

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Barrett, *Transforming Moments*, Vision Edition, 2023, 255 pp. £24.99.

For many years, composer Richard Barrett has taught improvisation workshops at the Institute of Sonology in The Hague. Each workshop brings together musicians of various backgrounds, resulting in a new iteration of the Sonology Electroacoustic Ensemble (SEE). Barrett's new book, *Transforming Moments*, is in many ways a report on this activity in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. The book is also an investigation into improvisation as a topic in theatre, film, visual art and technology. It is an extremely useful text for improvising musicians: a thorough, insightful and practical book about the methods, possibilities and, indeed, technique of free improvisation, including links to over 40 recordings¹ with commentary. Stylistically, Barrett's writing is refreshingly straightforward; on the surface, it's a simple report of activities dating back to late 2018. But, like the best reporting, the discourse necessarily opens beyond the material at hand into a much wider network of topics. Undergirding it all is a keel of earnest belief in the power of music and collaboration: the power of free improvisation to serve as a model for the good life. I've known of Barrett's work for many years, but I must confess that I never really 'got it' – this book has really changed how I understand his work.

Although significantly less than half the book, the first of the two segments concerns Barrett's improvisation workshops with SEE. There are a total of 15 pieces, improvisations with various prompts to the participants, and a lengthy discussion/analysis of the music that resulted. These 'post-mortem' discussions are cogent and honest; Barrett is very aware of how his input as a director and interventions as a fellow performer have a significant impact on the quality of the music. His self-criticism is forthright and honest. He discusses both how it felt in the moment to perform and how he relates to the performance after the fact, listening to a

recording. Here, his thoughts are especially valuable, so I will quote at length.

While it might be thought that there's a contradiction in preserving a spontaneous or ephemeral musical event in this form, I think the truth of the matter is that the recording presents us with a different kind of experience, that there are some spontaneous moments in musical creation where something particularly memorable or intense takes place that somehow transcends its evanescence, as for example those 'classic' jazz albums which were generally recorded over a short period when the group was working at 'white heat'. (p. 26)

The 'contradiction' of recording improvised music – such an eloquent description of the *structural necessity* of recording technology for free improvisation as a discipline to exist. Free jazz emerges precisely when recording technology reaches a certain degree of sophistication and widespread adoption. Likewise, though not specifically mentioned by Barrett, the no-input mixing board became a viable instrument in the mid-90s when consumer electronics became inexpensive and widespread.

In the SEE workshops, there were no specific aesthetic strictures. But one can still find the contours of a consistent if not explicit aesthetic theory to which Barrett refers. Foremost is freedom – from materials and structures of pre-existent music, from preordained requirements for the piece. In the immediate circumstance of an improvisation workshop, freedom is in fact responsiveness to the immediacy of the present, in the spiritual sense, *presence*. During the workshops, listening to others and contributing meaningfully is the real goal. There is never discussion of materials or sounds as good or bad. Stand-ins include 'memorable', 'intense' or 'familiar'. For all the uncertainty, pedagogy is the real stable point in these discussions of the SEE workshop sessions. And it works; I myself felt inspired after reading it. My strong feeling is that the discussion is incomplete, that Barrett has not reached a conclusion.

As a writer of music, he has a fully elaborated taxonomy of blips and bloops. Listening to around ten of these pieces, more than 3 hours of music, one starts to understand that materials or interactions or internal structures are really not that important. What is important is the

¹ Hosted on Richard Barrett's website and accessible through QR codes.

emergence of a compelling group dynamic – in which case, the piece really is a piece, and the more a piece feels like a piece to itself, the better it is. The best of these, in my view, is the 10 October 2019 performance, which stimulated the most interesting discussion from Barrett. He expresses a kind of credo: '[free improvisation] is a way of making music which can embrace, and indeed combine, on the one hand a concept of music as fiercely individual, as bearing witness to personal and cultural history, and on the other hand a concept involving a dissolution of the creative musician's ego into a collective where it's no longer possible to hear who is making which sound, even for the performers' (p. 57). He continues: 'as artists one thing we can do is imagine through our work a world that's worth struggling for, and to express the possibility of freedom through the way we use our imaginations and the way we encourage... listeners to use theirs' (p. 59).

The second portion of the book is devoted to an examination of improvisation in different art forms. This is a small part of a fascinating question: why are there multiple arts rather than one? In Chapters Three through Six, Barrett studies theatre and film (combined), dance, visual art and 'technology' respectively. Interspersed with each discussion is a composition/improvisation prompt inspired by some aspect about the art form.

He is clearly disappointed in how improvisation is discussed in theatrical and cinematic contexts. His analysis for consists of reading texts on the subject but not a collaboration with a filmmaker or theatre troupe. By contrast, he obviously has a fondness for dance; he worked with dancer Katie Duck in the 1990s and that real experience grounds and focuses the relationship between her work and his practice. She specialises in contact improvisation (CI), a dance form that has many elements simpatico to Barrett's work, including overcoming hierarchy and critiquing the vacuity of technical perfection. CI also produces 'new inputs' – ideas Barrett otherwise wouldn't have thought of: focusing on duets, on the reflex reaction between two bodies, two people. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *duo 2*, perhaps my personal favourite of the musical examples. His discussion, his elaborated conceptual linking with contact improvisation, formalised into various modes of contact (unison pitch, unison rhythm), is legible in the music but not determinative.

Although this is not Barrett's goal, his entire body of work is given cogent exposition in this

book, particularly the three basic elements: action, stillness, silence. He often has large-scale pieces that involve separable smaller-scale pieces. These semi-hollow structures can get very complex indeed. Fully notated music is combined laterally or vertically with improvised music. And he's very prolific. In my view it all redounds to this: for him, a piece as a *thing* with a name, with a clear identity, with a kind of immutability, is precisely what his work tries to dismantle, in order to achieve some kind of flow state of pure presence.

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Liam Cagney, *Gérard Grisey and Spectral Music: Composition in the Information Age*, Cambridge University Press, xvi + 297pp. £82.25.

I'd be prepared to have a small flutter on the wager that, if I were to take a straw poll among those of us who write about new music, most would agree that on opening a new book the thought 'Oh, isn't this interesting! I'm glad *somebody* has written this' is more common than the thought 'I wish *I'd* written this'. This volume is, I think, the exception: I would have loved to have written it, though I'm also enormously grateful that Cagney has actually done so. This may not be all that surprising: anyone who's been paying attention to the various shorter Grisey-focused essays that Cagney's produced over the past few years will have been expecting that the book, when it came, was going to be excellent. And so it proves.

The first large portion of the text is an account of the first, longish period of the development of Grisey's approach, from his youth through to *D'eau et de pierre* (1972). Though this early music has been overshadowed by the beginning of *Les espaces acoustiques* (1974–85) with *Périodes* (1974), Cagney convincingly shows that it already contains in embryo a great many of the key elements of Grisey's mature style, persuasively arguing for the musics from which they derive. Those distinct, repeated musical figures, which undergo transformation as they repeat, are Grisey's interpretation of Messiaen's *personnages sonores*. The characteristic behaviours they seem to enact in undertaking those transformations are analogous to Xenakis' *métaboles*, possessing a sort of interiorised metabolism, which makes some forms of change statistically likely and others unlikely.