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Review of *Performing Knowledge: Twentieth-Century Music in Analysis and Performance*, by Daphne Leong, Oxford University Press, 2019

by Jonathan Dunsby

Joseph Kerman, then Heather Professor of Music at Oxford University, advised the present writer that the best topic for his doctoral dissertation could be a study of the history of the interpretation of Brahms in recordings, focusing on the piano works. The modern reader is probably thinking: so? Yet this caused consternation among the rising graduates of the time, leading to heated debate out of earshot of the professors—who were, as Heine wrote of his professors, in his 1824 essay "The Harz Journey," "like the pyramids of Egypt, except that they contained no secret meaning." The student consensus was that you cannot conduct serious academic research on something so ephemeral, so contingent, as musical performance, and not even "live" musical performance at that. Time's arrow has moved things on. The one feature on which most would agree about this book in today's world of music research, aside from its many estimable qualities, is that it is hardly surprising from a disciplinary point of view. Performance studies have become an integral part of the modern music theory scene.

That said, it is surprising in all the best senses as to its originality and rigor. Its structure is such a feature, organized around a triptych of "Variations," each panel consisting of three chapters; these panels concern, in turn: how performance influences analysis, how analysis influences performance, and finally the "duo of analysis and performance" (as the author puts it, retrospectively [382]). The "Theme" of these variations is expressed by the title of the first chapter, "Performers, Structure, and Ways of Knowing," followed by a chapter called "Counterpoint: Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration." Leong reevaluates the framing chapters' topics in reverse at the end, "Counterpoint" reconsidered and "Theme" concluded. In view of Leong's persistent concern with "structure"—"musical structure itself is a shared item, present to some degree in the score, the composer's mind, the analyst's conception, the performer's take, and the listener's hearing—that shifts shape across and within all of these" (384)—this makes for gratifying authorial attention on how to "perform" the structure of a book itself.[1] The triptych that forms the bulk of the book is a richly collaborative project, with composers and performers Alejandro Cremaschi, Hunter Ewen, Adam Ewing, Judith Glyde, David Korevaar, Jonathan Leathwood, Elizabeth McNutt, Robert Morris, and the Takács Quartet, joining Leong in each co-authoring one of the "Variations."

The reader will naturally want to know the big picture of what music Leong is discussing in this book. Is it about "performing knowledge" with regard to Joey Bada$$'s tracks, or *4′33″* perhaps, or maybe Ewe drumming? One is tempted to say: of course not. Perhaps not so long ago, when this book was conceived, an ultra-canonical approach to what counts as "music" would have been less conspicuous, but nevertheless guessing the composers on whose music Leong focuses would make for an interesting parlor game played by those content to call themselves "clas-

[1] This reviewer therefore finds here a sturdy response to his feeling that "in an age when it is not so apparent as it used to be what the idea of 'book' really is, it becomes ever harder to say what the value of a book may be" (Dunsby 2009, 132).

sical" musicians, were it limited to, say, three: Charles Ives, Judith Weir, George Lewis? Not exactly, and here is the actual list of nine names: Ravel, Schoenberg, Bartók, Schnittke, Milhaud, Messiaen, Babbitt, Carter, Morris. Nobody could fail to notice the ethnicity—a matter of historical record—and presumed gender of those nine names. Perhaps the point to bear in mind is that Leong is working within a particular canonicity, inside which she is hoping to persuade readers to open their ears and minds to the post-tonal world, to what one may call the post-1908 experience of Western art music. In this regard, there is an interesting, late-comer footnote, appended to the sentence "New Music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is perhaps the most challenging of all concert musics" (252):

> By concert music, we mean so-called "classical music" … The repertoire includes "art music" for solo performer, chamber ensemble, orchestra, and chorus written from about 1750 to the present, but focusing on music of the Classical and Romantic western music periods, from 1780 to 1910. Concert music is the main kind of music taught in music conservatories and music schools in North America, Europe, and some Asian countries. (252)

In 2021, the reader, like this reviewer, may feel that our new era of unforeseen change is driving the most recent published scholarship somewhat into its unforeseen historical place—a place that Leong most likely could not have anticipated.

The first panel of the triptych, about how performance influences analysis, was perhaps Leong's biggest challenge, and it echoes calls from venerable figures in the performance studies world to foreground performance rather than text as the object of music analysis. Nicholas Cook, for instance, famously asked us to regard the score as a script, and to analyze the realizations of that script (2001). Leong tackles in turn the opening cadenza of Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, a short Schoenberg piano solo, and the central section of Bartók's Fifth String Quartet. The aspects of performance that influence analysis are commendably clear in each case: in the reviewer's words, embodiment (how *écriture* for left hand alone translates into particular kinds of musical meaning), articulation (how you perform the Schoenberg will determine how its form comes through), and rhythm (the multiplicity of ways in which Bartók's relatively idiosyncratic take on meter and accentuation translates into viable performance inflection).

One of the issues any scholar faces is to navigate the boundary between originality and plausibility. This can be illustrated via two points regarding Leong's second "Variation" chapter, which addresses No. 4 from Schoenberg's Six Little Piano Pieces, Op. 19, and occupies about a tenth of the substance of the book. First, although she acknowledges the piece's formal ambiguity, outlining the "three ways" in which its form may be understood (her Ex. 2.9), she does not ask what the poietic angle may have been, and still be. If Schoenberg himself thought the piece was an example of her second reading, "a two-part form in which the third phrase contrasts with the first two" (74), would he not have simply called that AAB a "bar form"?[2] And is there not some preference for that reading in view of the detailed hierarchical, rhythmic, bar-form analysis graphed by Cooper and Meyer some sixty years ago (1960, 175), a hallowed moment in the history of music theory? This is not to argue that there is any "correct" interpretation of the piece's outer form, but to ask if there may not be a most plausible reading; and Leong herself privileges the rhythmic aspects of this composition, which for Cooper and Meyer was its *raison d'être*, or at least its reason for being analyzed. Secondly, although one may applaud Leong's historical due diligence in working on recordings of Op. 19 No. 4, by Steuermann, Pollini, and Uchida recorded in 1949, 1974, and 2000 respectively, again for plausibility one cannot but ask about Glenn Gould's recording (1966), in which he performs m. 10 of this 12-measure piece suddenly at half tempo before reverting back to full tempo in m. 11.[3] Leong rather concentrates on the last phrase, or *Abgesang*, mm. 10–12 as a whole (see for instance her Ex. 2.17, in which she notates perceived, subtle differences between score and interpretation of this measure in Steuermann's recording); and she also discusses Louis Closson's notated redistribution of the hands in m. 10 that eases the physical challenge of playing it at *rasch* speed and *martellato* (71–74).[4,5] Simply described, however, the Gould offers a radically different interpretation of that *Abgesang*. With these two observations, about form and recording history, this reviewer may seem to be nitpicking, but the intention rather is to dramatize the importance of evidential plausibility. This is not to undermine Leong's commendable intention in this chapter to explore "the creation of musical structure by analyst and performer,

[2] For a recent study of bar form in Wagner, see Bribitzer-Stull 2016. It is characteristic of the most widely used modern American theory textbooks not to teach bar form as such, probably because in general they suppress the phenomenon of Wagner, and therefore distort our image of one aspect of transitional, modern, and postmodern compositional thinking in Western art music, by composers who had assimilated Wagner or Wagner's influence—and which composers had not? For an account of bar form in Schubert songs, see Bretherton 2007. Bar forms became central to "blues" and common in much other popular music of the last century or so.

[3] This is not a hapax in Gould, and is certainly deliberate. In his recording of the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in E♭, K. 282/189g, Gould literally halves the tempo in the final measure (Gould 1968).

[4] Louise Closson was a Belgian pianist, taught by Busoni, who premiered Schoenberg's Op. 19 in 1912.

[5] It would be absurd to suppose that m. 10 at full speed would have presented Gould's technique with any hint of challenge.

alongside that of a score's entailments—its meanings and its affordances" (59), but to underline how crucial in music theory the selection and treatment of evidence can be.

In the central panel elucidating how analysis influences performance, readers may pounce upon the central chapter, a study of Milhaud's *mélodie "L'Aurore,"* to see how Leong addresses issues of vocality. Here the potential disconnect between theory and practice may seem most apparent, when she offers a conventional parsing of the music without, some might complain, transcending the merely descriptive. For example, what we may call the basic idea of the composition is what Leong cites as "motive X," and she discusses in detail its interaction with "motive Y" (that is in fact a variant of motive X). Yet she does not discuss how Milhaud's pervasive, indeed obsessive deployment of motive X throughout the song happens only in the "voice" of the piano, which is surely significant with respect to how the poetic meaning is composed by Milhaud. (Moreover, the motive's zigzag disjunct intervals would barely have been singable in Milhaud's neo-Romantic style.) Considering Leong's liking for detailed epistemological discussion, in a book dripping with footnotes, this might have been a place for her to discuss too how there is nothing, at all, that singer or pianist can do either to minimize or to maximize the obsessive predominance of motive X, in any interpretation of Milhaud's setting that retains normal fidelity to the score.[6]

You could of course somehow "perform" Milhaud's original by recomposing it, and this is the level of engagement with Mahler's scherzo fragment from about 1875 that was launched by Schnittke in his 1988 Piano Quartet, the topic of the preceding chapter. Here Leong's movement from analysis to performance may seem more successful, as she tells four distinct but related "stories"; the first compositional, about how Schnittke's music attempts repeatedly to "remember" Mahler's fragment and finally does; then about the performers' thinking on how, mostly technically, to communicate their reading of the music; about the listeners' experiences, resting on the sheer lure of a piece that is attempting to recover an earlier piece, as it eventually does, only to reveal that the original, incomplete composition never really came into being; and finally about the music-analytical take on Schnittke's foiling of "time's directedness" (158ff.). The chic ambivalence of Leong's title, "performing knowledge," comes into its own in this chapter, where we genuinely receive knowledge—of performance—that is also a performance of that knowledge; and this is the place to mention Leong's excellent companion website, clearly cued from the text wherever the reader needs it, and offering commendable interpretations of the actual music.

One of the virtues of the Schnittke chapter is the deft way in which Leong embraces a fairly substantial piece, about ten minutes in real time, and the sixth "Variations" chapter on Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* certainly achieves it, given that Messiaen's seven movements are about four times that. Messiaen research often hones in on one poietic level, in that commentators cling to the authority of the composer, who in this case was highly articulate, indeed commanding, about what his music was "about" and how to understand it. Leong incorporates poietic evidence invaluably here, as elsewhere in the book, yet is also able to stand aside from it and with her co-author for this chapter, Alejandro Cremaschi, include an insightful and original account of the difference between the characters of Piano 1 ("drama"), with its virtuosity and *joie de vivre*, and Piano 2, with its more "ritual" and perhaps epic character. Any two pianists who have the physical and musical accomplishment to seriously tackle the virtuosic Visions could not fail to benefit from Leong's analysis-influencing-performance meditation on this maximalist refusal (written in Nazi-occupied Paris in 1943) to allow that human tyranny, which eventually always dies in shame in a bunker, can so much as touch contemporaneous, sublime human creativity.

In the eighth chapter, about Carter's *Changes* for guitar, Leong's co-author Jonathan Leathwood is strongly present and offers a different kind of perspective in suggesting that improvisation using a composer's precompositional materials can be the key unlocking the work itself to a performer, and vicariously to listeners. Writing a "Postlude" to this chapter, Leong suggests:

> Leathwood's deep and sophisticated analysis of *Changes* may appear daunting to the guitarist wishing to learn the piece. But practical exercises can put Carter's set-class lexicon into the ears and hands. We suggest a few here. All are explorations that Leathwood carried out while learning *Changes* . . . . Notice that the exercises involve improvisation, a word that Leathwood has used to describe both Carter's play with and between his structural chords and a performer's intuitive facility resulting from tactile and aural familiarity with these chords. (320)

It is basically "scales and arpeggios" but in Carter's musical language. This will be familiar to those who have learned to perform Second-Viennese serial music, and absorbed the tone row, its potential pitch-space resonances so far as is practicable, in something like the way the composer will have done, but on one's instrument, or in singing. It will be familiar too to those who have learned to conquer multiphonics in wind playing; and there are many other

[6] Although it is not generally helpful for reviewers to itemize might-have-beens, out of scholarly integrity it should be pointed out that, in discussing French prosody in this chapter, Leong omits to mention Hunter's (2005) authoritative guide.

analogies in modern and postmodern music performance.[7] This is a point in the book where the reality of the performer's work comes through strongly. The last triptych chapter about Morris's *Clear Sounds among Hills and Waters* for piano solo highlights it too, in the sense of researching audience perception. There may be a good deal of confirmation bias in the data here, and other hazy factors in the understandable obsession of music psychology with the much-vaunted ordinary listener, which is a pretty exclusionary idea when you consider that by definition it cleaves practitioners from audience. "It is interesting that participants felt able to judge the quality of the performance without knowing the piece at all" (349). One might suggest instead that while some might be all-too-ready to express self-important feelings about affordances of which they have little or no prior knowledge, others instinctively hesitate to pass judgment, for all their acculturation and perhaps expertise; one might even dare to say that the latter know better.

The Babbitt chapter seems to stand out, not least because of the exceptional voice of its co-author Elizabeth McNutt, discussing *None but the Lonely Flute* (1991). McNutt's perceptions are not only fascinating in relation to Babbitt's composition, but also in the context of Leong's whole inquiry. This is a key moment in McNutt's realistic overview:

> Performance is intrinsically holistic: the entire work must be performed from start to finish. In this real-time experience, connections and generalities are unfolded as relationships of timbre, articulation, phrasing, pacing, and so on. The flutist conveys her conception of the work through calibrated nuances instead of reasoned explanations. No detail can be ignored or glossed over in this process; every part of the score must be dealt with at the same level of intensity. Where the theorist has the luxury of focusing her interpretation on pitch sets, rhythmic structuring, references to Tchaikovsky, and other particular dimensions of the music, the flutist cannot do this. (280)

Particularly telling is McNutt's advice that, in performance, "every part of the score must be dealt with at the same level of intensity," an insight that must ultimately undermine Leong's idea that knowledge can be performed, given that a "performance" is purely itself and by definition always replete, whereas empirical "knowledge" is by definition always incomplete. Yet we do not need to dwell on Leong's snappy title as a philosophical proposition: accept it instead as an aspiration, as hoping that the work of music theory and live music can be brought into ever more symbiotic collaboration.

[7] A pioneering publication in this arena was the *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (Slonimsky 1947), not mentioned by Leong. This might be a surprise in the context of guitar music, not least given its importance not only for "classical" guitarists of successive generations, but also for jazz and rock musicians of the 1970s (on the latter, see Walser 1992, 269).

The first, framing, afterbeat chapter, "Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration," is Leong's own review of the triptych analyses with respect to the sharing of objectives and agents that formed the fabric of those studies. She ends this with an account of institutional practices (syllabi, journals, societies, and so on) and some of the differences between them—given that the Atlantic is still quite a river for anyone to aim to cross intact. The broad-mindedness of her tone crystallizes when she writes how "our [analytical] interpretations are by no means definitive, but rather 'thicken' the description of analysis-and-performance relations and imbue it with particular meanings" (369). Finally, she returns to "Performers, Structures, and Ways of Knowing" in this pass, briefly reviewing the epistemological status of her triptych studies and showing her own penchant for crossing that river by calling in evidence Barthes's "grain of the voice" as well as classical rhetoric, both of which are, supposedly, emblematic of "a reaching across, through individual partnerships, the cultures of theory and performance" (385).

Carefully structured though the book is, probably few will read it from cover to cover. Apart from the sheer musical proliferation on offer—that this review's main intention has been to try to convey—it is also a major work of scholarship, with a bibliography of some four hundred items, cited not only in the copious, ever-appropriate footnotes, but sprinkled relevantly through the text itself. One can well imagine that performers specializing in transitional, modern, and postmodern repertoire could benefit from experiencing its entire argument and evidence, but equally from mining it for repertoire and issues with which they are familiar, or would like to be. For a music theorist, to do the book justice, the whole probably needs to be absorbed. However it may be read, it will remain an invaluable resource. Its length and density represent its author's wealth of musical expertise and experience, and the plurality, diversity, and cultural range of its collaborators' interactions with the author, as well as the inherent complexity in Leong's ambition to promote intradisciplinary understanding.

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