
BOOK REVIEWS

Behind Bars – the Definitive Guide to Music Notation by Elaine Gould. Faber Music, £65.00.

It is a long time since anyone published a substantial practical handbook on Western musical notation. Kurt Stone's *Music Notation in the Twentieth Century* was published back in 1980 (Norton). Mr. Stone had considerable pedigree as editor at Associated Music Publishers in America – where he was responsible for the scores of Elliott Carter, Gunther Schuller, Milton Babbitt and others. Gardner Read's *Music Notation* (1964, 2nd ed. 1979, Taplinger) and its several more specialized successors were the work of an experienced composer and teacher. These were useful and in their time influential volumes, the first of Read's being quickly adopted throughout the US teaching system, whilst the Stone offered a publisher's insights into many aspects of notation, with a particular emphasis on the practicalities of score layout and part-preparation in addition to an extensive survey of (then) new instrumental techniques. Yet, despite revisions, both of these volumes were issued between 30 and 50 years ago; a fresh look at the practical problems of music notation has long been overdue.

Elaine Gould has been New Music Editor at Faber Music Ltd. since 1987 (which is where I first encountered her). Thus she has long and very intensive experience in getting new music from composers' manuscripts into performance. What follows is both a normal review of her volume, and in a sense the latest stage of a dialogue between us which began in 1995 when she first edited a score of mine. But it is also informed by my own experiences as a composer in rehearsals over that period, and equally by experiences teaching composition and running workshops in conservatoires, universities et al. The fact that I am a Faber house composer who knows its author well will not, as will be seen, dent my objective assessment of Gould's book.

Given her credentials, if anyone nowadays had any hope of producing 'the definitive guide to music notation', it is most certainly Elaine Gould. The question remains as to whether such a fluid and continually evolving practice as the notation of music can in reality ever be summarized in a 'definitive guide'. The changing circumstances of rehearsal and of performance, as well

as of performer attitudes surely mean that musical notation needs to be flexible in its responses to the unpredictable and often widely differing situations which crop up. Furthermore, today's musical trends and norms are so wildly different from those of even 1970, let alone 1907, that any attempt at a definitive notation guide would appear to be doomed from the start. In opposition to these arguments, anyone active in composing, editing and copying new music has regularly felt the need of a truly comprehensive modern notation book of sufficient scope and size. Its lack has long been a problem for practitioners everywhere. Gould's book, much anticipated (it was 15 years in the writing) is the result of elaborate and careful reflection; it is the work of an expert and highly informed mind, and her views must be taken extremely seriously.

Any fear that this volume might prove brilliant but unrealistically proscriptive happily proved unfounded. Gould offers a range of solutions to notational problems, acknowledging viable alternatives wherever necessary. Curiously, one possible criticism is her tendency to give alternative notations for the same practice but sometimes draw back from saying exactly in what circumstances one or other notation would be found 'preferable', to use one of her favourite words. Yet perhaps her honesty in this regard is to be respected. Gould is surely aware that absolutism in musical notation can lead to exactly the opposite from the intended clarity: inflexibly applying a blanket rule can easily lead to notational eccentricity and a lack of appreciation of performing reality – in short to a failure in effective communication. Stockhausen's apparently logical insistence that staccato notes be played as short as possible, whatever the duration of the pitch to which they are attached, is an interesting example of notational consistency applied excessively, as it flies in the face of years of training and practice the world round. *Behind Bars* guards against such absolutism, not least in the notoriously disputatious area of accidentals, where her prose is admirably clear and refuses to hide continuing and necessary uncertainties. Though it has the advantage of lacking ambiguity, Gould criticizes the Schoenbergian solution of an accidental per note as needlessly overloading the notation. On this I would agree, though there are still contexts in which it may prove necessary. On

the other hand, she is wary of flatly saying that an accidental should always apply over a whole bar, regardless. Here, as so often, the composer's or editor's decision needs to be case sensitive. Gould provides strong tools for anyone making such a decision.

The book is carefully laid out, starting right from the absolute basics of musical notation, proceeding to specific notational problems of each instrumental family, vocal and choral music, the layout of parts, the notation of electronic music and finally the incorporation of performer choice, chance and aleatoricism into music notation. The inclusion of the latter category may surprise some, since between 1980 and 2000 composers at large turned sharply away from such practices, and many senior figures (notably Berio, Boulez and Henze) republished their aleatoric scores from the 1960s in completely standard Western notation, eliminating the chance elements for reasons of sheer impracticality. However the most extreme example of this – the 1989 revision of *Don* from Boulez' Mallarmé cycle *Pli Selon Pli* – shows a dramatic stylistic as well as practical shift. The cut-up, scrapbook appearance of the first orchestral *Don* (1967) actually looks like a musical realization of the famous Mallarmé *Coup de Dés* in which words are scattered like varying sized confetti across the printed page. The final score of *Don* is entirely metered, has no elements of choice whatever, and lacks the scrapbook appearance. In addition, and very typically, Boulez has covered over certain parts of this formerly crystalline music with his now usual clouds of dense trills. The result can certainly be conducted much more simply than the floating, unstable first version. But a comparison between his earlier and later recordings of this music is disturbing: the unmistakable sense of expressive hesitancy in the earlier recordings has completely vanished in the later brusquely efficient performance, and much of the music's true character with it. The change in notation seems at least partly responsible for this. Whilst other instances of renotation – Henze's *Heliogabolus Imperator* comes to mind – strike one as responsible and necessary realizations of sometimes unrealistic or confused first scores, the Boulez episode leaves an uncomfortable question in one's mind (and one directly relevant to Gould's book): what price notational clarity?

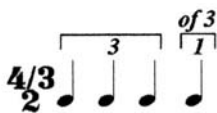
Recently many younger composers have reassessed the aleatoric question as computer programmes have become easier and more flexible. Over the past few years I have seen increasing numbers of them arriving at a responsible and selective use of occasional aleatoric notation, which should not disrupt rehearsals unduly.

As things tend to evolve in swings of fashion, I should not have been surprised at this development (though initially I was dismayed by it, given aleatoricism's chequered performance history). The final chapter of *Behind Bars* is therefore very timely: Gould coolly and fairly assesses the pros and cons of various aleatoric possibilities as communicative musical notation, duly acknowledging Lutoslawski's practices, advocating others as well, clearly indicating the consequences of each. I disagree with Gould only in her advocacy of the so-called 'Curlew sign' invented by Imogen Holst for Britten's *Curlew River* to indicate a pause of variable duration (often where players wait for each other – in effect something like a *colla parte* pause). Since all note values, let alone pauses, are of variable (or approximate) duration in *ad libitum* passages, this sign is both unnecessary – Lutoslawski never found need for such an invention – and confusing. The curlew sign is not standard practice outside the UK, and is rarely used even here. Otherwise Gould offers by far the wisest guide to aleatoric notation yet in print.

One factor might have been added in connexion with Birtwistle's practice (in *Verses for Ensembles*, *The Fields of Sorrow* and *Meridian*) of offering performers boxes of musical phrases to be played in any order (see pp. 644–45). All too often, the result of such supposedly random boxes of musical phrases is that the performer simply plays the phrases in order from left to right, or else from the top box to the bottom. This is a notational practice which, I suggest, does not need reviving. In fact this is probably the place to remark that if composers require a passage to sound random in some degree, especially in the order of pitches, it is sometimes far better to write the passage out in full, using some external source of random-number generation to determine the order of pitches, events or whatever (this is the policy of Xenakis, much Birtwistle, Kagel and Finnis, amongst others). The sad reality is that human beings are poor at behaving randomly.

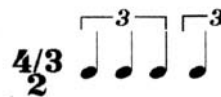
On the question of rhythmic notation, Gould is a model of precision. Again one admires her ability to juggle various alternatives, but here she is very clear on what alternatives simply don't work. It is one of the most brilliant chapters in the entire book and should be required reading for anyone composing, copying or editing new music. The one area in which some may have differences with her is the vexed topic of so-called irrational time-signatures – time signatures for bars consisting of incomplete tuplets. Here Gould advocates the practice of Ferneyhough and Adès in using time signatures which are divisions of a whole note: thus a bar of (say) 3 quintuplet semiquavers is to

be a meter of 3/10; a bar of 6 semiquaver septuplets is a meter of 6/14, etc. No further tuplet indications are needed within the bar, unless a further irrational speed is required within it. So far as I can discover, this new type of irrational meter was first adumbrated more than 80 years ago by Henry Cowell in his *New Musical Resources* (1919, rev. and publ. Alfred A. Knopf 1930; reprinted by CUP, 1996): see pp. 53–59 and 86–89 of that remarkable volume. Paul Hindemith in his *Elementary Training for Musicians* (Schott, Mainz, 1946) completed the listing and explication of them. On p. 116 of *Elementary Training*, he introduces such irrational time signatures, logically explains them and shows how they can be used by students wishing to discover the exact relationships between polyrhythms. There is no doubting the logic of these time signatures: since the lowest numeral in the time signature 2/4 indicates a duration a quarter of the length of a whole note (i.e. a crotchet), therefore the lowest numeral in the time-signature 3/10 indicates a duration one-tenth of a whole note (i.e. a quintuplet semiquaver). But in reality only specialist new music performers know what such non-standard time-signatures mean. Most performers will understand quickly the term ‘at the speed of a semiquaver quintuplet’; the notion of ‘one-tenth of a whole note’ will, on the other hand, appear more obscure. The notation adopted by Cage (in *Music of Changes* (1951)), further developed by Boulez and since used by numerous others should have been mentioned here as a viable and common alternative which, with its fractional time signatures and explanatory indications under the tuplet bracket, is both logical and arguably more visually explicit to performers. See Ex.1; or its alternative Ex.2. This point seems worth dwelling upon as incomplete tuplets are in quite common use at present (possibly due to the influence of Nancarrow’s rhythmic experiments). The matter is therefore decidedly current. The other option is to have a tempo modulation applying to only a single bar, an option Gould does offer. (Boulez usually additionally offers such explanatory tempi in such instances; but he perhaps goes too far in offering additional explanatory metronome indications even for compound as opposed to simple time-signatures). Aside from that, the Boulez solution or its Ex.2 alternative is, I would argue, most readily grasped by non-specialist and specialist players alike.



Example 1:

Boulez-style notation of incomplete irrational time-signatures.



Example 2:

An alternative notation of Example 1 – note the incomplete triple bracket.

Behind Bars perhaps says less than one might have hoped on the topic of notating extended playing techniques, although its general advice on how they might be implemented is extremely valuable:

Typically, a symbol would replace instructions for a technique exploring a new way of producing a sound ... Any symbol requires verbal qualification in a preface or at its first appearance ... Where a technique occurs only occasionally, a short verbal explanation is more helpful than an invented symbol unique to a piece – this avoids the danger of a musician forgetting its meaning. A symbol should have a single function in a work or its meaning will be ambiguous. Do not give an existing symbol a new meaning: this is confusing. (p.494)

The author recommends the many specialist instrumental volumes for consultation on the practicality of such techniques. However, such books are not notation guides. Most often their authors invent their own private notations on the spot; as these are often at variance with each other, composers have been left to make their own minds up, and have not always chosen wisely. Nevertheless, 50 years on, the Penderecki notations of extended string techniques (except his spatial notation of clusters, which can be forgotten) are surely secure enough in notational practice worldwide to be recommended – the lack of a full inventory of them here is a pity. Gould is very articulate on the topic of microtones (where she steers a commonsense approach through a myriad of sometimes absurd alternatives) and the more complex topic of multiphonic notation. Should the composer of a passage in multiphonics write actual chords, or fingerings with or without notes or chords, or a rhythm without any definite pitch? As with aleatoricism, Gould assesses the various options very rationally, and is clear on which context will suit which notation. This section can be recommended without hesitation as a guide for the notation of these sounds. On the topic of extended playing techniques more generally, the omission of any mention of, or of suitable music examples from, the music of the two composer-doyens of such extended playing techniques, Salvatore Sciarrino and Helmut Lachenmann, is surprising. Gould’s recommended notation of the commonly used flute ‘jet whistle’ sound (p.249) is one I have never previously encountered: the notations of Sciarrino or Lachenmann for this

sound are now standard, and should have been cited instead.

On the other hand, much as I admire his music, Lachenmann's notation has a number of other features which are perhaps unhelpful: notably his practice of using horizontal extending lines after any non-standard playing techniques (except multiphonics, curiously) is visually confusing for both players and conductors. Plain ties would do much better (or nothing at all, with short durations), yet unfortunately many composers influenced by him have adopted this practice. Gould's views on this and other aspects of Lachenmann's notation would have been very welcome and could have helped rationalize the appearance of many new scores. I am a little surprised at her drawing on examples from George Crumb, whose scores are certainly intricate and attractive, but whose notations are sometimes eccentric and who was working mainly in an era where extended playing techniques were still unfamiliar. Gould also commends in this context Kurt Stone's book cited above, but alas it is now largely out of date on this matter, despite its many other virtues.

Gould's book does not stop at the minutiae of musical notation. There is an important section of the book devoted to the preparation to professional standards of scores, of instrumental parts – an area in which her advice is especially expert – and other important topics such as the preparation of vocal scores for operas and choral music. The latter section is one of great practical importance, as I have discovered when singing (as sometime member of a major London chorus) in contemporary choral/orchestral pieces. Those who prepare new vocal scores – rarely the composer – are often seemingly far from competent to do so. In one case our repetiteur examined the full score extensively, discovered that the orchestral music contained plenty of musical material to cue in the choir which the original arranger had ignored, and then rewrote the reduction. Many other choirs may not bother. Performances of modern choral/orchestral works are rare; how many more performances would such works be getting if the piano reductions were done properly and the chorus parts edited professionally? Gould's advice on this area is wholly expert.

Readers should be aware that *Beyond Bars* is not a guide to all possible forms of music notation; nor is it a historical survey, nor an enquiry into aesthetics. Rather it is a guide as to how the available notations can be made to work productively in a practical context. Thus Gould has no particular need to single out any specific contemporary notational tendencies such as, for example, that known as 'new complexity'. Broadly speaking,

this notation is traditional. Its only particularity is to opt for the use of very small note values – sometimes accompanied by unusually long beaming – with the quaver, rather than the crotchet, as the basic metronomic unit. This results in scores whose visual appearance is of intricate density and high energy, certainly appropriate to the character of (much of) the music. As already mentioned, Fernyhough's use of irrational time signatures is Gould's recommended notational option for that problem; otherwise his conscientious notational habits deviate hardly from those advocated here.

Behind Bars will therefore be found to be of use to composers of many stylistic inclinations. Gould avoids any aesthetic alignment in general: whilst it is true that music examples, when copyright, are inevitably often from Faber house composers, nevertheless examples from elsewhere are not lacking. Most often, in order to illustrate the point in question clearly, Gould or her assistants have devised musical examples especially: which is probably more efficient, though the curious musical style of many invented examples – which look like a kind of loose panmodality – may raise a few eyebrows. Some may regret that examples from existing literature were not used more often, but I think this is a red herring. If the point is well illustrated the provenance of the musical illustration, let alone its style, matters little.

Some readers may want advice on how to implement Gould's recommendations in their computer programmes, and this is one area on which Gould is rightly silent – this is not a computer programme handbook. Gould's working life has traversed the final stages of dyeline copying and the last flowering of hand-engraved scores to the current dominance of computer software. Hand engraving at its finest reached standards of visual excellence which have perhaps never quite been equalled since in music printing. The full scores of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* (1965, UE), and of Britten *War Requiem* (1962, Boosey & Hawkes) are notably outstanding examples. The rehearsal score of *Curlew River* (1965, Faber Music, 'curlew signs' aside) must stand as another exemplar of really first class hand engraving which is, as Britten himself remarked, a joy to the eye. Consider the full score of the *War Requiem*: staves change size from page to page elegantly when needed, vital in a work whose movements include long passages ranging from music for one vocal line plus keyboard (the opening of the *Offertorium*) to the final passage of the *Libera Me* (setting Owen's 'Let us sleep now') on more than 40 individual simultaneous staves. No page, not even the densest, is hard to read even in miniature reproduction.

So far as I am aware, *Sibelius Software* has yet to

provide for the vital possibility of changing stave size within the bounds of a single score file. Is the same true of *Finale*? Either way, the past decade has seen an avalanche of computer scores at one uniform stave size – usually far too small, to fit the requirements of the densest passages. Computer engraving is here to stay, and has eased many other areas of professional music making. Yet it still needs improvements before it reaches the highest standards we would have expected of a printed score until just 15 years ago. It is only very recently that *Sibelius* put in place some kind of mechanism to stop dynamics clashing with pitches, hairpins, slurs and staves, or indeed to stop any of these objects, or even staves themselves, clashing with each other – though I have never seen a printed score where they did. Wonderful though *Sibelius* is in other respects – I have been a staunch supporter of it since its launch in 1992–3 – I shudder somewhat when I think of the colossal amount of time wasted till recently by copyists, often the poor composers themselves, in pulling staves, slurs, dynamics and hairpins apart despite the programme's incessant attempts to make them clash.

This is only one of several issues which have been swept under the carpet in the economic rush to computer scores we have witnessed since 1994. Another is the so-called 'instant' part extraction of many such programmes, which in many cases remains in many cases a practical chimera. If parts are truly extracted instantly, the result can be quite hard to use. Clumps of music at the wrong size of stave without cues, separated by ludicrously huge numbers of bars' rest preceding entries often lacking dynamics or hairpins (which may have been accidentally re-assigned by the programme to a neighbouring instrument), sometimes with inadvisable page-turns. There is no doubt that computers have nevertheless vastly helped both composers and publishers in many ways, as we can all agree. Still, my eyes are weary from trying to decipher computer scores of miniscule print size in composition seminars (I have taken to bringing a magnifying glass to such meetings). How do conductors cope? Writing music with computer should by now be as flexible as the best handwriting, as elegant as the finest hand-engraving. Given what they have already managed to achieve – staggering when you consider that merely 16 years ago such programmes were only just out of their infancy – this final updating of computer score processing programmes can surely not be that hard for programmers of such software to achieve fully. They should start – at once – with Elaine Gould's *Behind Bars* which, rather than pinning itself down to what programmes can do now, establishes once and for all how scores and

parts should look, regardless of software. The day music software can fulfill all Gould's prescriptions easily will be a great day indeed.

Despite some criticisms outlined above, overall Elaine Gould's *Behind Bars* is a triumph, undoubtedly the masterpiece of its genre, and destined so to remain for a very long time. None of its predecessors come close to equalling its expertise, concision, clarity and practicality. Here we have decades of high-level experience crammed into a single portable book. The volume could not be easier to read or more handsomely produced: in this day and age, such production care over a music book is, alas, almost unheard of. In any case, the expertise divulged in this book will last its users over a lifetime of professional practice, so investing in this hardback is exceptionally worthwhile.

In his preface, Sir Simon Rattle has rightly remarked that the recommendations of *Behind Bars* will help 'hard working and long-suffering performers everywhere'. Very true. But it has also focused my own admiration for us composers. For when you consider that most of the book's information has of necessity been carried around in the head of professional composers for generations – together with the contents of harmony and counterpoint treatises, other detailed theoretical knowledge, the contents of instrumental guides and instrumentation/orchestration textbooks, extensive practical experience plus a deep knowledge of generations of music from several traditions – then perhaps the real wonder is that composers manage to write their music at all.

Julian Anderson

Harrison Birtwistle: The Mask of Orpheus by Jonathan Cross. Ashgate, £35.00 (website price £31.50).

With so few detailed, book-length studies of single works, this volume in Ashgate's 'Landmarks in Music' series is greatly to be welcomed. *The Mask of Orpheus* has a scant performance history, with only one fully-staged run; nevertheless it is a work to which composers continue to respond and its place in the canon of British music is secure. Cross's book is focused firmly on Birtwistle's score, appropriate given that Birtwistle identifies with Orpheus so strongly (153). Throughout the book, Cross avoids clear-cut narratives and the result, which emerges over the course of the volume, is subtle, informative and provocative.

The book's introduction sympathetically sets the scene through the Orpheus myth, the myth's role in the 20th century, the significance of the