Book Review

Jonathan Impett (ed.), *Sound Work: Composition as Critical Technical Practice*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9789462702585.
doi:10.1017/S1355771823000055

What is it that composers actually *do* when they compose? That is the question (more or less) that *Sound Work* aims to address. More accurately, the book is about discourses surrounding composition, or, as editor Jonathan Impett puts it in his introduction, 'the stories composers tell about composition, to themselves and to others' (p. 7). The observation that Impett makes is that composers, when explaining their work, have tended to focus on rationalising or contextualising the finished product, the composition, rather than reflecting on the nature, content and sociotechnical embeddedness of the act of composing itself. Thus, the forms of labour that a composer undertakes have tended to remain mysterious, sealed within the proverbial 'black box', as scholars in the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies (STS) might say (Pinch 1992). The aim of the book, then, is to pry open that black box, to critically examine what composers are doing – or, rather, what they *say* they are doing – when they compose.

Sound Work appears at a time of renewed and invigorated interest in practice research, as evidenced, for example, in PRAG-UK's recently commissioned report on the subject (Bulley and Şahin 2021). In that report, authors James Bulley and Özden Şahin address two questions – 'What is practice research?' and 'How can practice research be shared?' – and Impett's volume provides a timely contribution to further answering those questions by focusing on a range of contemporary music composition practices.

In addition to Impett's introduction, the volume includes within its 373 pages 16 chapters and 16 pages of colour plates/images that add a substantial visual element to two of the chapters (as well as black-and-white graphics within several others). There is also a companion website that includes links to audiovisual material relevant to six of the chapters.

Most of the chapters in *Sound Work* have been written by practitioners who explicitly identify themselves (albeit never exclusively) as composers in the volume's Notes on Contributors. Of the three authors who do not, two affiliate themselves with other forms of creative musical practice, as mentioned later in the chapter synopses. Only one author – Laura Zattra – does not explicitly mention in her biography any music-making practice of her own, adopting instead the position of the historical musicologist. All but two of the authors are affiliated with an educational or research institution, and this is presumably no coincidence, since, as Ambrose Field points out in his chapter, it is composers working within those kinds of organisations who are most likely to be called upon to justify their activities as 'research'. Indeed, the volume might be regarded as a collection of such justifications (although it might be a bit cynical to look at it that way).

Any multi-author edited volume runs the risk of coming across as a heterogeneous collection of perspectives – interesting, perhaps, but with little connective tissue to assist the reader in constructing a clear understanding of the topic as a whole. In *Sound Work*, Impett has managed to circumvent that problem to some extent by engineering into the project a common theoretical framework, namely, that of 'critical technical practice' (CTP). Invented in the 1980s by computer scientist turned sociologist of technology Philip Agre, a central tenet of CTP was that engineers – and it was specifically engineers working within his own field of artificial intelligence (AI) that Agre had in mind – ought to critically reflect upon the assumptions and worldviews embedded within their professional activities and use this knowledge to modify their technical design work in socially responsible ways. Agre was working in a context where much AI research was military funded, and the ethically questionable ends to which AI technology might be put provided a strong motivation for developing a critical framework with social responsibility at its core. Although there are some parallels between AI engineering and composition, Agre's framework was not, of course, tailor-made for critically examining compositional practices. Perhaps because of this, half of the authors in *Sound Work* do not engage directly with it at all, and of those that do, some do so only superficially, while a few seem to get a little caught up in the process of mapping the ontological assumptions of CTP on to the (in many ways rather different) ontologies of compositional practice. Many authors engage with it quite successfully, though. Despite this unevenness of application, the overarching framework of CTP does help to bring these diverse perspectives together under a common rubric, which is a considerable achievement in itself.

One significant insight that *Sound Work* reveals is that approaches to narrativising creative processes are as numerous and heterogeneous as approaches to creative practice themselves. The 16 chapters each

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771823000055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

present very different answers to the question posed at the beginning of this review, and the detailed documentation of this plurality of creative approaches, focusing on processes rather than products, is a worthwhile and long overdue contribution to scholarship. Although the editor perhaps assumes (not unreasonably) that readers will 'dip in' to one chapter at a time rather than reading the chapters in sequence, I nonetheless felt that the ordering of the chapters seemed a little arbitrary and that a more explicitly principled ordering (or clearer signposting of an ordering principle that I may have missed) could have helped to provide a stronger sense of thematic narrative linking the chapters. In the following paragraphs I have summarised the chapters in the order they appear in the volume, which might help to illustrate what I mean by this.

Alan Blackwell, a computer scientist, amateur performer and one of the three 'non-composer' authors mentioned previously, describes his experiences as a contrabass player in orchestras and an amateur bass guitarist playing in a funk style and reflects on the very different 'technosystems' in which these variants of the same instrument are embedded. David Rosenboom elaborates on an approach to composing that he calls 'propositional music', 'a point of view about composing, in which composers might build proposed models of worlds, universes, evolution, brains, consciousness, or whole domains of thought and life' (p. 36). Nicholas Collins, who identifies as a computer performer and hardware hacker rather than a 'composer', reflects on 'some distinctive differences between hardware and software tools as applied to music composition and performance' (p. 81), while Ann Warde discusses how 'music composition might be conceived as providing an opportunity for those who construct music to model a world we'd like to perceive and experience' (p. 89). Warde provides what is one of the most direct mappings of Agre's thinking on to the parameters of musical composition, and for that reason, her chapter is likely to be useful to readers who are not already familiar with Agre's writings. Nicholas Brown, meanwhile, explores epistemological and creative issues inherent in composing using 'mobile phones and physical computing devices' (p. 105).

Editor Jonathan Impett's own chapter offers not a perspective on his own creative practice but rather an appeal to composers to provide 'a first-person presence in discourse' (p. 130) about *their* practice, followed by an exemplification of how Agre's overarching framework might be deployed to that end. To my mind, it would have made more sense to position this chapter at the start of the book, perhaps as part of an extended introduction, as it serves that purpose very well.

Moving on, Scott McLaughin describes his approach to composing with and 'for' the indeterminate acoustical behaviours of the cello, contrabass and clarinet. Agostino di Scipio's chapter introduces the concept of 'eco-systemic agency' as a way of critically interpreting live electronic composition and performance practices as a reflection of the technologised human condition. Lula Romero's approach is one in which composer, composition and listener are viewed as mutually co-constitutive: she proposes 'a relation of open encounter between material, composer, and listener' (p. 216) and explains how the distribution of sounds in space is central to this approach. Thor Magnusson describes how he created a new digital instrument, software platform and coding environment, the 'Threnoscope', emphasising the contingent and unpredictable unfolding of the artistic research process and noting that this mode of enquiry is at odds with funding councils whose application processes tend to be geared towards 'hypothesis-based scientific research' (p. 228). Daniela Fantechi also discusses the role of contingency in her compositional practice, making explicit the normally implicit strategies that she employs to discover and structure sound material, while Karim Haddad illustrates a compositional approach that he calls 'temporal poetics', which effectively amounts to a theory of musical time that is actualised in the compositions he discusses.

Laura Zattra focuses not on any creative practice of her own but rather on the testimony of three composer's assistants – Marino Zuccheri, Alvise Vidolin and Carl Faia – who worked with, respectively, Luciano Berio and John Cage, Luigi Nono and Salvatore Sciarrino, and Philippe Leroux and Jonathan Harvey. In doing so, she adds a refreshing etic perspective to what is otherwise an overwhelmingly emic group of studies. This is followed by Patricia Alessandrini and Julie Zhu's chapter, which describes a cyber-feminist approach to collaborative co-creation.

Ambrose Field's chapter addresses the nature of creative practice as research in general terms. Putting aside the specifics of his own compositional processes, he argues that, rather than proceeding according to a predetermined hypotheses and methods, '[c]reative practice is effectively a form of dynamic research design' (p. 331) in which new research questions emerge and methods of investigation develop in an ongoing and rigorous process of discovery. (There are parallels with Magnusson's chapter, here.) Finally, Ciciliani outlines methods that might be used to engineer specific kinds of audience–work relationships when developing hybrid concert-installation works.

It is a diverse range of perspectives that is presented in *Sound Work*, and although each perspective is interesting in its own way, I did find myself struggling to derive generalisable insights across the selection as a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771823000055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whole, partly because connecting themes between adjacent chapters were not always readily apparent. I also found most chapters quite convincing when judged on their own terms. Perhaps that in itself is the beginnings of an insight about the subjective and individualistic nature of creative processes in the twenty-first century.

In the introduction to *Sound Work*, Impett states that the volume considers the 'cultural, professional, epistemic, and institutional situation of composition' (p. 8), and it is fair to say that some chapters do that more fully and convincingly than others. Some chapters do not really do it at all, tending more towards a detailed but decontextualised *description* of technical practice than a properly critical analysis of its cultural, professional, epistemic, or institutional situatedness. At the other end of the spectrum, a couple of chapters are basically all situational analysis with little or no description of the contents of creative practices taking place within those situations. Ideally, I suppose, a critical technical narrative of compositional practice would occupy a midpoint equidistant between those two positions, though in *Sound Work*, the overall balance is tilted somewhat towards the former position: most authors provide a description of their own approach to creative practice with a nod in the direction of reflexivity or contextualisation according to some self-selected framework (which may or may not be couched in terms of 'critical technical practice'). The value of *Sound Work* is not, then, that it has struck the balance perfectly, but rather that it has begun an important discourse that might lead to a better balance being struck in future.

Because of the orientation described in the previous paragraph, *Sound Work* is likely to be of most interest to composers and the supervisors of student composers, particularly those who are interested in developing (and sharing insights derived from) practice research methodologies. It may also reward reading by non-composers interested in gaining an insight into a range of contemporary compositional methods and methodologies.

James Mooney
Email: j.r.mooney@leeds.ac.uk

REFERENCES

Bulley, J. and Şahin, O. 2021. *Practice Research – Report 1: What is Practice Research? and Report 2: How Can Practice Research Be Shared?* London: Practice Research Advisory Group UK (PRAG-UK).

Pinch, T. J. 1992. 'Opening Black Boxes: Science, Technology and Society'. *Social Studies of Science* **22**(3): 487–510.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771823000055 Published online by Cambridge University Press