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*Music, Philosophy and Gender in Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou.* By Sarah Hickmott. Pp. ix + 245 (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2020. ISBN 978-1-474-45831-3, £80.)

This is an admirable book with numerous rewards for readers with enough time to ponder its smart blend of diverse philosophical discourses, musical practices, and value systems. Probably there is no single type of reader or simple disciplinary home for this book, and that is all for the good. Some of the seas that Hickmott traverses are uncharted and there is a palpable sense of excitement in the air, especially the chapter on Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, whose project, she concludes, is ‘the most productive’ (p. 217) of the three men. Anchored in the historical repurposing of ‘philosophy’ as ‘theory’, this book sets sail in two directions. On the one hand, it uses Continental theory to pose questions to musicology, which are largely grouped around concepts of listening, subjectivity, and meaning. On the

other hand, it uses musicology to respond to the provocations of, Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Alain Badiou when they turn to music or the musical (to a lesser extent, sound and the sonic), analysing how they deploy music, on the one hand, as a mode of contemporary thought and challenge to all things metaphysical, and, on the other hand, as aesthetic content (in which respect proper nouns stand proxy for certain kinds of cultural and political investment).

From deep trawling of a range of work by the three thinkers that puts their ideas under sustained pressure, Hickmott shows the significance of their philosophical approaches to music, focusing particularly on their more or less explicit materialist assumptions, and from this position going on to read music and its affects as multiply constituted by a range of mediating functions. To wit: Nancy's argument that experience through the senses, sensuous experience, is itself meaningful and not a mere platform from which meaning must be excavated, extracted, or expressed; Lacoue-Labarthe's attention to *techne* and its imbrication in the constitution of the subject (technologies of the self, a phrase already familiar from Foucault's influence upon musicology); and Badiou's philosophy of *l'événement* and its forceful imperative that the subject labour to perpetuate the truth of the event.

Hickmott does an excellent job of marshalling contemporary French theory to her own purposes and summarising expansive, complex, and in some cases live, issues. Readers may have already read her earlier articles on Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe; these have been revised for this book. The most substantial differences between the earlier articles and this book are her comparisons between approaches to music. All three men have at various points in their careers worked through the case of Wagner, and all three have—Badiou more so than the other two—drifted back from the radical implications of their own thought into broadly conventional configurations of music's ontology (the work concept) and of silent listening (p. 167); indeed, Badiou's position is that 'music must be (philosophically) seen and not heard'

(p. 216). One consequence of Hickmott's critique is that the dense theorising of Continental philosophers comes to seem, by virtue of their musical tastes and aesthetic values, plain and simple. Badiou is quite a different case to the other two, standing out for his dogmatic insistence that, because its proper focus must be truth-events, listening cannot be about pleasure (pp. 177–8), and for his dogged refusal of anything sophisticated that might muddy the purity of philosophy. Thus his prose is deliberately less literary and poetic than Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, even in the Wagner book.

Comparisons between Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe are easier to make, for no other reason than they were colleagues, and co-authors on more than one occasion. Although there are undoubted parallels between their respective writings, it would be interesting to pursue, as an appendix to this book, a reading in which they are understood separately. One might deal with Nancy, for example, without the concept of *la mère* (a term that itself is not mentioned frequently, but which plays a huge submarine role in how he constitutes the embodiment of listening); or one might consider his deployment of *résonance* in relation to Lacoue-Labarthe's term *écho* (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Echo of the Subject' in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk and Linda M. Brooks (Cambridge, MA, 1989), pp. 139–207). Such perseverance would help to channel the fascinatingly fluid contexts of this book into deeper straits.

It is useful to have *Listening* and 'The Echo of the Subject'—possibly cited more frequently than they are read—framed by the wider context of their authors' other writings on music. These are less well known in the Anglo-American musical world, with the exception of Lacoue-Labarthe's *Musica Ficta: (figures of Wagner)* (trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford, CA, 1994)). Further ripples in the pool of context can be felt, but could be more explicit. For example, parallels could be made with Nancy's equally pithy books, *Intoxication* (trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: 2016)) and *The Fall of Sleep* (trans. Charlotte Mandell (New

York, 2009)), where he discusses, respectively, the fomenting of drink in the stomach, and the back-and-forth rhythms of sleep. Similarly, Lacoue-Labarthe's essay on Diderot ('Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis' in *Typography*, pp. 248–66) could provide an interesting undercurrent regarding the relation of music performance to his maternal theory of the subject.

Hickmott's argument is mediated, and in fact literally bookended, by her wide-ranging discussions of mediation in chapters 1 and 5. This is a helpful feature of her approach. Chapter 1 puts the three thinkers into context, working through the intellectual, musical, and musicological frameworks of their arguments, and subdividing the critique into four subsections on ontology, representation, meaning, and the nominal art-science divide. Diving into the deep underpinnings of the musical practices deployed (or at least named) as evidence, she surfaces with interesting takes on the multiple mediations that constitute musical practices. These mediations include technological developments, extractive planetary engagements, pedagogical regimes, capitalist exclusions (e.g. the cost of instruments), biopower manoeuvres (e.g. the relation between leisure entitlement and art making), institutional value judgements (e.g. the disciplining of the archive, p. 3), and, most potently and frequently, the mediations of gender and the feminine. Hickmott also shows that the citation of musical practices within philosophical arguments is never innocent: it is an exercise of power, and it comes with risks. Indeed, she argues in the three central chapters of the book that each of the three thinkers falls foul of an essentialism in the narrative he assumes or constructs about the feminine, by configuring music as naturally feminine and understanding it in terms of a pre-symbolic maternity. This is related to the error of exceptionalism whereby music is configured as excessive and beyond knowledge, beyond rationality, beyond perception, and so on.

With the three critiques returned to port, chapter 5 resurrects and repairs elements of these same arguments, now understood in terms of mediated practices, in order to understand what it means for music to be ‘staged’ both literally and within the context of its phenomenological constitution as an art form. This final chapter triangulates between the case of Wagner and the three thinkers, questioning the logic of huge swathes of discourse on music and the feminine (the reductive ideology that each has its own essence). In addition, Hickmott melts the glacial opposition between the sonic and the visual (and several other oppositions that deploy a similar logic) and develops ‘tools and techniques that both shape and are shaped by social, cultural, political and performative practices—including articulations of gendered identity’ (p. 14). What could or should happen in the wake of Hickmott’s book is an open question, despite the tentatively programmatic epilogue, ‘*Encore: After Music*’, in which she supports the proposal that we need to rethink, possibly even drop, the very term ‘music’ (p. 223). Perhaps this studied ambiguity is a consequence of the double function of mediation: both in relation to the three thinkers’ thought as this is critiqued specifically through the lens of gender and the feminine, and in relation to this very book’s structured presentation of its diverse materials—from the calm historical and musicological eddies in chapter 1 through to the philo-musical and musico-philosophical whirlpools in chapter 5.

Some of Hickmott’s points about the figuring of the feminine are designed, quite reasonably, to provoke, rather than to merely resonate with readers, making waves that might erode the shoreline of received wisdom. To give only three examples: she notes that music has long been configured in relation to philosophy as existing in a submissive position of prostitution (pp. 215–16, quoting Laura Odello); she rightly criticises Badiou for implicitly condoning gendered violence (p. 216); and she articulates a sharp, to-the-point feminist response to Nancy’s reading of Titian’s *Venus with an Organist and Cupid* is (pp. 83–7).

One point on which Hickmott is slightly less critically provocative concerns the deployment of popular musics. She notes the variously uneasy relations between such artistic practices and the three thinkers' philosophical practices, ranging from partiality in the case of Nancy to disdain in the case of Badiou (p. 150), but in tacking across the choppy discursive seas she remains relatively gentle in comparison to, say, her more determined criticisms of Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's genealogical inheritances from Rameau and Rousseau respectively. Perhaps Nancy's writings on rock and techno, if they are not to be dismissed simply as out of touch, and untouched, by a committed engagement with material realities of a popular music's practice, need a separate monograph. Though falsely divisive, such a gesture might afford a space in which due credit could be apportioned to Nancy's political self-positioning vis-à-vis popular culture. His response to such music could be read as being bound up with the wider political concerns brewing within intellectual culture in the early twenty-first century, as it sought to apprehend the dynamics of the noisy resistance emanating from *les banlieues* ('suburbs'). To put it counterfactually, one would predict a different kind of assessment of the significance of popular musics when writing after the Western financial downturn of 2008 or after the planetary downturn of 2020; 1968 was only one year in which cultural tsunamis hit the humanities during Nancy's lifetime. A comparable case is the 1997 live encounter between Derrida and Ornette Coleman, during which the role of (philosophical) wonder in relation to (artistic) public utterance was volubly questioned, making Derrida out of sorts afterwards. Lacoue-Labarthe's deployment of non-classical musics, however, seems more of a piece with his broader philosophical trajectory.

Even when she is not deliberately being provocative, the critical register of Hickmott's argument is replete with insights. She builds upon brilliant work by Robin James, Brian Kane, and Benjamin Piekut in cognate areas of the musico-philosophical archipelago, particularly with respect to the (meta)disciplinary implications of her argument. From James

she gets the point that music is often deployed ‘as a metaphor for affect’ in ways that merely replicate gendered oppositions (vision is masculine, being resonant is feminine) and marginalise women (p. 77, quoting James), and the point that music is not actually in need of ‘rescue’ (p. 198). From Kane’s work on the acousmatic, her theme is the misguided consequences of attempting to bracket out *techné* from performance and music production (pp. 174–5). From Piekut’s explication of actor-network theory she reiterates the importance of bodily regimes to musical discourse (p. 213) and expands the critique of New Musicological ‘contextual studies’ (p. 220).

This is a book about the outcome of desire for phenomenological plenitude, and for full presence in auditory experience. The assumption driving so much thought downstream towards open water is that resonance, timbre, and the autobiographical gesture must necessarily be committed, continuous, efficient, forceful, intense, invasive, and irrevocable. Mediation must be both productive and exhausting to achieve a full-on, and fully focused, constitution of the subject *qua* self-assertion. This register of the book feels like it is drifting towards Badiou, despite the penetrating critique of his philosophy and aesthetics (by far the longest chapter). Building upon Hickmott’s detailed analyses, we might suggest that, notwithstanding the common “belief that sound—and particularly music—is in some way originary, or at least is more intimately connected to essences or truths . . . [and that this] remains one of the most believed in idols of Western philosophy’ (p. 2), what is at stake in the three thinkers’ projects is how energy can be disseminated, invested, cathected, and—for the planet’s lucky ones—stored and accumulated. When Hickmott writes that ‘any sounding is always already a *resounding*, with no recourse to an originary or ‘pure’ sounding’ (p. 64), one could take this logic as indicating a leak in the phenomenological bucket—resonant body, echo chamber, etc.—into which Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe insist on pouring the subject.

The dripping trickles down into the main paradox of the concept of resonance: whether constituting resonance as some kind of perpetual motion machine is unnecessarily problematic for the nominal subject. Music is a liminal and possibly difficult artistic case in this respect, given its temporality, its allographic emergence (p. 19), and its supervenience upon sound and noise. Yet the case could still be prosecuted a step further, the target being music's insidious claim over the subject, which needs to be unpacked, heard, and afforded the space to disperse naturally. This might be where Lacoue-Labarthe's allusion to the 'destabilizing division of the figural' and a 'phenomenon that, despite the catharsis, begins to exceed and broach the subject's economy, and ruin it from within' ('The Echo of the Subject', pp. 175, 189 respectively) begins to have genuine traction. The mediation of the sound-music distinction is important here. With the presence of sound unregistered beneath music's clamour, Hickmott is right to hear in music—'particularly music'—the connection to myth and biopower.

The viewpoint helps us to begin unpacking music's attempt to swim against the current of energetic investment, which for both Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe would navigate back to Heidegger and *Dasein*'s death-bound subjectivity. There is an opening to sound here, first as the *techne* of mediation, then as the damming of energetic flows and the emergence of temporary subject positions. Music cannot stage the desolation of energetic investment; it is always caught up in the multiple mediations noted above, as per Hickmott's detailed discussions. Sound, despite the fact that it is transparent to assertion and its resistance to anthropocentric manipulation is silent, might just be able to force the question, for its own mediation comes with a little less of the hubris characterising music. To put it schematically, and in the manner of Hickmott's alphabetically pregnant chapter titles: in the midst of music, mediation matters; meanwhile, sound scatters the subject.



I am still reaping the rewards of reading this book, and I will continue to do so for some time. A sequel exploring Stiegler's concept of *organologie générale* in greater depth is certainly warranted, for his ideas only appear in chapter 5. Future printings should correct the index entries for Albright (Daniel not David) and Piekut (listed twice with different first and last names). Hickmott's discussion of psychoanalytic configurations of the subject is well made; yet having not been at the forefront of this book, it could benefit from its own bespoke space. *In fine*: this book ought to become a touchstone for future studies in the relationships between Continental theory and music. Hickmott makes a clear and persuasive case for why we should continue to read Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Badiou—and an even more trenchant case for why we should take more care in how we deal with gender and the feminine.

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