CHARLES ROSEN AND CATHERINE TEMERSON, *THE JOY OF PLAYING, THE JOY OF THINKING: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ART AND PERFORMANCE*, translated by Catherine Zerner (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020). ISBN: 9780674988460, 160 pp, €20 (hardback).

This book is a recent translation of *Plaisir de jouer, plaisir de penser* which first appeared in 1993. Essentially, it reads like a spoken interview or dialogue between the late well-known American pianist and musicologist Charles Rosen (d. 2012) and a close lifelong friend Catherine Temerson (d. 2015). Temerson poses all the questions, which tend to be brief but intelligent and highly informed, while Rosen answers at greater length in what amounts to a portrait of aspects of his life and more particularly of his interests and his life's work.

The 'Thinking' aspect of the main title centres on what is possibly Rosen's most famous achievement: his creation of a number of extremely significant books about music that combine history, criticism and analysis of music from different periods of the past three centuries. The 'Playing' of the main title clearly addresses Rosen's main profession as a concert pianist of note and the subtitle ('Art and Performance') gives advance notice that the conversations within the book will stray well beyond music, bringing other arts (literature, drama, painting and even architecture) into the discussion.

The first chapter, 'Musical Analysis', begins with questions about conversations among musicians and about Rosen's own musical upbringing. Early on, he states: 'It's said that literature is useful in addition to being agreeable, and efforts have been made to show that the same is true for music. I don't think anyone really believes it' (3). Certainly, the discipline of learning to play pieces of music on an instrument is perceived by parents as a very useful way of improving a child's problem-solving resources and concentration, while hopefully giving the child pleasure too! But his point still holds about the centrality of enjoying music, of getting pleasure from it—a child who doesn't enjoy learning a musical instrument is unlikely to gain much of a boost to the brain skills cited above.

Rosen's teacher was the celebrated pianist Moriz Rosenthal, who, most unusually, had been a pupil of Liszt and a friend of Brahms (for whom Rosenthal played on occasion), and there follows a series of amusing anecdotes about his teacher's relationship with both of these figures. More significantly, Rosenthal gets credit for several important things in Rosen's pianistic and general musical development. First, Rosen was impressed by his teacher's ability to project 'any particular note of a chord' he wished to, while keeping his hand 'almost still' on the keyboard. He comments: 'It's odd, but he never told me one should bring out the polyphonic qualities of a work; he

DOI: https://doi.org/10.35561/JSMI16214

taught me to do so by his playing' (15). While this is one of the advantages of studying with a great pianist, an equally important piece of direction came from Rosenthal not only telling the 13-year-old Rosen to learn the monstrously demanding fugue of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata but also 'to analyze it before playing it'. In Rosen's words, 'I owe him a debt for encouraging me to see the relationship between the execution—the realization of a work in audible sounds—and the idea or structure of a score, something that continues to fascinate me' (17).

These reminiscences are the launching point for a more lengthy exchange between Rosen and Temerson about musical analysis and performance: how are they connected and, indeed, whether analysis *should* connect with performance? Temerson launches this section with the question: 'Are musical analysis and musicology necessary training for a performer?' (18). What is fascinating—given that Rosen is so rightly celebrated as having been an author of a number of significant books on music as well as being a very fine pianist—is the honesty of his reply to the above question: 'I don't know, though it's a question I ask myself often' (18).

In the following twelve pages or so (taking us to the end of Chapter 1), Rosen casts light from different angles on the nature and central purpose of criticism as he perceives it, and on its possible links to performance. That central purpose of criticism (he admits he has a 'fairly radical' view on this) is 'to analyze the composer's technique', by which he means the task of explaining *how* the composer achieves the effects his music produces. He believes that 'the composer's point of view should always be at the center of music criticism' (27) and he adds 'if there is no profound and intimate knowledge of the processes of composition, then everything (criticism) says will be hollow' (27). As to the relationship between criticism and performance, between analysis and interpretation, he suggests 'it is an unconscious one' and 'it is certainly not as simple a relationship as is commonly thought' (19). He reviles as 'absurd' the critic (here unnamed) who, seizing upon Rosen's own analytical commentary on the record sleeve of his recording of the *Hammerklavier*, claimed that his playing 'sought to establish the veracity of this analysis' (20). In addition, he tells us that the spur which prompted him to begin writing about music was when he read a well-known early twentieth-century critic James Huneker's comment that: 'Chopin's Nocturne staggers, drunk on the scent of flowers' (28). He adds: 'It seemed to me that I should be capable of saying something more penetrating about a nocturne that is one of the masterpieces of polyphonic music of the nineteenth century!' (28).

In the next chapter, 'The Uses of Musical Analysis', the conversation shoots off into many different isolated pieces of commentary on particular composers or their works including Beethoven, Schumann, Handel, Stravinsky and Mozart. It is clear that Rosen's comments are underpinned by his tremendous, almost encyclopaedic

knowledge of the repertoire of each composer; but for a reader who does not command an equivalent breadth of knowledge, an isolated remark such as 'Handel's rhythmic energy allows us to understand his harmonic procedures, his way of constructing a melody, and his conception of opera' (45) can seem excessively vague and therefore not particularly helpful. In his magnificent earlier books such as *The Classical Style* and *The Romantic Generation*, any such general and wide-ranging comments were always strongly backed up by highly apposite examples which enabled the reader to decipher and follow the logic of his broader message. Here however, the omission of such examples means that the reader simply has to take his statements 'on faith' as it were, as opposed to seeing their logic demonstrated before their eyes.

The comparison of music criticism and literary criticism which forms part of this relatively short chapter (commenting in passing on Shakespeare, Goethe, Flaubert, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, E. M. Forster as well as literary critics and philosophers such as Schlegel, E. T. A. Hoffman, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling) is an interesting one certainly, but again one is left at times admiring such polymathic width rather than being convinced by fleeting remarks which are simply stated rather than proved.

Despite its brevity, Chapter 3, 'Styles', is again wide ranging and touches on styles from eighteenth-century neoclassicism right up to late twentieth-century postmodernism. The observation which stands out here is his unhappiness with postmodernism. When Catherine Temerson prompts: 'It is obvious that you have more affinity with modernism' (than postmodernism), he replies:

> I was raised on modernism, in literature, in painting, in music. Modernism gave me the idea that there were worlds to explore … The great modernist artists, writers, and composers attribute a function of scientific investigation to art (50).

Rosen relates that fundamental exploratory belief of modernists back to its origins in Romanticism (which, interestingly from an editorial point of view is here always given a capital 'R' as opposed to other movements or periods which are always in lowercase). When she follows up: 'Isn't postmodernism interested in exploration and discovery?', his reply sounds dispirited: 'Very little. Postmodernism preserves classical forms and language but strips them of meaning' (51–2). Rosen does relent a little on the question of postmodern 'play': 'Postmodernism is interesting when it becomes playful and mixes several languages … in order to modify their meaning. Then the style opens up and becomes fun' (54–5). But then the polemic continues, as the compositions of John Cage or Philip Glass are found wanting: 'interesting momentarily, but one quickly perceives that this is an impoverished music' (57–8).

Here, as in the previous chapter, representatives of the other arts—painters (Delacroix, Courbet, Constable, Caspar David Friedrich), architects (Bofill, Gehry) and writers (Diderot, Brentano, Proust, Schlegel amongst others)—are drawn into the mix, as he gives examples of characteristics of important features of Romanticism and of what might be called *fin-de-style* periods 'at the hinge between two styles'. The latter Rosen declares are of particular interest to him, citing as an example Brahms's successful reincorporation of the 'grand classical forms' of Haydn and Mozart 'into a completely modern music' (60).

The last three chapters concern themselves with various aspects of performance—Chapter 4 is titled simply 'Performance', but it focuses mainly on two rather important aspects namely: (1) the questions of fidelity to the score and 'authenticity' and (2) the related question of period performance practice. Rosen quickly establishes himself as taking a middle position in the debate about what he calls 'the myth of authenticity' on the question of whether the performer should view a musical work as an abstract creation or, on the other hand, should they attempt to perform the work in a way that is informed by the historical period during which it was written. As already mentioned, the first edition of *Plaisir de jouer, plaisir de penser* appeared in 1993, thus the 'dilemma that animates a lively polemic today' has, to my mind, quietened down a great deal in the almost three decades that have passed since he was answering Temerson's questions.

However, the related question of 'fidelity to the score' seems to occupy him greatly. He makes several attempts at articulating his ideal, notably in remarks such as: 'The whole difficulty is there: how to manage to play in a very personal, very inventive way, but adhere completely to the text' (73). And, earlier on, 'It is much more difficult [than playing fast and free with the composer's markings] to keep, as Schnabel and Solomon do, to the composer's tempos, dynamics, and phrasing, while giving the impression that you are improvising, creating the work as you play' (72–3). As Schnabel's own edition of the Beethoven sonatas is somewhat famous for giving detailed and changing metronome markings within single movements, it is questionable whether Schnabel *did* keep to Beethoven's tempos; but in fairness, the issue there is more about whether Beethoven would have approved of internal tempo *changes* within a single movement, and there is at least some evidence that he did approve of such changes.

Chapter 5, 'Physical pleasure, intellectual pleasure', is a stimulating, entertaining read—particularly for any pianist—though it will likely provoke much debate. The posited physical satisfaction for the pianist is the sheer 'intense pleasure in moving their fingers, above all in bringing them into contact with the keys'. He argues that, for pianists, this pleasure has become 'a physical need' which has been critical to their

decision to dedicate their lives to it. This is highly relevant because he goes on to talk about the athletic aspect of piano-playing:

> In Liszt's *La Campanella* the pianist must constantly fling his hand to the other end of the keyboard in order to produce the sound of the bell. This quasi-acrobatic gesture procures a visual pleasure, but also a muscular pleasure, that of always hitting the right note. Assuming you don't miss it of course! (90).

That throwaway final sentence is a real giveaway—the muscular pleasure is, it seems, linked to the accuracy (or otherwise!) of the effect produced. Thus, the pleasure is not simply muscular, it is a compound pleasure. For instance, any tennis player will be familiar with these compound pleasures; the purely *physical* pleasure of hitting a well-struck backhand passing shot is the same whether the shot hits the top of the net, marginally overshoots the baseline or accurately arrives at its target just inside the baseline. However, these different results will hugely modulate the overall pleasure, either enhancing it, dampening it or destroying it completely. This makes me more than a little dubious of Rosen's emphasis on the purely physical pleasure of playing the piano as being critical to the player's enjoyment and even to their decision to take it up as a profession. But on the other hand, he is right that physical pleasure is, and should be, an important element in the satisfaction of playing.

Towards the end of the chapter, there are some revealing views expressed on various composers. In the case of the music of César Franck:

> While I love the atonal music of Schoenberg, so much do I strongly disapprove of the corrupted tonal music of Franck, his chromatic rambling in a void without a tonal center. It may also be because he was the organist at Sainte-Clotilde … I have a very secular conception of music (99).

On the other hand, I tend to agree with Rosen when he writes: 'Well, [Messiaen's] music has a self-righteous side that I really dislike. All the same, Messiaen is certainly a very great composer … He is a revolutionary' (100–101). And slightly further on he continues:

> … there are musicians for whom I have the greatest respect who adore Messiaen's music. I tell myself that I am wrong, and they are surely right. My lack of enthusiasm for the work of Messiaen is obviously a sign of ill will (101).

In the final chapter, 'The Role of the Performer', the questions posed by Temerson encourage Rosen to give some brief but specific advice on what to do (or what not to do) when playing works by specific composers including Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert and Schumann. Just to give a flavour of this, Rosen says at one point:

> There is a current tendency to play Mozart the same way as Chopin and Schumann … In conservatories, students learn to play Mozart with an agonizing legato, as if it were Chopin

> … There is an ideal of what a beautiful sound should be that pianists adhere to without discernment … Yet, certain works demand a less beautiful sound, less melodious legatos. When Mozart said that he wanted a passage to flow like oil, his conception of oil was not the same as that of Chopin! (107—108).

As with his comments about 'authenticity', there is the sense that things have changed in this area too, and students are more aware nowadays that a ubiquitous, all-serving 'beautiful legato' sound is not the ideal recipe for a great performance of Mozart or Haydn. Once again, period instruments and the great performers playing and recording on them have cumulatively changed the general consciousness in the direction of more discerning, varied and illuminating renditions of the early classical composers.

When Temerson asks, 'What, according to you, is the principal role of the performer?', Rosen comes up with a pithy and clear response: 'He should make manifest the most interesting qualities of the work' (110). This is strongly aligned with his earlier comment in Chapter 2 that '[the critic] wants to convey the essence of a work and must highlight what is original in the devices used by the composer' (31). Returning to this theme in Chapter 6 when talking about his own performing, he adds:

> Perhaps I do tend to emphasize the originality of procedures too much, although I also make every effort to integrate them into the whole. What most pains me are musicians who glide over the strange aspects of a work (110).

Despite his early disavowal of any kind of direct and obvious connection between analysis and performance, it is clear that in his mind the aims of the critical analyst and the performer are very closely connected. He goes on to say:

> We come back to something I said before: a good musical interpretation should transmit the meaning and expressivity of the procedures, render them audible and graspable. In this respect performance can resemble a kind of analysis (111).

This marks a suitable note on which to leave this book, one so full of insights into the remarkable mind of an outstanding performer and, in my view, a musical analyst of genius.

Hugh Tinney
Royal Irish Academy of Music