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Jann Pasler, *Writing Through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xiv + 513 pp. Figures, notes, tables, musical examples, appendices, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-532489-1.

Review by Keith Clifton, Central Michigan University.

Essay collections by a single author can be both a blessing and curse for readers. Resembling self-authored *Festschriften*, the essays may present a limited view, lacking the perspective of multiple scholars with diverse opinions. On the other hand, such collections allow readers to sample a writer's most important work in one location. When the author in question is Jann Pasler, however, and the material is as wide-ranging as *Words About Music*, monotony is unlikely. In this new book of thirteen essays compiled from diverse sources over a twenty-year period, Pasler explores a dizzying array of (mainly French) topics, including race, gender, cultural identity, journalism, patronage, American experimental music, and the role of the composer in modern American universities. Underlying it all is Pasler's dense, elegant prose, supported by an encyclopedic knowledge of her chosen subjects.

Part one includes three chapters related to musical narrativity.^[1] Using terminology from basic semiotic theory, Pasler demonstrates "the relevance of narrative concepts to criticism of contemporary music" (p. 26). She considers how Beethoven, Stravinsky, and Debussy reinterpreted narrativity, especially the concept of musical narrative as goal-directed. Modern composers in particular have rejected defined approaches to narrative, with Karlheinz Stockhausen's preference for spontaneous "moment forms" providing one method. Others, including minimalist Philip Glass, replace narrative with repetition.

Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* and Glass's *Two Pages* are typical examples. A third type of narrative, the nonnarrative, includes works "that shun any organizing principal" (p. 41), represented above all by John Cage. The next chapter expands on the above concepts to encompass Harold Bloom's influential theory of "anxiety of influence."^[2] Pasler uses Pierre Boulez's *Le Visage nuptial* as a case study. Strongly influenced by the *Trois petites liturgies* of his teacher Messiaen, Boulez combined elements of Messiaen's music with Stravinsky's ballet *Les Noces*. Pasler notes how several recent composers have resisted the influence of earlier music and written completely original works. Using Cage and Pauline Oliveros as examples, she shows that Oliveros's nonhierarchical multi-media *DreamHorse Spiel* allows us to "continually reevaluate where one is in such a piece" (p. 77).

The abiding French interest in *musique spectral* is the focus of Pasler's third chapter, titled "Resituating the Spectral Revolution." Drawing on nineteenth-century researchers such as Emile Littré, who focused on acoustic theory and the sensations created by objects, Pasler pinpoints the origin of such connections to the 1899 Paris Exhibition. Her examples are drawn chiefly from the music of Debussy and Ravel, with Debussy's controversial 1913 ballet *Jeux* presented as an instance of applying spectral principles to larger works.

In part two, Pasler moves beyond the esoteric subjects of the first section to informative case studies of three diverse artists: Vincent d'Indy, Jean Cocteau, and John Cage. There have been few French composers who have generated as much controversy (and in recent years, as much ink) as d'Indy.

Known mostly for his pro-Wagner, anti-Dreyfusardian stance, d'Indy has often been portrayed as stubborn, intractable and fiercely conservative. Pasler succeeds in illuminating overlooked aspects of his career by “deconstructing the attitudes that have accumulated about him over time” (p. 102). She reveals a nuanced and multi-dimensional artist in the process. She highlights d'Indy's involvement in the preservation of French folk song (*chansons populaires*) and his populist works for amateur chorus, military bands, and civic ceremonies.^[3] Although such works may appear to represent a more open-minded approach, they are in fact quite traditional in their style and harmonic language. Perhaps most informative are Pasler's comparisons between the Schola Cantorum and the Paris Conservatoire, where she reveals overlooked common bonds between the institutions.^[4]

Jean Cocteau's reputation as a poet, playwright, and filmmaker is well-known to French scholars. Although his work as spokesperson for the short-lived group of composers known as *Les Six* is one of his greatest legacies, Pasler argues that Cocteau's artistic viewpoint derives from transformative associations with Igor Stravinsky and Erik Satie; in other words, his well-known penchant for confrontation was shaped by exposure to the work of contemporaries. Regarding Cocteau's relationship with Satie, Pasler writes that “What he learned from Satie, besides the value of simplicity, again comes from how he perceived Satie's relationship with his public” (p. 154). I only wish that Pasler had explored these connections and the effect they had on Cocteau's stage works (such as *Parade*) in more detail.

The object of both adoration and disdain, American composer John Cage has been an influential figure in American music since the early 1950s. His aleatory or chance pieces often require performers to make spontaneous musical decisions, rather than having them clearly defined by the composer as in traditional music. Switching eras (and continents) from the previous essays, Pasler devotes a brief chapter to Cage's 1981 mesostic text “Composition in Retrospect.” She considers how Cage's freeform poetry pays homage to those who have most influenced his work, including Satie, Marcel Duchamp, and James Joyce. As useful as it is to read Pasler's summary of Cage's ideas, she fails to convincingly connect them to a clearer understanding of his music or his models. This is especially crucial for *I-IV*, a work barely mentioned but directly influenced by “Composition in Retrospect.”

The third section of *Writing Through Music* contains three essays related to reception history, gender, and exoticism. Beginning with the contention that “in turn-of-the-century Paris, a scandal inevitably awaited any new masterpiece that demanded extensive public attention” (p. 211), Pasler demonstrates that the early reception of Debussy's 1902 opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* was influenced by the political viewpoint of the reviewers. She also shows that concerns about the opera were often unrelated to the music but centered on Debussy's adaptation of Maurice Maeterlinck's play. Again, I wish Pasler had explored the music in more detail, especially charges by contemporary critics that hearing the work could damage the listener's character. In chapter eight, Pasler's exploration of overlooked composer and pianist Augusta Holmes provides an opportunity to explore shifting gender roles and the rise of feminism in the Third Republic. With her appearances at the Universal Exhibition and the Concerts Colonne, Holmes became “the most frequently performed female composer in the last quarter of the century” (p. 218). Aside from her numerous songs—which along with piano works were the principal domain for nineteenth century female composers—Holmes devoted much of her career to writing large works, including *Ode triomphale*, the opera *La Montagne noire*, and the patriotic choral piece *Lutèce*. These were unprecedented achievements for a female composer, and Pasler provides detailed commentary and trenchant musical analysis. She makes a convincing case for further work on this neglected pioneer.

As Edward Said and others have written, the exotic Orient held a special allure for French artists ranging from Gauguin to Baudelaire.^[5] In music, George Bizet's opera *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, set in ancient Ceylon, in one of many examples. Pasler is concerned with the influence of India, a topic largely ignored by previous scholars. She concentrates on Albert Roussel and Maurice Delage, two composers with very different approaches. Although Roussel is one of the few Third Republic French composers

to actually visit the Indian subcontinent, the influence of Indian music on his own was mainly decorative. For Delage, however, the connections are stronger. By focusing on his *Quatre Poèmes hindous* and *Ragamalika*, Pasler shows that Delage's careful study of Indian music and exposure to early recordings resulted in a more authentic appropriation of Indian performance style. This chapter should be required reading for those interested in the intersections between French and Indian music.

The fourth section, containing two chapters, is devoted to "Patrons and Patronage." Pasler begins by examining Countess Elisabeth Greffulhe, one of the most important music patrons of the early twentieth century. Her organization and financing of public concerts corresponded with greater autonomy for women in French society and the rise of feminist organizations. Greffulhe is distinguished from her female counterparts—such as the Princess Edmond de Polignac—by a commitment to public performances, rather than the private salon aesthetic typical at the time. She helped bring several examples of new and overlooked music to a larger audience. Jumping forward, Pasler's next chapter explores the role of composers in American universities during the period 1965–1985. She focuses on those receiving NEA grants and how their background and education influenced the likelihood that they would receive such awards. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the NEA awards have gone to composers associated with schools on the East Coast, including Eastman, Harvard, and Juilliard. Pasler provides an informative breakdown of the number of grants and how they were distributed. Beyond the financial issues, however, she devotes scant attention to the works themselves. Why, for example, were some works funded and others not? And what specific factors led to the privileging of certain institutions over others?

The final section, incorporating two essays, opens with a thoughtful examination of the crucial but underappreciated role of printed concert programs in shaping perceptions of French music. Drawing on programs from several diverse groups, including private music societies and the influential Concerts Lamoureux, Pasler shows that individual works on a program do not tell the whole story. Program order, the appearance or lack of descriptive commentary, and the usage of advertising are also significant factors. Pasler posits concert programs as important clues to how the French understood music and, not surprisingly, there are multiple meanings. I hope that Pasler's work will lead to a proliferation of scholarly "program studies" in the future. The final chapter reconsiders the concept of the "popular" in fin-de-siècle France. As the cabaret and café-concert milieu rose in stature, divisions between popular and classical music became less defined. Noting correctly that "the *populaire* was neither a single nor a reified concept" (p. 419), Pasler concentrates on French leisure music exemplified by the rise of transcriptions of larger works (chiefly operas) for wind band or solo piano. This is an area that clearly merits further research. She concentrates on Saint-Saëns's popular *Samson et Dalila*, but fails to explain why the "Chant de Dalila," transcribed almost verbatim from the piano-vocal score, was among the most popular transcriptions of the period.

When considering *Writing Through Music* as a whole, it becomes clear that this is a significant collection of essays, indispensable for scholars of French music but often accessible to historians without musical training. For those new to Pasler's work, the collection provides a stimulating introduction to her longstanding focus on the role of music in defining society, and there is no doubt that her research will challenge and influence scholarship in the field for some time.^[6] The breadth of topics and Pasler's command of source material is remarkable. Taken as a collection with music in the title, however, there are inconsistencies and a need for greater balance. While some essays provide trenchant musical commentary, others ignore music almost entirely to focus on history, culture, and gender. If experiencing music was truly an integral part of French culture in the Third Republic, as Pasler argues, then why is the music itself often given short shrift in her essays? *Writing Through Music* does not necessarily provide quick reading or easy answers, but it is well worth the investment.

NOTES

[1] Pasler provides definitions of the semiotic terms used in these early chapters (such as “narrativity” and “signification”) as Appendix 1 of the book (pp. 451–53).

[2] Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Representation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).

[3] Much of Pasler’s recent work has centered on the *chanson populaire*. See especially Jann Pasler, “Race and Nation: Musical Acclimatization and the *chansons populaires* in Third Republic France,” in Julie Brown ed., *Western Music and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 147–67.

[4] Founded in 1894 for the teaching of subjects overlooked by the Conservatoire (including counterpoint and Gregorian chant), d’Indy served as director of the Schola cantorum starting in 1900.

[5] See especially Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

[6] Pasler’s longstanding interest in music as “public utility” is the subject of her forthcoming book, titled *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

Keith E. Clifton
Central Michigan University
clift1ke@cmich.edu

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