

the humble gardener, who does not expect to live to see the seedling grow into the forest, but nevertheless abides in faith of the natural world and the nobility of labors for the benefit of the future: we submit here, for any who might stand at the threshold however far in the future from the present era, that this labyrinth is complete, that at its heart resides the promise of transcendence we have set forth, that the hazards of which we have warned may be overcome through courage and perseverance – but that although the steps taken to reach and surpass the challenge it represents have been yours alone, the summit attained is all of ours to share, together.’ (pp. 335–36)

Julie Zhu

10.1017/S004029822300058X

John Miller, *The Modern Brass Ensemble in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Boydell & Brewer, 2022, 220pp. £65.

In the concluding ‘envoi’ chapter of *The Modern Brass Ensemble in Twentieth-Century Britain*, John Miller introduces Septura (a London-based brass ensemble founded in 2013) and cites the liner notes on their 2014 album *Music for Brass Septet*. Founders Matthew Knight and Simon Cox describe their approach as a ‘counter-factual history of brass chamber music’. Citing a canon of Romantic chamber-music composers (Brahms, Bruckner, Mendelssohn and Schumann), they ask: ‘what if these works of art had been written for brass?’ (pp. 146–47).¹ As Miller is quick to point out, transcriptions are not new to the brass ensemble repertoire, and have been common practice since the mid nineteenth century (p. 147). The most recently founded group covered in *The Modern Brass Ensemble*, Septura would be an anomaly in Miller’s book if it did not engage in at least some form of arrangement or transcription practice. What makes Cox and Knight’s framing compelling, though, is the creative anachronism that such a ‘counterfactual history’ suggests.

If the debates surrounding authenticity in historically informed performance taught musicology anything, it was that *all* musical performance is to a certain extent ‘counterfactual’.² The overarching celebratory tone of Miller’s book resides in his enthusiasm for brass chamber writing – be it historical reconstruction, arrangement or newly composed – that pushes boundaries. *The Modern*

Brass Ensemble provides musicology with a much needed, thorough survey of a body of twentieth-century music unduly overlooked by much of the mainstream academy. From the perspective of new composition especially, Miller prompts the reader to seek out an array of fascinating compositions. To name just three examples: Gunther Schuller’s confronting *Symphony for Brass and Percussion* (1950), Thea Musgrave’s taught and colourful *Variations for Brass Band* (1966) and David Lumsdaine’s *Looking Glass Music* (1970), for brass quintet and tape (an intricate and beautiful score, to my knowledge unrecorded).

An immediately striking quality of this study is the enormous quantity of repertoire, composers, players, institutions, technologies and trends that Miller – in part informed by his own active performing career – manages to accurately cover in a relatively short space. One consequence of this abundance of information is that *The Modern Brass Ensemble* has a somewhat encyclopedic quality, especially in its earlier chapters, which could benefit from slightly more expansion in some places. In particular, Miller’s introduction might have presented an opportunity to connect some of the fascinating thematic strands that persist throughout the book into a more sustained argument. Two such themes include:

- 1) the tendency of ensembles (like Septura) to invoke the Romantic string quartet when grappling with the question of what constitutes a desirable chamber style; and
- 2) the extremely common and long-standing tendency among brass ensembles to perform transcriptions of early music.

The string-quartet comparison arises in almost every chapter (pp. 1, 23, 46, 52–57, 67, 78–79, 120, 139). Chapter Six even sees an account of conductor and trumpeter Howard Snell, upon forming an ensemble of conical-bore brass band instruments (cornets, flugelhorn, tenor horn and euphonium), being ‘attracted to the homogeneity that he explained was epitomised in Schubert’s String Quintet in C major, D 956’ (p. 120). Given early music’s somewhat indirect relationship with the Romantic string quartet, these two themes could be held in productive tension as a means towards understanding how brass ensembles have made sense of their own place in history.

Miller’s first six chapters are in chronological order and fall broadly (albeit not explicitly) into two sections. Miller’s central object of study is the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble (1951–83, hereafter PJB), to whom Miller principally attributes the popularisation of British brass chamber

¹ Matthew Knight and Simon Cox, liner note, Septura, *Music for Brass Septet*. 2014, Naxos, 8.573314.

² Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music: Scholarship, Ideology, Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

performance into the present day (p. 1). As such, Chapters One and Two detail the PBJE's nineteenth-century and pre-war precursors, while Chapters Three to Six follow the PBJE's foundation, its mounting success through the shifting demands of the late-twentieth-century recording and concert landscape, its expansion into new genres and commissioning activity and its more direct successors (especially London Brass). Dozens of other international ensembles are visited along the way, but the PBJE remains at the core of Miller's narrative.

The early chapters move especially quickly through diverse, chronological examples, lending Miller's commentary an even-handed quality, appropriately light on value judgements as he moves from genre to genre. Chapter One, for example, touches on eighteenth-century Russian horn bands, nineteenth-century military and brass bands, touring groups like the Distin family, and the Hawick Saxhorn Band (still active) (p. 27). The string-quartet comparison arises in relation to Victor Ewald's intimate, sonata-form quintets, while a form of early-music antiquarianism makes its presence known in the form of Giuseppe Verdi commissioning one-valved instruments in "'ancient Egyptian" style' for *Aida* (p. 20).

Given the chronological progression through the first six chapters, Miller's seventh chapter is anomalous in its long-frame account of the intersection of brass ensembles and the early-music revival. Beginning with Julius Kosleck's Gabrieli transcriptions and development of the championing of the long, two-valved 'Bach trumpet' and paying particular attention to the Wallace Collection's period-instrument recordings of music from the 1838–c.1880 partbooks of the Cyfarthfa Band, it repeats a certain amount of information found earlier in the book (albeit from a revival perspective) (pp. 125, 134–38). Miller's own involvement in the latter project lends valuable texture to his account, and the critical and interpretative nuances surrounding historical brass could easily fill an entire book. Perhaps, in this instance, they could have been integrated into Miller's earlier chapters rather than compartmentalised at the end.

Many of the most frequently occurring figures in *The Modern Brass Ensemble* (trumpeters like James Watson, hornists like Denis Brain, trombonists like Denis Wick and tubists like John Fletcher) are akin to household names in British orchestral brass pedagogy. In Chapter Two, Miller does also acknowledge the role of African American musicians like James Reese Europe (1881–1919) and the Harlem Hellfighters band as turning point in the history of jazz

dissemination after the First World War (p. 29). The rest of the narrative, like the British symphonic brass scene today, remains predominantly White. The influence of women musicians is evident throughout *The Modern Brass Ensemble*, including nineteenth-century American ensembles like the Park Sisters and the Edna White Quartette, wartime Hallé principals Livia Gollancz (horn) and Maisie Ringham (trombone), the Gallina Brass Quintet, London Brass' trumpeter Anne McAneney, sackbut player Susan Addison and trombone quartet Bones Apart. However, Donna McDonald has documented Philip Jones' manifest resistance to appointing women to his ensemble,³ and the only woman mentioned in the chapter that features the PBJE most heavily (Chapter Five) is Musgrave (p. 106). Pertinently, in the foreword to *Five Fanfares for PMJ* (2001), Howarth describes Jones as 'the most remarkable personality I ever met in the brass fraternity' (p. 124).

Finally, there is an informative class perspective to Miller's discussion. While he productively distinguishes the brass ensemble from the brass band for the sake of clarity in his argument, he consistently acknowledges banding as a creative force, influential working-class institution and crucial pedagogical avenue through which many important players, composers and conductors moved at various stages in their careers. In his discussion of Eminence Brass especially, he demonstrates the extent of the inaccuracy of the designation 'amateur' for prolific band performers (p. 149). Miller also emphasises that public arts funding and sustainable working conditions (including BBC contracts) have been crucial to the proliferation of brass ensemble music over the past 70 years.

The Modern Brass Ensemble is as wide-ranging as it is accessible. While there are places where a longer or differently structured book might have allowed more space for Miller to identify and develop cross-historical trends, his clear, direct writing style enables him to present this substantial piece of research in an approachable manner. Bolstered by extremely useful appendices listing repertoire and recordings, this book is a fantastic resource for students, scholars, performers and general readers interested in this exciting and underacknowledged repertoire.

George K. Haggett
10.1017/S0040298223000608

³ Donna McDonald, *The Odyssey of the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble* (Bulle: BIM, 1986), p. 107.