

Behind Bars: The Definitive Guide to Music Notation. By Elaine Gould. London: Faber Music, 2011. [704 p. ISBN 0571514561. £65]

Modern philosophy can be broadly divided into two streams: the analytical and empirical approaches, which are chiefly concerned with cataloguing and defining limits of understanding; and the phenomenological and existential schools, which display more interest in exploring the limits and potential of ideas and creating new conceptual paradigms. In a similar manner, writing about music notation is usually presented from one of two viewpoints: on the one hand by cataloguing and defining symbols in relation to sounds, and on the other hand through exploring the possibilities afforded by interpretation. Elaine Gould's new book may be seen to espouse the former tendency but – to stretch the analogy – like the pragmatist philosophers John Dewey and Richard Rorty (whose work combines aspects of both the empirical and the phenomenological), with an added emphasis upon the practical uses and usefulness of notation.

Now, to begin, let's take a look at that title. Aside from a punning inference that the life of the copyist, editor, or composer is as much a sentence to be served as it is a vocation, its emphasis is placed firmly upon restriction and control; but to what end? As Stravinsky put it, "my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles" (*Poetics of Music*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 87). These are the virtues which this volume is keen to instill in its readership and which it illustrates to good effect. Gould's use of the phrase "The Definitive Guide" is, of course, a bold claim and may be read to a certain degree as provocation (although her writing style is anything but polemical and is always measured, readable and focused on the task at hand).

Well, of course, you can't judge a book solely on its title; the only way to decide if the title is merited is to read the thing – and what a thing it is! At 704 pages, Gould's book is borne out of much practical experience as an editor working with many of the foremost figures in what

might be termed mainstream modernist orchestral composition. Of the few extracts from existing pieces included are examples from Britten, Birtwistle, and Ligeti, presenting a very particular view of the compositional scene Gould wishes to address. The author has made good use of advice from some of Britain's leading performers (several from the London Sinfonietta) familiar with the ins and outs of the repertoire upon which Gould's technical advice is based.

Music technologies have encouraged all kinds of extraordinary explorations, experiments and an egalitarian 'hands on' approach but this has perhaps led to a sidelining of musical 'literacy' with skills such as notation viewed as a form of abstruse higher mathematics or a dead language such as Latin, intelligible only to the privileged few. With music education blindly targeted by governments for ever-deeper cuts in funding – regardless of the intellectual and social benefits of a musical education – and the institution of the orchestra seemingly ever more anachronistic as a medium for contemporary artistic expression, Gould's book can be viewed as a bold leap of faith.

Composer Cornelius Cardew, writing about notation in the early 1960s, noted that, "A musical notation is a language which determines what you can say, what you want to say determines your language" (*Cornelius Cardew – A Reader*, ed. Edwin Prévost, Harlow, Essex: Copula, 2006, p. 6). For Cardew, and others like him at the time and ever since, this matter of what you want to say was bound up with adapting and experimenting with the possibilities of notation. Gould focuses in Chapter 20 ('Freedom and Choice') on those aspects of the avant-garde which have been absorbed into the mainstream, including 'time-space' notation and the free choice of ordering ideas, and she is very insightful in terms of the responses that professional musicians under pressure are likely to make to this kind of material. There is nothing on graphic or text notations and it is pretty clear that Gould does not deem these to be appropriate matter for discussion in this context where professional expediency outweighs the exploration of the performer's interpretative potential. However, even the most experimental of composers usually take account of

the psychological demands of the performer – as Cardew wrote: “I feel that things which are difficult to understand should be said in such a way that at least they are easy to read; otherwise the difficulty encountered in reading prevents you from even starting to understand” (Cardew, *ibid.*, pp. 10–11).

Chapter 6, in particular, on ‘Preparing Materials’, is essential reading for composers and copyists alike. Even the most exacting and considered of orchestrators can, on occasion, be charged with having produced awkwardly presented scores and parts (for example, the wayward bar lines of Ligeti’s Piano Concerto, or the unwieldy music stand-toppling parts found in some of Helmut Lachenmann’s chamber music). Chapters 9 to 15 consider ‘Idiomatic Notation’ when writing for the main orchestral instruments and voice. The book is not a study in orchestration yet composers are likely to gain useful insights into the ways in which instruments can be used effectively, and the manner in which instrumentalists have been trained to regard notation and ways in which to manage their expectations.

I would have liked to see more made of Gould’s summary dismissal of handwritten scores due to the preference of most professional performers for computer-typeset copy (p. xi). Perhaps it is somewhat fogleyish of me, but to instill the ability to make a score by hand in a musician surely gives a deeper insight into the practicalities involved in preparing materials for performers than simply accepting the limitations of computer programmes – the traps and failings of which Gould admits is a key motivator behind her writing of this volume (of the extracts from existing pieces, there is one – lucidly notated – handwritten example by Lutosławski, p. 613).

More relevantly perhaps, in terms of a wider readership for the volume, a consideration of the score and font style layouts used in jazz and commercial music could have been a useful addition and perhaps widened the base for the ideas Gould wishes to promulgate (but then again, this would have necessitated the volume being ever more vast in scope and size). The great majority of the musical examples are composed by Gould and are well devised for the problems and solutions which she illus-

trates; however it may have been of interest to include more reference to other scores which present these ideas within context.

These are minor quibbles. As you may well expect, considering the nature of the subject, the layout of the book is elegant and sound (Gould is well served in the presentation of musical examples by the copyist, Richard Emsley – also a composer). The price is somewhat prohibitive for those who are likely to derive the most immediate benefit from it, namely students (though professionals need to read this too), which makes it an essential purchase for libraries. Gould has produced an indispensable tool for all would-be music copyists, editors, orchestral librarians and composers who have any desire to work with professional musicians.

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