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Jacques Amblard and Emmanuel Aymès, *Micromusique et ludismes régressifs depuis 2000*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2017. 124 pages. Illustrations, cartes. 7 € (broché). ISBN: 9791032001233.

Review by Edward Campbell, University of Aberdeen.

Micromusique et ludismes régressifs depuis 2000 by Jacques Amblard and Emmanuel Aymès is a slim volume at 124 pages, but nevertheless a fascinating exploration of a contemporary musical phenomenon. Setting out from the concept of “le redevenir-enfant,” a phrase with more than a hint of the Deleuzian about it (though the philosopher is not mentioned in the text), the book examines a tendency towards infantilisation which the authors trace to the 1830s but which has become much more evident in more recent times with the sociological identification of the “adulescent” in the 1970s and 1980s, certain developments in the plastic arts from the late 1980s, in certain strains of popular music that arose with the availability of personal computers in the late 1980s and 1990s, and finally in aspects of Western art music [“musique savante”] from the new millennium. What Amblard and Aymès term *micromusic* is also known as *chiptune* or *8-bits*, the post-punk music of geeks and hackers with whom game technologies such as *Game Boy* are transformed into sources and instruments for music-making. While this, for the authors, is ostensibly regressive and nothing less than the “acme” of infantilisation, it signals at the same time, as the back cover notes, the “subtile inversion” of the player-musician into an anti-consumer within processes of alternative globalisation.

“Regressive” is not to be confused with conservative and when the authors state that twenty-first-century composers, the generation who are now in their thirties, have gradually adopted a regressive aesthetic, this is not a return to the traditions of music history but rather to their own personal histories and to that of listeners, by means of which a musical composition, thought of as “serious” music may nevertheless be based on or draw on more playful, childhood musical experiences (p. 5). Picking up on such current tendencies, the book sets out to imagine the pathways such developments might take in the future (p. 6).

The majority of the book consists of two long chapters, the first, “Généralités, régressives” written by Amblard (pp. 13-41), and the second, “Micromusique,” by Aymès (pp. 43-106). Amblard’s contribution is a fascinating survey of contemporary French culture from which he picks out some key examples of “kidult” (Tony Anatrella), “adulescent” (Corinne Maillet and others) or “Peter Pan Syndrome” phenomena (Dan Kiley) pertaining to television, train tickets and the flagship radio station *France Musiques* (a campaign for funds to restore 48 musical manuscripts including first editions of Bach’s keyboard works, where one must subscribe on the

website—*Kiss Kiss Bank Bank*) (p. 14). The French version is Robert Ebguay's "*La France en culottes courtes*", in which infantilism develops within a "société de consolation" becomes "à la mode" (p. 15), and adulthood is only finally accepted by those in their fifties (p. 16). Financial analyst Corinne Maillet, who traces the economic bases of infantilism, shows that it is a global force, informing behaviour in the United States, Spain, Mexico, Japan and elsewhere. Given all of this, Amblard asks with good reason, how composers and musicians could not be part of such a widely-experienced phenomenon (p. 18).

Amblard considers a number of examples taken from the plastic arts, including an installation by the American artist Paul McCarthy, and a video by Rémi Gaillard and Jeff Koons, *Inflatable rabbit* (1986), which is identified as "la première œuvre emblématique" (p. 20). For Amblard, a regressive take on childhood is mixed up here with quasi-pornographic aspects of sexuality and Koons's global influence is recognised beyond the domain of the plastic arts (p. 22). He goes on to identify certain indicators of the infantile in aspects of popular music, for example in the particular repetitiveness of a certain kind of ostinato (p. 23), a stereotypically "innocent" kind of singing with a voice that is "plus aigu, soufflé et dénué de tout vibrato, comme un chant soliste d'enfant de chœur" (p. 24); the use of instrumental techniques such as Alberti bass and of instruments such as bells that arguably recall the sound-world of simple tuned percussion. Invoking Adorno's critique of regression in the music of Stravinsky, Amblard reflects on how Prokofiev, despite his many achievements, is so easily reduced in status to the composer of *Peter and the Wolf* (p. 27). Raymond Scott's electronic recordings *Soothing sounds for baby* (pp. 27-28), originally intended in the 1960s for babies, were reissued after 2000 but this time for an adolescent audience aged "from 17 to 37" (p. 28). Indeed, for Amblard, it is arguably the case that "une certaine dérive festive/régressive accompagne tous les arts depuis les années 1990/2000" (p. 32) fuelled by creators wishing to rediscover the shared world of their childhood (p. 33), though with unmistakably sexualised overtones (p. 34).

While Sant-Saëns did not want his *Carnival of the Animals* (1886) to be performed again after its premiere during his lifetime, lest it damage his reputation as a serious composer, the contemporary French composer Guillaume Connesson (b. 1970) had no such qualms in linking his composition *Jurassic trip* (1998) with the Saint-Saëns piece, something which for Amblard is clearly emblematic of kidulthood and "la régression individuelle" (p. 36). Adorno would undoubtedly find certain strains of "naïve," "innocent" and anti-complex contemporary music fit only for babies. While not uncritically accepting Adorno's negative judgements (on the value of jazz or on the merits of the guitar, for example), Amblard nevertheless questions whether an infantile aesthetic lurks within postmodernism (p. 37) before looking to the aesthetic of musical "saturation" of contemporary composers Franck Bedrossian, Raphael Cendo, Yann Robin and Dmitri Kourliandski, which he lauds as "un des rares modernismes renaissants" but also as "un véritable néo-primitivisme ou post-expressionisme" (p. 37). He identifies aspects of adolescent inspiration in Kourliandski's science fiction borrowings for his operas (pp. 37-38), which he interprets in relation to the production of a number of recent operas by composers of the calibre of Helmut Lachenmann, Philippe Boesmans, Unsuk Chin and others, all of which are based on fairy tales. Amblard makes the point brilliantly when he wonders whether the reader could really imagine Pierre Boulez, who for many continues to exemplify compositional seriousness, writing an opera at the end of his life on the subject of *Tom Thumb* or *The Ugly Duckling*, and the effect this would have had on the public (p. 39). Amblard completes his reflection in drawing attention to some recent pieces by contemporary composers that seem to exemplify the "infantile": Mauro Lanza's *Barocco* (1998-2000) written for an ensemble of toy instruments,

Kourliandski's *Concerto for Porsche* (2006) and Andy Akiho's *Ricochet* (2015), subtitled "Ping pong concerto," in which the rhythm of the ball is a key component. Amblard awaits a concerto for *Playstation*.

Where Amblard provides cultural context, Emmanuel Aymès's chapter "Micromusique" is firmly focused on exploring the micromusical universe in all of its forms. Instead of setting out from a fixed definition, she outlines a genuinely interesting micromusical constellation made up of *cheaptune*, *circuit-bending*, *8-bits* and *toy music* as well as the music of *geeks* and *hackers* (p. 43). Emerging in the late 1990s and proliferating with the development of the internet, it is described as an alternative electronic scene in which game consoles, electronic toys, and microcomputers become the means of musical production. For Aymès, their ludic use is only "potentiellement régressif" (p. 43) and infantile, and while she acknowledges that it is still marginal, her goal is to show that micromusic is "un genre musical à part entière," (p. 44) albeit one that attempts "à développer des nouveaux moyens de création musicale basée sur des *objets obsolètes*" (p. 45). As a new area of enquiry, currently one "sans textes," Aymès's sources are primarily videographical or drawn from the internet: chat forums, blogs, festival announcements, videos and conversations with artists, of which she includes four.

Aymès considers the rise of the Demoscene computer art subculture in the late 1970s with its audio-visual presentations, recognising that while it was "un milieu élitiste" available only to initiates, it also gave rise to demoparties where productions were aired and shared, a scene that continued to develop into the 1990s with the progress of video games and that, while less vital than before, still exists up to the present (pp. 46-47). She next discusses *Micromusic.net*, a website set up in 1999 to feature "*chipmusic*: réduite, minimale, composée sur des équipement numériques *low tech*, comme les *game boys* et les vieux ordinateurs personnels" (p. 48). For the originators of this web platform, the term "micromusic" seemed preferable to *chiptune* and *8 bits*, terms used by others for the music they liked, and *Micromusic.net* became the centre of the movement. Independently of this, the Tasmanian DJ Lektogirl organised the first international concert in the medium in 2000 and opened up opportunities for performance beyond online platforms (p. 49). *Micromusic.net* was in fact part of the *Do It Yourself* culture which rejected consumption and specialisation and gave its micromusical amateurs a platform for and means of exchange.

Having established the movement's origins, Aymès next tackles the charge that micromusicians are not actually musicians at all (p. 50), positing with justification that they operate in the place opened up by John Cage whereby "*everything we do is music*" (p. 51). Fluxus, Christian Marclay's *turntablism*, Iannis Xenakis's art-science and Pierre Schaeffer's aesthetic of "*objets musicaux*" are also invoked as precursors (p. 52; 58), a genealogical move which both Amblard and Aymès repeat several times. Discussing the local scene in France, Aymès considers the activities of *Micromusic HQ* which operates in Marseilles, Lyon and Paris, and which organises "des soirées, des ateliers, des rencontres, des concerts et des festivals à travers le monde" (p. 53). She discusses the *FabLabs* that began in the United States in 2004 at MIT, many of which also exist now in France, and which make technological tools available to artists, with several labs focusing on one particular area of development, such as "robotique ludique" (*PoBot* at Sophia-Antipolis) (p. 55). For Aymès, the vibrant nature of the French micromusical scene is largely the result of the *FabLabs* (p. 56). An important aspect of micromusic entails the "misuse" of technology or its rerouting for new use, and a piece of micromusic can also include within itself a range of existing musical genres such as *rock*, *reggae*, *techno*, *hip hop*, traditional music, or even

Ligeti (p. 57). Consequently, it is characterised not by particularity of style but rather by its cultural framework and by the way in which old and disposable things are retained and reused for new purposes.

Aymès discusses in some detail two current techniques employed in micromusic, *circuit-bending* and *chiptune*. Relating the artisanal nature of *circuit-bending* to Luigi Russolo's early twentieth-century noise music or "bruitisme" (p. 60), the existence of a number of internet tutorials on *circuit-bending* seems to indicate that this is not at all an elitist activity (p. 61). On *chiptune*, Aymès unfolds some of the possibilities of *LSDJ* (*Little Sound DJ*) a "pirate" programme "fait par des fans, pour des fans," which facilitates the use of *game boy* (p. 65) and by means of which it becomes a compositional tool (p. 66). The *chiptune* use of *LSDJ* with its four tracks is even compared with Bartók's *Sonata for two pianos and two percussionists* (1937) (p. 66) and Aymès notes that *LSDJ* pieces are generally binary in form. The limited nature of the available sound source is evident when Aymès explains that where *game boy* is an 8 bit console, *Play Station 2* has 128 bits (p. 67). Despite this, micromusicians "utilisent la *game boy* pour son timbre et notamment la qualité de ses basses" as well as its referential power, and Aymès compares micromusical re-usages of material (détournements) with Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (p. 68). In a similar way, Tapetronic's fascinating work with cassette tapes, which is given more extended attention, is related to Steve Reich's *Come out to show them* (1965-66) (p. 73). Aymès next considers micromusic as "la musique des geeks" (p. 74), providing an informative and entertaining potted history of the term before considering "la relation fusionnelle, voire organique, entre le *geek* et sa machine" which is nothing less than "un organe numérique" (p. 79). Micromusical works are uniformly "joyeuses et festives" in sound, paradoxically underpinned by nostalgia and "régression tragicomique" (p. 81), while remaining outside of or in a critical relation to the culture industry (p. 83). It marks "une esthétisation et [...] une socialisation rituelle de la régression" (pp. 83-84).

After all of this, Aymès discusses the relative merits of the various titles given so far for the favoured term "micromusic." Beyond the convergences and divergences of the various terms, Aymès notes that "les artistes définissent leurs styles de façons différentes" (p. 88) and that "l'objectif est d'être créatif avant tout" and to find one's own "identité musicale" (p. 89). Ultimately, for Aymès and Amblard, micromusic encompasses several media, in which *chiptune* and *circuit-bending* serve in the creation of original sound tools (p. 89). The main body of Aymès text concludes with discussions of *DIY* (the *Do It Yourself* movement) and various kinds of hacking, followed by four discussions with practitioners of the various forms of micromusic.

In sum, this is a musically literate study which never misses an opportunity to make meaningful links between these interesting and surprising new micromusical practices and the rich history of Western music from the middle ages onwards, possibly (even hopefully) at times a little tongue-in-cheek. It is well written, sophisticated, and playful, drawing on the work of a wide range of musicologists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, sociologists, financial analysts and historians and making reference to work across a range of cultural fields. Despite all of this, the text remains accessible and clearly articulated throughout and while never thin or superficial, it avoids any kind of "geeky" overexuberance in technical explanation. The two authors write in full awareness of one another and references to the other's material are sprinkled throughout the text, thus ensuring coherence and consistency of approach, while at the same time maintaining individuality of voice. It is both an enjoyable and informative read, and one that does great service to an emerging area of musical practice.

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