-positivistic way in which particularly historical musicologists believed it was possible to reach objective judgements on all matters musical by staying supposedly neutral and disinterested (often through abstaining from too close an engagement with 'extra-musical' issues) has been superseded while the achievements of ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and cultural musicologists have shown how musicology benefits from a more interdisciplinary approach. Yet each generation faces new challenges which prompt musicians and musicologists to redefine the relationship between the music itself and the society in which it was produced with the current, highly polarized age defined by phenomena such as neoliberalism, post-truth, and continuing racial tensions bringing this into sharp relief.

Marianna Ritchey's new volume focuses on neoliberalism, investigating how composers engage with it while also demonstrating, by example, how musicologists can productively critique it. Ritchey argues 'that neoliberalism has profoundly shaped contemporary ideas about classical music in the United States' (p. 1). She consciously restricts herself to the state of affairs in the US (which she describes as the 'nexus of neoliberalism'), acknowledging that while not all composers have succumbed to the lure of the capitalist embrace, the figures that feature in her study have pursued patronage in this mode. Her interest lies, on the one hand, in why corporate neoliberal actors are interested in an association with classical music and, on the other, in what the consequences of this association are for the music and the musicians involved—for example, how tools of oppression can masquerade as tools of empowerment. The commodification of difference and individualism is a core element in this process: 'Capitalism allows the expression of difference so long as that difference is never formulated in terms of opposition to the system itself' (p. 14). Unmasking this version of false consciousness by way of four case studies is a central plank of the volume. At the same time, Ritchey is fully aware of the difficulties in challenging capitalism, pointing out that crises 'have historically strengthened and reconsolidated the system, because they show it how it must reform so that people will continue participating in it' (p. 19).

The first of Ritchey's case studies ('Innovating Classical Music') engages with the US composer Mason Bates. Bates is often praised for bringing classical music into modern times by linking it with the opportunities provided by new technology.

Ritchey demonstrates how this is done with reference to two events: the première of *The Rise of Exotic Computing* in Las Vegas in 2014 and that of *Mothership* by the specially formed YouTube Orchestra in Sydney in 2011. In both pieces Bates accompanies a symphony orchestra with a drum machine and electronic sounds performed by himself (under the name 'DJ Masonic', he is also active as an electronica DJ). In the case of *Mothership* there are, in addition, four soloists playing distorted electric guitar, violin, Chinese *guzheng* and electric bass.¹ The soloists were amateurs who were selected on the basis of audition tapes and remained unpaid, thus demonstrating neoliberalism's preference for unpaid work particularly—yet not only—in the cultural sector (everyone has probably heard the jokes about musicians being asked to perform for 'exposure', but also of the proliferation of unpaid internships). The inclusion of non-classical and non-Western instruments played by people from all over the world was meant to indicate the breaking down of cultural barriers and an embrace of diversity, yet the soloists stay in far-away niches and mix with the orchestra neither visually nor aurally as each one appears only briefly in so-called 'docking episodes'. Ritchey describes this as a kind of faux diversity: 'non-Western others are allowed to look, dress, and signify differently, but they must behave "as if" they are Westerners, sometimes by eschewing their own country's traditions in favour of those of the West [...], and sometimes by packaging their cultural traditions into a form that a Western audience can comfortably consume'. (42) It would be nice to get a bit more detail here—does Ritchey believe that any integration of non-Western elements into Western music represents an objectionable act of cultural appropriation, or where does she position the red line? *The Rise of Exotic Computing* was commissioned by Cisco Systems for its 'Cisco Systems Summit 2014' which had as its headline 'Amazing Together'. It was performed by the (again unpaid) Las Vegas Youth Orchestra.²

For Ritchey, Bates' collaborations with YouTube and Cisco Systems fit the neoliberal agenda in many ways: this music appears to combine tradition and innovation, supporting the often-repeated (yet never really proven) claim that classical music can be made more attractive to younger audiences by its combination with innovative technology. However, Ritchey is not convinced (and nor am I) that this music would be accepted by either classical or techno fans as it lacks complexity and

¹ The Sydney performance of *Mothership* can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFh7LAFel4w>. There are several other performances of different versions/arrangements available on YouTube, attesting to the piece's popularity.

² An extract of *The Rise of Exotic Computing* can be listened to here: <https://www.masonbates.com/the-rise-of-exotic-computing/>.

drive while focusing on brief, repetitive motifs. Tech firms also like to ‘borrow the aura of commercial disinterestedness that still adheres to the idea of classical music, and use it to legitimize capitalist globalization and the surveillance state’ (p. 23). Finally, there is the element of disruption expressed by this music: permanent innovation has as one of its desired effects the constant deskilling of the workforce, the need for all of us to upgrade our skill sets constantly in order to keep pace with the evolving technology and therefore to qualify for lower wages—only a very small number of people (those entrepreneurs and programmers who drive that constant innovation) really benefit from it. Ritchey’s view of Bates can be summarized along these lines: ‘by penetrating the historical genre of the symphony with the cutting-edge technology, Bates shows us the way toward becoming ideal neoliberal participants, individuals who entrepreneurially use technology to disrupt old industries or traditional practices by opening them more fully to the market’ (p. 57).

Ritchey’s first case study engages with musical details more than the ones which follow, and it is the only one to contain music examples. One reason for this may be that the chapter is based on an article published in 2017 which engages with Bates’s music in greater detail (the article already contains two of the examples that feature in the book) alongside its contextualization within a neoliberal framework.³ While subsequent chapters focus to a slightly lesser degree on musical details, they are by no means absent.

The second case study (“‘Indie” Individualism’) centres on a New York-based group of composers often labelled as ‘Indie Classical’, specifically on Judd Greenstein, Missy Mazzoli, Claire Chase, and Nico Muhly. Ritchey’s main point here is that while these artists have by and large embraced neoliberal entrepreneurial ideals and benefitted from doing so, their music sometimes demonstrates a (probably unintended) resistance to these concepts: ‘indie classical artists engage with ideas that emerged in opposition to capitalism, but they largely do so without taking capitalism itself into account’, as a result producing ‘a new formulation of the individual conditioned by neoliberalism’ (p. 61). This new formulation includes a ‘liberation’ of musicians from contracted or unionized labour, again highlighting the destruction of collective identity as a core neoliberal goal, ultimately weakening the supposedly freer individual and making it an easier target of capitalist manipulation and exploitation. Another aspect is a dedication to flexibility, the concept of the gig economy and the transition of genres and styles. While they are highly trained as artists, for Ritchey

³ Marianna Ritchey, “‘Amazing together”: Mason Bates, Classical Music, and Neoliberal Values’, in *Music & Politics* 11/2 (Summer 2017), 1-23. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0011.202>.

these composers ‘rhetorically embrace career flexibility and stylistic eclecticism, which represent the diffusion of specialization that survival within neoliberalism requires’ (p. 67).

A further key component of the group’s activities is their lack of engagement with music’s critical social and political potential; they mainly want to please rather than challenge their audiences. According to Ritchey, Indie composers ‘reject the notion that music itself should be critically engaged’ (p. 77)—she postulates that in this music ‘any historical ties between musical sound and a critically oriented politics have been severed cleanly’ (p. 81).

Yet having said all that, Ritchey concedes that artists like Muhly are at least in part aware of these issues and stresses that her aim is less to critique composers like him, but rather to demonstrate how they are ultimately furthering the neoliberal agenda—whether they do it intentionally or not. Moreover, Ritchey finds that some works by members of the group appear to clandestinely contradict neoliberal principles. For example, she describes Mazzoli’s *Tooth and Nail*⁴ ‘as presenting a semblance of free individual movement that seems to clash against its context [which] offers the potential to hear it as expressing an ambivalence about the neoliberal realities the composer publicly espouses’ (pp. 72–73). The piece thus seems to indicate ‘an ambivalence about and a discomfort with neoliberal individualism that is not manifested in these composers’ public statements’ (p. 74). It appears that for Ritchey cognitive dissonance can on occasion reveal itself more directly in music than in language.

‘Opera and/as Gentrification’ is the title of the third case study. Its topic is the ‘mobile opera’ *Hopscotch*, which was produced by the experimental opera company The Industry and performed in Los Angeles in 2015. In this work, members of the audience were driven around the city in 24 cars, experiencing different musical events at a range of locations, as well as within their cars and during encounters en route.⁵ There were altogether 96 audience members participating in this journey while a larger audience group at a central location called ‘The Hub’ was watching video clips of the musical events shot on the way (which were partly produced by those audience members who were driven around, using mobile phones provided by the organizers). The performance was critically acclaimed as an example of immersive and accessible

⁴ A recording of *Tooth and Nail* with Anna Heflin (viola) can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd0_6xMudw.

⁵ An ‘Artbound’ documentary about the project can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGxhAJ4iXPE>.

participatory art which follows the general trend of using alternative venues as well as cutting-edge technology. However, Ritchey argues that *Hopscotch* does not represent a proper piece of participatory art: it is personalized rather than participatory since the participants are mainly involved in the creation of meaning rather than acting as performers themselves as would be expected. The result is 'personalized consumption' in an 'experience economy' rather than 'social engagement' (p. 95). Audience members become 'prosumers' (consumers who produce what they consume) who create/provide content—namely the video clips presented to the audience at the hub—for free.

Another aspect alleged by Ritchey is that *Hopscotch* was mainly produced by whites for whites yet took place in a Latinx environment without consultation, namely in Hollenbeck Park in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles. Boyle Heights has recently been subject to increasing gentrification (including as a typical feature the presence of artists, their studios, and artistic events such as the *Hopscotch* performance), which is resisted by many of the longer-term residents who fear being priced out of the market. In this case the residents' activities included disruptive actions (heckling and band performances) in or near Hollenbeck Park during performances. Ritchey states that gentrification does not improve diversity (as is often claimed by its supporters) since it is usually restricted to white, affluent people. While it may have been neither The Industry's nor the performing artists' intention, the opera's promotion and critical reception thus represented 'the workings of a neoliberal ideology that emphasizes personalized consumption at the expense of civic responsibility or collective identification' (p. 112). Neoliberalism's blindness to these values were rather aptly demonstrated by those residents who resisted the choice of Hollenbeck Park as a performance venue.

The fourth and last case study is entitled 'Intel Beethoven: The New Spirit of Classical Music' and engages with an event closely related to those analysed in the first chapter. In November 2015 another tech giant (in this case Intel) organized 'Drone 100', a carefully choreographed aerial display of one hundred Intel-guided drones at a small airport near Hamburg in Northern Germany while an orchestra (placed on the runway) performed a specially adapted version of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, which integrated Intel's well-known four-note 'Bong' motif after most occurrences of Beethoven's fate motif. Walter Werzowa, the creator of the Bong, had shortened Beethoven's movement significantly, removing most developmental and transitional passages as well as elements of contrast (such as the second theme), while also transposing the piece from C minor up to D-flat minor since the Intel Bong has D flat as its lowest note—so Beethoven had to adapt to Intel rather than the other way round. Ritchey describes the reception of the result as Adornian 'atomized listening', with the visual presentation yet again focusing on the individual rather than

the collective: the orchestra is rarely shown together while a special focus lies on a Hawaiian musician involved in the performance.⁶ It is also relevant that the software and effects displayed in 'Drone 100' were originally developed for the military; their use for artistic and marketing purposes is at least in part meant to distract from that fact.

Ritchey concludes her case studies with a poignant observation: 'Neoliberal beliefs are about gut feeling, not facts or intellectual understanding. We feel in our gut that liberty and personal choice are morally right and thus that entrepreneurial success is an indication of virtue, but we must be careful not to bring these vague ideas into the light of intellectual understanding. If we did, we would see how fraught, ambivalent, and historically contingent they are' (p. 138).

In her extensive conclusion, Ritchey returns to the core argument outlined in the introduction: new classical music of the type discussed here serves as a faux symbol of difference and individualism that ultimately cements the power of neoliberal capitalism, stating that the pieces she has discussed 'can appear revolutionary because their makers are rebelling against both a two hundred year old conception of musical transcendence and the notion that art should be critical of society. They are refusing the idea [...] that music that is immediately comprehensible and pleasing to a wide variety of people is necessarily fraudulent or inauthentic' (p. 140). The conclusion gets particularly interesting when Ritchey contemplates the possible features of a contemporary art music that rejects the neoliberal embrace (while also transcending the purview of modernism). Such a music should be trying to 'awaken a radically new sense of collectivity' (p. 149), the creation of new social bonds that move away from the inevitability of competitiveness that is the bedrock of capitalist thinking. Of special interest in an Irish context is a reference to Jennifer Walshe's work as an example of such an approach; Ritchey particularly names 'Grúpat' as an instructive example. The members of this artistic collective produce music and art in different, distinctive styles, yet they are all fictitious—their identities, their biographies and their art have all been created by Walshe who as a composer therefore eschews concepts such as originality,

⁶ A rendition of this version can be found here: <https://scroll.in/video/802443/watch-100-drones-fly-information-to-beethoven-s-fifth-symphony-and-set-a-world-record>. This is not the video discussed by Ritchey (which I could not locate) but a different clip covering the same event. Interestingly, the text accompanying this video speaks of a 'live rendition of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony', mentioning neither the condensation of the music nor the injection of the Bong. The drone performance set a Guinness World Record for 'Most Unmanned Aerial Vehicles airborne simultaneously' at the time. (see <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/brand-or-agency/2016/1/intel-stuns-during-ces-keynote-with-record-for-most-drones-airborne-simultaneousl-411677>).

genius, individuality, and uniqueness. This approach also helps moving away from regarding music primarily as an object of consumption, rather focusing on its agency as a 'complex of extending active relationships' (p. 151).

Critical theory helps to reveal underlying structures and intentions that are not immediately obvious on the surface, thus uncovering systemic attempts to manipulate us. Yet this is often regarded as resulting in disillusionment: 'We want truth, and critique gives us ambiguities. We want to know what is good, and critique gives us only contradictions' (p. 160). Can critique also give us a more positive outlook? Ritchey believes it can, but its power to do so mainly rests on its ability to make us more independent thinkers, acquiring—and enjoying—the ability to unmask power structures and manipulative techniques particularly with regard to the commodification of all aspects of our lives. Equipping us to recognize these techniques is the main target that this book is ultimately dedicated to, particularly given the inroads that neoliberalism continues to make into all aspects of our lives: 'The chipping away of even the desire for a non-commodified space is capitalism's most urgent project, and the musical products, practices, and discourses examined in this book demonstrate the on-going success of this project' (p. 161).

The structure of *Composing Capitalism* follows two trajectories at the same time. First there is an arch-like structure, with the framing case studies both dedicated to Silicon Valley heavyweights (YouTube, Cisco Systems, Intel) and their engagement with classical music. Here the emphasis lies on the corporations and what is in it for them, or by extension for the neoliberal economic system at large. The two central case studies (the slow movement and scherzo of this study, so to speak) focus less on corporate patrons, instead engaging more with free-lance composers and production companies, commencing the discussion from their point of view—albeit still in a critical way, of course, problematizing their often positive intentions in the light of the trade-offs required in order to be successful in the current conditions. Secondly, there is a more linear narrative that moves from creation via production/performance to arrangement and reception. This trajectory first looks at individual composers such as Bates, Mazzoli, and Muhly, assessing their interaction with neoliberal forces. This is followed by the neoliberal aspects of an operatic production (*Hopscotch*). In this case the composer is hardly mentioned at all, and we learn virtually nothing about the music—it is all about the way in which the performance was set up. Finally, the chapter on the Beethoven/Bong arrangement is also about production and performance (in this case a fusion of pre-existing material). Although more information about the way in which the two musical elements were put together is necessary here in order to fully understand the project, this is provided not in order to appreciate the music as the fusion came about not for artistic reasons but entirely as a marketing gag accompanying the drone display, which was the main event.

Composing Capitalism is a great example of a musicology that does not restrict itself to descriptive analysis but also indicates a way towards an improvement of the situation—which is, of course, one of the fundamental tenets of critical theory. The book is well written; its topic requires extensive forays into economic and sociological theories that are, however, clearly outlined, and well integrated. The reader can sense the author's personal commitment to this cause that, by and large, improves the reading experience while just occasionally creating the risk of appearing to cloud the objectivity of her approach. When, in her third case study on the *Hopscotch* performance in Los Angeles, Ritchey explains how the audience members are not really acting in a participatory way, she mentions that they were given mobile phones to create footage, which was then shown to the people watching proceedings at the hub, commenting: 'This facet of *Hopscotch* was participatory in the literal sense of the term, but it is strange that audience members who had paid \$125 to see an opera were then asked to produce a document of the event to be consumed for free by others' (p. 97). This latter point may be well made, but it is a proper participatory activity nonetheless, and here one gets the impression that nothing the organizers did can be allowed to appear in anything other than a negative light—an impression that occurs on a few rare occasions in the book.

The critique of the neoliberal understanding of innovation is a thread running through the entire volume, yet it is probably most pronounced in the first case study (and perhaps stronger still in the article that the chapter is based on). Here it might have been interesting to discuss Adorno's notion of the progress of musical material in contrast to the concept of 'disruptive innovation'. Furthermore, it perhaps could have been emphasized further that progress is not rejected per se but rather in its neoliberal, 'innovative' functionalization while also preparing the turn towards a positive outlook as undertaken at the very end of the book.

Since the founding days of the Frankfurt School, social and political discourses (particularly on the left) have broadened from a focus on class as the main indicator of inequality to include other aspects such as race or gender. Ritchey commits to following a 'middle path' by taking into account those other particularities as well, yet acknowledges that the emphasis of her book centres on class, because '[w]e cannot afford to lose to absolute relativism the recognition of those aspects of our condition that are shared' (p. 15). For Ritchey those aspects are first and foremost class-based, with gender or race following behind. I have heard this kind of argument a few times in recent years, but mainly from white males, and while it gains credibility when supported by a female author, I am still not fully convinced that this has to be an either/or decision. Improving the systemic, underlying conditions on which economic inequality is based will not, per se, also solve all problems related to race or gender inequality—which does not mean that economic inequality should not be addressed,

of course, but rather that neither of these issues are likely to benefit from being ranked in an order that prioritizes one over the others.

Ritchey's book provides the reader with an impressive (and sometimes depressing) number of examples of the ways in which neoliberal thinking encroaches on the composition and performance of art music. It is particularly interesting to a European reader who may not fully be aware of this state of affairs as the European classical music scene is still supported to a much larger degree by public funding and thus a bit less dependent on corporate patronage—yet Cisco System's Beethoven/Bong arrangement performed in Germany shows that these things happen on this side of the Atlantic as well. *Composing Capitalism* is a great achievement, a conceptual tour de force addressing a burning issue of our times and demonstrating how musicological research can productively contribute to both the analysis of general societal problems and their possible improvement.

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