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Henri Gonnard, *Musique et surréalisme en France d'Erik Satie à Pierre Boulez*. Preface by Caroline Potter. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2021. 184 pp. Bibliography and index. €35.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2745355829.

Review by Campbell Shiflett, Oklahoma City University.

This compact, well-researched volume describes a canon of surreal musical works composed in France over roughly the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing on a recent flurry of writings by musicologists and an impressive array of texts by and about Surrealism's key figures, it aims to address the problematic relationship between academic music composition and a modernist movement that was famously music-averse. It is a difficult task that Gonnard has set himself, but also a necessary one. As he explains in his Foreword, the surreal has long since entered the popular consciousness as an aesthetic descriptor, and the Surrealist movement has expanded considerably beyond the isolated polemics of André Breton and company. It behooves scholars to examine the Surrealism of music from this place and time, then, not simply because it was composed in proximity to the roughly contemporary movement in literature and visual art, but because surrealist poetics already inflect the way critics talk and write about them.

After laying out his program, Gonnard spends the first of his twelve chapters explaining the circumstances that contributed to Breton's notorious exclusion of music, and especially instrumental music, from his Surrealism. He identifies two main contributing factors: For one, the movement's categorical rejection of the Romantic aesthetics of the previous century, particularly as outlined in the writings of Schopenhauer and the Symbolist poets, meant rejecting these writers' view of music as a supremely expressive art. In addition, Breton's personal disinterest in music—as a bourgeois pastime, a technical and thus inaccessible medium, and an art he found difficult to integrate within his Hegelian philosophy—also played a role in his judgment against it, preferring instead the expressive potential of text.

Chapter two concerns Erik Satie's ballet *Parade* (1917), the work that inspired Guillaume Apollinaire's coining of the term "surrealist." Gonnard describes Apollinaire's role in inspiring the community of Dadaist and Surrealist creators in the era preceding both movements' formal beginnings. In particular he notes how these younger artists praised Apollinaire's ability to reinvent poetry with each new verse by synthesizing familiar forms and subjects in rare and unexpected ways, thereby attuning readers to the strangeness of the everyday. He goes on to compare this with the collage aesthetic of *Parade*, whose odd juxtaposition of musical and cultural signifiers serves its audience a similarly strange slice of life. If Gonnard's relation of Satie's anti-Romanticism and anti-Debussyism to later Surrealist polemics comes across as tenuous, his

comments on the significance of a hyphenate “sur-réalisme” (p. 31) are well made, particularly as he contrasts the implications of this neologism with the later use of the term by Breton.

Chapter three focuses on the activity of Jean Cocteau, whose scenario for *Parade* paradoxically links him to a nascent Dadaist movement that refused to accept him. Gonnard suggests the writer can thus be thought of as a representative of musical surrealism, embodying its contradictory status, and he sets about identifying the surrealist implications of Cocteau’s musical manifesto *Le Coq et l’arlequin* (1918). Crucial to Gonnard’s analysis however is Cocteau’s difference from Breton—as a nationalist, classicist, and homosexual—and he suggests ways in which these differences led the two men to parallel and divergent positions in their writing. Gonnard concludes with insightful comments on the proto-Dadaist design of Cocteau’s later periodical *Le Coq* and on the status of Germaine Tailleferre and Irène Lagut as female proto-surrealists on the basis of their contribution to Cocteau’s Dada ballet *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921).

Chapter four returns to Satie by means of a political history of Montmartre. Gonnard goes on to an engaging account of the composer’s inclusion of paratexts in his piano music. These Gonnard describes as pre-Dadaist and proto-Surrealist in their reversal of Symbolist poetics, their proliferation impressing Satie’s music into the service of this strange literature. The chapter continues to a discussion of Satie’s *Le Piège de Méduse* (1921), whose mechanical and objectifying music reflects the proto-Surrealism of its text, which similarly relies on the unexpected results of taking words for their literal meaning. After a disappointingly brief glance at *Mercurie* (1924), the chapter concludes with a reflection on *Relâche* (1924), which Gonnard connects to Dada’s proto-Surrealism by relating Satie’s score to the more canonically relevant contributions of Francis Picabia and René Clair. He affirms these sketchy connections at the chapter’s close by noting how Breton himself came to appreciate Satie as a proto-Surrealist by mid-century.

Figures more central to Dada and Surrealism occupy the focus of the next chapter. After introducing Dada as an anti-art movement presaging Surrealism in its radical global challenge to a centuries-old tradition of Western thought, the first half of this section takes a close look at the musical contributions to the movement of Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, a composer and friend of Satie, whose search for “l’anti-ordre” in music (p. 66) Breton sanctioned. Gonnard’s account of his method of aleatoric composition and of his work *Pas de la chicorée frisée* (1920) will be of particular interest. Gonnard then moves to address Breton, rereading some of his better-known statements on the Surrealist movement to reassess music’s relevance to his project. He foregrounds some clever contradictions in Breton’s rhetoric in the process, most notably that a movement founded on the universality of its approach to the limits of thought would deliberately exclude anything on the basis of its indeterminacy.

Ravel, a composer not especially known for his Surrealism, takes center stage for the following chapter. Gonnard cannily notes (pp. 75-76) that Breton praised the poet Aloysius Bertrand and particularly the texts of *Gaspard de la Nuit* (published posthumously in 1842) as proto-Surrealist, using outmoded language to inspire fantasy and channel the unconscious. Ravel’s 1908 piano works inspired by three of these texts can be profitably analyzed through a Surrealist lens, he continues, particularly as the composer’s musical illustration of these texts augments the supposed realities Bertrand describes instead of simply reacting to them. Crucial to his argument is the fact that these texts already encode sounds for Ravel to render somewhat more real through music. The second half of the chapter is devoted to *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925), whose libretto and music Gonnard identifies as exhibiting a dreamy illogic achieved through the juxtaposition

of odd materials. He looks closely at the garden scene of the opera's second half, whose depiction of the natural world is not merely imitative but instead outdoes, so to speak, the realism of its setting.

Chapter seven takes up works by Igor Stravinsky, Manuel de Falla, and Alfredo Casella in an effort to determine what relationship might exist between Surrealism and neoclassicism, the latter of which Gonnard spends a considerable amount of time contextualizing historically. Even so, his eventual conception of the neoclassic as a term able to describe much of interwar musical composition leaves it relatively powerless as a critical descriptor. His all too brief comments on works like Casella's *La Donna serpente* (1932) or Falla's *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* (1922) do not offer much help here either. The sticking point for Gonnard seems to be neoclassicism's tonal orientation, able to render foreign familiar materials of music composition. This claim seems too broad however, especially when it is not reinforced with more sustained comparisons with surrealist neoclassicism in the other arts (for instance the work of de Chirico).

The concern for neoclassicism continues into chapter eight, which returns to Poulenc by focusing on his use of traditional tonal materials to deconstruct traditional musical and social values. Though he claimed not to be a Surrealist himself, Poulenc's settings of texts by Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard have been fruitfully analyzed through a surrealist lens, and Gonnard here nods at these earlier approaches in summarizing the composer's alignment with certain tenets of Surrealism: Both seek out a forthright art devoid of easy artifice, an art anchored in human experience, and an art that draws on instinct instead of dogmatic rules. His principal example of Poulenc's musical Surrealism here is his 1947 opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, based on the 1917 play by Apollinaire which the author himself described as a surreal work. In a curious change from his earlier examples, though, Gonnard concludes that Poulenc's setting amplifies the Surrealism of its libretto by turning to a lyric, solemn, and somewhat conventional musical style. Softening the blow rendered by Apollinaire's strange text, he argues, the work thus makes the text more accessible and so sharpens the effect of its poetry and social messaging.

Chapter nine opens with a summary of the early life of Germaine Tailleferre that emphasizes the importance of improvisation and play to the musical life of the composer, illustrated at length by a digression on her collaboration and friendship with Charlie Chaplin. Gonnard uses this sense of play to suggest Tailleferre's sympathy with the Surrealist aim of reconciling apparently opposed qualities, something the author argues is accomplished through the illogic of free play. The chapter proceeds to a discussion of the composer's cycle of mini-operas *Du style galant au style méchant* (1955), whose improbable plots and lack of clear moral messaging transform the works into opportunities for Tailleferre to parody the musical style of the period in which each opera is set. The operas having become a site for compositional play, Tailleferre is thus able to reconcile the values of supposed serious and non-serious music in her pastiche of respected yet dated styles.

The next case study, on André Jolivet's *Mana* (1935), opens with a discussion of the notion of the surrealist object. Taking note of Breton's comments from the following year concerning the power of objects to serve as a chance meeting-point of reality and dream, the author suggests how this understanding of the surrealist object corresponds to an attitude toward the work of art more generally: Both take the role of transitional objects in the sense developed by Donald Winnicott, chosen or created in order to bridge a gap between the subject and an imagined object of desire. That both rely on the impression of the object choosing its subject leads Gonnard to Jolivet's inspiration by a set of fetish objects in *Mana*. Noting Jolivet's admitted interest in

Surrealism, the author seizes especially on their common fascination with esotericism and with the power of objects to inspire reverie through their interpellation of the viewer. Further circumstantial details serve to affirm Gonnard's point: Jolivet's curiosity about non-Western art, his interest in the bizarre, and his friendship with Alexander Calder, whom Breton named a surrealist.

Chapter eleven considers a self-proclaimed surrealist, Olivier Messiaen, whose work Gonnard finds unites the natural and supernatural. Noting the ideals of poetry and love his music shares with Surrealist aesthetics, the sympathy of Surrealists' praise of the movement's stupefying image with the composer's colorific music, and the literary milieu in which Messiaen came of age and himself contributed to, Gonnard advocates viewing him decidedly in the movement's orbit. Some of his claims are circumstantial and others unconvincing, like his suggestion that Messiaen's exaggeration of the conditions under which his wartime Quartet was premiered represent a surrealist deepening of reality. Others are more enlightening, like his account of how Messiaen's Catholic faith can be reconciled with a Surrealist movement that was largely suspicious of organized religion. Gonnard also demonstrates how certain sources of inspiration for Messiaen's works (the Tristan legend, a painting by Roland Penrose, the Apocalypse of Saint John) are relevant to the surrealist movement more broadly.

The final chapter opens by considering the nature of the poetic image, which is produced by linking together two differentiable concepts. The surrealist innovation on this classical principle, suggests Gonnard, was to focus not on how such metaphors suggested the concepts' similarity but rather how their declared similarity paradoxically foregrounded their difference. From here the author proceeds to a survey of how Surrealist poets rely on this trope to represent the sound of the voice in text, returning once more to Breton's insensitivity to music. Then, in a clever twist of his own, Gonnard shows how texted music relies on a similarly ambiguous relationship of media, suggesting that the meaning of language in such works depends so heavily on its musical setting that one might consider it a product of the music. Gonnard concludes with two contrasting examples of Surrealist text setting: Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* (1955) and Poulenc's *Le Travail du peintre* (1956). The former is broadly serial, and its musical setting undercuts the intelligibility of the text to create a sense of discontinuity. The latter is broadly tonal and foregrounds its poetry in a way that encourages listeners to relate musical and textual meanings. Both works demonstrate for Gonnard the breadth of approaches available to musicians who responded to a surrealist movement whose influence had far outgrown the insular café scene of the interwar period in which it began.

Gonnard's study takes Surrealism as a lens for musicological criticism rather than a premise for historical inquiry, offering new means of orienting listeners toward the challenges of familiar works. In doing so, the book treats its historical materials perhaps too lightly. It leans heavily on a select few quotes from canonical Surrealist writers. It says little about the other factors influencing the composition of the works it covers. And it is surprisingly short on musical detail, offering broad claims about style and aesthetics and limited analysis of the sounding structures that convey these. Instead Gonnard's work draws rhetorical force by making provocative comparisons between well-known features of Surrealism and more or less familiar details about the works under consideration. Still, not all of his case studies clearly demonstrate the value of approaching these works through the lens of surrealism. And his criteria for determining what merits being called surrealist seem sometimes too broad or ill defined. In his Afterword he even

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suggests, via Bergson, that all music may be Surrealist, a claim that threatens the specific project of his book.

Still, this study offers an admirable introduction to the repertoire it covers. And it does an especially fine job collating an array of interdisciplinary scholarship in an initial effort to write a more nuanced history of musical surrealism during in France during this period. The author offers some novel interpretations of works whose surrealist implications have been securely established, and he imaginatively expands this familiar musical-surrealist canon to include less-obvious works and composers. If some of these efforts are more successful than others, in all cases they encourage further inquiry. Overall, Gonnard succeeds in making a case to music studies that the problematic relationship between surrealism and contemporary composition ought to be taken seriously, for doing so can afford an opportunity to better understand both the true extent of Surrealism and, especially, the complexity of this music's aesthetic entanglements.

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