

- REVIEW -

Critical Perspectives on Michael Finnissy: Bright Futures, Dark Pasts

Edited by Ian Pace and Nigel McBride

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382 pp.

Twenty-one years separate this new collection of essays with the last substantial multi-authored collection on Michael Finnissy (born 1946).¹ In the two decades since the previous volume appeared, Finnissy's creative output has continued to grow, and with it, reassessment of his compositional approach has become possible. Differing from *Uncommon Ground*, which conceived of Finnissy's output in terms of two fundamental 'periods', this new volume argues for a more plural approach, whereby 'several strands of composition which had previously seemed exceptional and uncharacteristic now can be seen as the beginnings of more sustained tendencies' (p. 17).

Christopher Fox's initial chapter, 'Michael Finnissy: Modernism with an English accent', considers aspects of Finnissy's modernism with respect to modernist trends of the last fifty years, focusing primarily on subject matter, form, and musical material. The most illuminating aspect of Fox's approach is his highlighting of aspects of modernism that Finnissy eschews, his 'negativity' as Fox terms it. In his musical material, for instance, Finnissy does not adopt many of the developments of electronic music or timbral extremes, generally preferring conventionally notated successions of pitches. Finnissy's virtuosity comes from the speed at which musical events unfold, rather than extremes of tone production. Philip Thomas explores the more experimental aspects of Finnissy's music, focusing especially on the 'kit' chamber works, which feature unsynchronised parts without a score, often with free use of instruments. Thomas concludes that this music 'invites a performance

response which is curious [and] inherently experimental' and places 'the performer in the heart of the experiment' (p. 53).

In his investigation of musical borrowing and intertextuality, Ian Pace rejects a formalist approach to such musical phenomena, persuasively suggesting that these elements need to be considered within the context of performance studies. Far from a catalogue of quotations, this chapter explores the issue in terms of various theories of intertextuality, especially via the dichotomy of genre and style. Pace considers such wide-reaching aspects as the influence of Gershwinian harmony, Judy Garland's performance in the 1943 film *Girl Crazy*, and Rachmaninovian and Lisztian pianism. Such an approach convincingly takes stock of the intertextual nuances in Finnissy's music.

Nigel McBride explores the 'ontological implications' of Finnissy's notation and *Werktreue* ('truth to the work'), which roughly equates to issues of authenticity in musical performance. The topic is explored with respect to several theories of the philosophical relationship between musical notation and performance, though the relevance of these theories to Finnissy's music could be illustrated more clearly. Relatedly, Roddy Hawkins then considers Finnissy's eclectic career as a performer, which to some extent dwarfs his compositional output. Hawkins' brief sketch study especially considers Finnissy's performing career from 1977 to 1986, thereby 'focusing on the different ways in which Finnissy's programming and collaborations (rather than the works [performed] themselves) formed and inform the model of him as a composer who defies categorisation' (p. 133). Hawkins also appends his article with a chronology of Finnissy's public performances from 1971 to 1997, including repertoire performed.

Gregory Woods offers a probing exploration of homosexuality as it arises from 'Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets', the sixth section of Finnissy's *The History of Photography in Sound*. James Weeks then explores the role of the voice in Finnissy's work, adopting two case studies in the form of *Tom Fool's Wooing* (1978, rev. 2015) and *Gesualdo: Libro Sesto* (2013). In the former, Weeks suggests that Finnissy 'embodies' the voice and 'demonstrates a unique capturing of the physicality of vocal performance within the frame of notationally hyper-detailed,

formal concert work'. In the latter, Finnissy achieves the inverse whereby 'vocality emerges from the body' (p. 195) through its expression of sexuality and subjectivity.

The next chapter presents a refreshing performer's perspective of Finnissy's music from cellist, Neil Heyde. Divided into two parts, Heyde's chapter first explores the author's personal performance challenges with the work *Chi Mei Ricercari* (2013), and then offers a broader discussion of the composer's writing for string quartet. There follows another chapter from Nigel McBride, exploring notational and non-notational aspects in Finnissy's music.

Arnold Whittall explores pantonality in Finnissy's music, especially as it relates to Arnold Schoenberg's problematisation of tonal construction. For instance, Whittall compellingly demonstrates how Finnissy's melodic constructions can serve as a 'paradigm of mobile tonality' which implicitly evokes 'a sequence of tonal possibilities' (p. 247). Whittall provides several examples of ways in which Finnissy constructs pseudo-tonal hierarchies in his music, and considers the relevance of the Brahms-inspired works in Finnissy's pantonal constructions.

Lauren Redhead adopts Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of 'exform' to explore the concept of folklore in Finnissy's and Chris Newman's music, which is revealed in these composers' efforts to 'decenter' their musical material (whether original or borrowed). James Weeks, in more abstract terms, adopts the metaphor of Finnissy's hand to describe physicality, both literal and metaphorical, in the composer's music.

The final four chapters present specific case studies of Finnissy's works. Maarten Beirens explores the composer's use of traditional and non-Western materials framed in postcolonial terms. Max Erwin considers the First, Second, and Third *Political Agenda* (completed in 2006, 2008, and 2016 respectively),² observing how Finnissy constructs the political in his music, and how the composer's musical politics resonates with that of John Cage and Cornelius Cardew. In the following essay, Richard Barrett provides an analysis of Finnissy's seminal work, *alongside* (1979). In one of the most absorbing chapters, Ian Pace closes the collection with an investigation into the influence of film and cinema in Finnissy's works. Pace applies neoformalist approaches from film studies to Finnissy's works – which, though largely unfamiliar to musicological literature, is compellingly

outlined and synthesised into the argument. Pace enumerates the plethora of filmmakers that have inspired Finnissy, whilst also demonstrating the composer's debt to musical montage techniques.

The essays in the collection are directly derived from conference proceedings, which poses inevitable strengths and weaknesses. They offer a welcome plurality of fresh approaches in interrogating aspects of performance, analysis, and context in Finnissy's music. But breadth occasionally comes at the expense of depth, and some chapters seem explorative yet ripe for further development.

The book's musical examples are its most disappointing feature, which are inconsistent, often verging on total inadequacy. Many examples have not been re-typeset but rather reproduced from published or manuscript scores, often awkwardly resized and of poor resolution. For instance, examples from *Gesualdo* (p. 194) and *Chi Mei Ricercari* (p. 200) are so pixelated that they are hardly decipherable. Other partially illegible examples are found on pages 43, 284, 288, and 348, though many others are distractingly fuzzy and poorly formatted. Another example from *Chi Mei* (p. 202) has been awkwardly reformatted, such that the ledger lines are not of even thickness.³ In at least one instance, the reproductions are so poor that it is impossible to observe the analytical point made in the text. For instance, the music example from Piano Concerto no. 4 (p. 227) has been scaled down so much that it is impossible to decipher the intervallic pattern the author seeks to highlight. Such severe editorial faux pas are a disservice to the collection's probing content.

One additional disappointment is the book's accompanying website, of which is promised 'a comprehensive bibliography of writings on Finnissy, a discography, a worklist, the full programmes of Ian Pace's 2016-17 series of Finnissy's complete piano pieces, and an interview between Finnissy and James Weeks' (p. vii). But at the time of writing in July 2020, a year on from the book's publication, only the promised interview is present.

In sum, the two decades of hindsight since the last multi-authored volume on Finnissy have brought the context of this composer's music into sharper focus with respect to the history of British music. This new collection of essays interweaves a

collection of explorative strands that draw us closer to unmasking the intricacies of Finnissy's music, and further development of these strands in future scholarship are eagerly anticipated.

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Endnotes:

¹ Henrietta Brougham, Christopher Fox, and Ian Pace (eds.), *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

² Since the publication of this volume, Finnissy has composed a *Fourth Political Agenda* (2019) and *Fifth Political Agenda* (2020).

³ A rectified depiction of this example is provided on the book's accompanying website, at the time of writing.