

The Quarterly Review of New Music

Tempo

A photograph of a person with dark hair and glasses, wearing a black shirt, playing a cello. The cello is a rich, reddish-brown color. The person is holding a bow that has a large amount of white hair tied to it, which is draped over the cello's body. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some wooden structures.

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Editorial

What we hear when we listen

Hearing is a sense that is very hard to suppress, yet the differentiation in many languages between ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ seems to suggest that we want to assert that there is a hierarchy of aural attentiveness. It’s a differentiation that goes beyond two verbs, especially when music is being discussed. Erik Satie’s *Musique d’ameublement* (1917) offered us the compositional equivalent of the IKEA catalogue and people have filled their living spaces with sonic wallpaper ever since. The current dispute amongst members of the German copyright protection organisation, GEMA, about whether the system of awarding different economic values to popular and serious music should continue, might also be thought of as an extension of the distinction between music that is just heard and music to which we need to listen.

The existence of a journal like *Tempo*, however, is predicated on the idea that the discussion of music goes beyond a simplistic binary choice between casual hearing and engaged listening. This issue, in particular, has a lot to say about all the different things that come into play as soon as we hear music, the things that shape the ways in which our attention is directed.

Seppe Gebruers’ article explores what he calls the ‘relational field between creation and listening’ and argues that in listening we should ‘allow the unknown to emerge’, suspending ‘the logic that binds making to meaning’. Zygmund de Somogyi adopts a different perspective, considering the nature of the frame within which creators and listeners imagine that meaning is being constructed: what happens to meaning if the frame is now metamodern?

Gebruers also advocates an interruption of ‘linear causality’ but the tendency to historicise is founded on the idea that our capacity to understand is contingent on what we already know. Notated music encourages the historical tendency, because it conveniently encodes what previous generations of musicians have known and it’s difficult to avoid a sense of linear causality if one spends an afternoon in the library looking though

orchestral scores from Mozart to Mahler. Less convenient is music that resists encoding and Tellef Øgrim and Mia Zabelka write about how free improvisation ‘often feels historically present when you hear it, yet historically absent when you read about it’. Their conclusion, that in free improvisation we can test our ideas about music history so that they are ‘reconfigured in the present tense’ is, again, an invitation to question what we hear when we listen. Kai-Young Chan concludes the articles by making a pragmatic distinction between these two modes of sense, addressing how the intonations in Cantonese might be navigated – or heard differently, in creative ways – within the context of contemporary choral music.

We would like to apologise for the very late arrival of the April issue of Tempo, which fell victim to a series of production delays. We hope we will be able to avoid these in future and we are very grateful for your patience. Readers will also notice some minor changes to the design of this new issue. We hope you approve of these alterations and we welcome further suggestions for improvement. Please send your thoughts, ideas and critiques to editors@temponeWMusic.com.

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Franz Xaver Schlecht as Pieter in Bernd Franke's *Coming Up For Air*, Oper Leipzig, 2026.
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Why Free Improvisation Doesn't Seem to Fit Music History and why that Matters

Tellef Øgrim and Mia Zabelka

Free improvisation is often treated as marginal or ahistorical, even in serious accounts of twentieth-century music. This article argues that the problem is not the music, but the way music history is usually written: in many narratives, free improvisation is treated less as a practice than as a symptom. It is not sufficient, however, to describe freely improvised music as an outburst, a reaction, a moment of rupture, something that happens after styles have broken down rather than something that carries its own historical weight. Taking *The Rest Is Noise* by Alex Ross as a reference point, we suggest another way of hearing improvisation: not as an exception to

history, but as a practice that challenges how historical authority itself is organised.¹

Even in thoughtful and wide-ranging histories such as *The Rest Is Noise*, improvised music tends to remain at the edge of the story. It is acknowledged, sometimes vividly, but rarely allowed to reorganise how the story itself is told. This is not because free improvisation lacks depth or influence, it is because it does not behave in ways that conventional music history finds easy or convenient to describe. Many listeners will recognise this tension, even if they have never thought about it in these terms. Free improvisation often feels historically present when you hear it, yet historically absent when you read about it. The gap between those two experiences is where this article begins.

From early vocal and percussive practices to baroque performance, from Indian classical music to jazz and contemporary electronic forms, improvisation has been a continuous and central mode of musical expression. Yet in dominant accounts of Western music history, it appears as a supplement, something secondary to more formalised methods of composition and notation. Free improvisation is particularly difficult to place within music history because it resists the categories on which most historical narratives depend. It does not centre on stable works, fixed repertoires or stylistic succession. It unfolds as practice rather than product, as event rather than object. In histories that are built around composers, scores and movements, this creates friction.

It is important to note that such histories are concerned almost exclusively with Western art music, just one historically specific musical culture among many. From a global perspective, music is very often created, transmitted and transformed without written notation. In many cultures musical practice is fundamentally oral, embodied and situational; improvisation is not a specialised activity but the normal condition of music-making. What Western discourse labels as ‘improvised music’ is, in much of the world, simply music.

Before going further, it is worth being clear about what *The Rest Is Noise* set out to do and when it did it. First published in 2007, the book is a broad cultural history of twentieth-century art music, not an ethnography of musical practice. Its focus is on how composed music responded to war, ideology, power and trauma and, from that perspective, it remains persuasive and influential. Given the book’s position as a widely read account

¹ Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

of twentieth-century art music, it is still relevant to ask what lies in the background of such a narrative.

As it resists standardised organisation around works, composers and stylistic succession, free improvisation fits poorly into such narratives. But that difficulty should not be mistaken for marginality. It may instead point to a central musical practice of the twentieth century that demands a different way of being written into history. Ross does acknowledge free jazz and free improvisation, but as the precursor to composed music, as in a section of the 'Beethoven was wrong' chapter which takes us from Charlie Parker, through John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman and eventually to 'younger classical composers looking for a way out of Schoenberg's maze', such as Steve Reich.² Improvisation is a transitory phase, something one arrives at, encounters and then goes beyond. It becomes part of a sequence rather than a practice with its own internal logic and continuity. What is missing in this framing is not respect, but depth.

If one actually listens—across performances, ensembles and decades—the idea that free improvisation exists outside tradition quickly collapses. One hears jazz phrasing and time-feel, extended techniques from postwar contemporary art music, noise practices, folk and instrumental memory, ritual gesture, call-and-response. These elements are not denied or erased; they are made available. Yet it is not unusual to encounter descriptions of freely improvised music that describe it as somehow freed from the rules of genres and styles, drawn from the moment in which it is performed. Such descriptions may be incorrect, but they do at least offer inspired attempts at branding, at a sort of anti-categorisation.

In this context it may be fruitful to look back on the legendary improviser Derek Bailey's concept of 'Non-Idiomatic Improvisation'.³ Since he coined the term 50 years ago it has often been treated too literally and become somewhat superficial. We believe that the key to understanding Bailey's concept is his statement that free improvisation has no stylistic commitment: it contains style but avoids being ruled by it. Ten years after Bailey's book, another central player from British improvised music, Edwin Eddie Prévoist, joined the discourse, in an answer to a question about whether this music had rules or not.

2 Id., *The Rest is Noise*, p. 478.

3 Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Ashbourne: Moorland Publishing, 1980), pp. 4–5.

I'm saying that there is a set of rules. It's no good Derek (Bailey) saying he doesn't have any rules. Well, he can say that but it doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. The very fact that I can recognise his playing from one occasion to another indicates to me that there is a set of rules. If it's coherent there must be rules. There are rules; it's a different set of rules. And a different set of rules relates to a different worldview. What we are proposing, whether we are doing it consciously or not, is a different worldview—and there has to be rules in a worldview. I'm not proposing anarchy, I don't even believe that anarchy exists, there's nothing in nature, which is anarchic, it always gravitates towards form eventually. The question is, 'What form?' and what we're proposing, consciously or otherwise is a form, which in essence is completely different in its political and social implications from the form which classical music has perpetuated. And let's have no illusions about it classical music is not apolitical, it's very political indeed, and so is pop music.⁴

Prévost's concept of 'meta-music' is another oft-quoted attempt to grasp the core of free improvisation. The concept may not be entirely defined but it fleshes out some essential demands for musicians taking part in collective improvisation, such as a profound adherence to their 'sonic contribution', even when that contribution is silence. According to Prévost, no sound, including the absence of sound, is truly innocent and the people listening to an improvisation contribute to its identity just as much as the musicians and the sounds they produce, although this is only partially preserved in a recording.

This could also be said for many other musical genres and styles. The emphasis on discovery, both relating to excavating sounds from a concert situation or discovering sides of one's self is however one aspect of Prévost's metamusic concept that is unique to free improvisation: 'You can never be certain of your place within the whole. But, in my opinion, part of the reason to practice this music is to try and discover something more about yourself. This is in relation to the materials you use and in relation to the musicians you perform with'.⁵ Musical coherence emerges not from hierarchy but from coordination: a shared negotiation of musical space in

4 Eddie Prévost, interview by Richard Scott, <https://preparedguitar.blogspot.com/2014/04/eddie-prevost-interview-by-richard.html> (accessed 27 April 2026).

5 Eddie Prévost, interview by Vanita Monk and Johanna Monk, <https://www.monastery.nl/bulletin/prevost/prevost.html> (accessed 27 April 2026).

which no single participant controls the outcome. Improvisation models a non-hierarchical form of organization that is both aesthetic and social. The ensemble dimension complicates authorship.

This explains why free improvisation cannot be reduced to a niche practice. Its principles—interaction, contingency and openness—are not confined to experimental music but appear across genres, including popular music. Late works by David Bowie or the experimental strategies of Björk demonstrate how improvisational thinking can permeate structured forms. At the same time, improvisation challenges one of the central assumptions

of Western art music: the idea of the work as a stable, enduring object. Improvisation is not a monument. Its ontology is bound to the moment of its emergence. Its value lies precisely in its ephemerality.

Free improvisation
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niche practice.

Even within the history of Western art music itself, improvisation has been far more central than modern narratives suggest. Cadenzas in concertos were improvised, not notated, and eighteenth-century keyboard practice assumed improvisational fluency as a basic skill. Composers such as Mozart and Bach often developed their works at the keyboard, meaning that music later fixed in notation frequently originated in improvisatory exploration. Opera composers such as Verdi shaped arias collaboratively with singers during rehearsals, drawing on performers' spontaneous contributions. The sharp opposition between composition and improvisation is a comparatively recent construction rather than a stable feature of Western musical life.

If free improvisation is historically saturated, it nevertheless treats history as material rather than as law. When improvisers say that their music has nothing to do with genre or style, they are rarely making a literal historical claim. They are making a normative one: no inherited form has authority in advance and no tradition dictates what must happen next. This becomes clear in performance. Improvisers comment on, rewrite, mesh, parody or invert traditions in real time. Styles appear briefly, collide, dissolve and return altered. The past is not quoted as a reference point but activated as a resource. Meaning is produced through interaction rather than through adherence to form.

Anyone who has tried to write promotional material for a festival, a concert or a recording will know that it is not easy and that often the words seem to fall short of describing the music. When asked to categorise their

music, musicians often point out that categorisations make it difficult for both them and their public to keep their ears open to the music: mapping the music within a system of genres and styles limits creativity. Such categorisations also restrict festival programming and too many contemporary music festivals are evidently reluctant to include improvised music within their concept of contemporary art music. We challenge festival directors to revitalise their festival programmes in dialogue with improvising musicians.

After a recent Zabelka/Lie/Øgrim trio concert in Bergen, an audience member approached us and gave a remarkably detailed account of the performance from her own listening perspective. Considering the music's eclectic character—violin (Mia Zabelka), electric guitar (Tellef Øgrim) and turntable (Håkon Lie)—the clarity of her recollection was striking. What is often described as chaotic or impenetrable had evidently registered as a coherent and memorable sequence of events. A practice that hands over as much as possible to the intuition of the moment creates problems, however, for conventional music history. Most historical writing depends on stable works, named movements and the continuity of institutions such as conservatories and orchestras.

Free improvisation undermines such constructions. It prioritises events over objects, relations over artifacts, listening over notation. History is no longer stored primarily in scores or canons but in skills learned through practice, shared habits and collective memory. That does not make it ahistorical. It makes it difficult to archive. Historical studies of postwar experimental music reinforce this view. In his account of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, for example, George E. Lewis demonstrates that improvisation was neither anarchic nor anti-intellectual, but a highly structured practice grounded in collective responsibility, self-determination and alternative models of musical authority.

Another example, this time Kyle Gann characterising the group AMM:

AMM is an improvisation group, but not improvisation in the dictionary sense of “to fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand”, and still less in the jazz sense of playing around within a preset structure of melody and harmony. The aims of AMM, and the style of its music, have changed from time to time, and its members are sometimes hard put to describe their working methods; but it is clear that, for each one, improvisation is the embodiment of a philosophy, not a technique. Each AMM improvisation is a search for something freed from the limits of past experience, something that did not exist until its

realization. The members of AMM are uninterested in flaunting their virtuosity or expertise, and indifferent to their past achievements, and even to the concepts of success or failure. Yet despite this Zen-like uninvolvedness with conventional standards of good and bad, AMM has garnered an enormous amount of critical praise and built up a wildly enthusiastic European following, and several of their albums have been best-sellers.⁶

Again, there is a suggestion that free improvisation is freed from past experience. Yet to 'search for something freed from the limits of past experience' is not the same as finding it: the search constitutes a central part of this form of music, even if past experiences might sometimes pop out.⁷ Such practices do not fit easily into narratives organised around composers, scores and stylistic succession: not because they lack history, but because they embody it differently.

Free improvisation does not usually present explicit political messages. Instead it performs social relations. Authority is negotiated rather than fixed. Leadership is temporary. Responsibility is shared. There may be virtuosity, but it does not automatically confer control. These are enacted conditions, not symbolic gestures, and, in this sense, free improvisation does more than represent democratic or egalitarian ideas: it practices them, however imperfectly, in sound and time. This explains why it sits uneasily within narratives of music history. *The Rest Is Noise* is primarily concerned with how music responds to war, ideology, power and trauma. Free improvisation often does something else. It does not reflect history so much as interfere with it. It shifts attention away from works and toward relationships, away from fixed meaning and toward negotiated action.

To describe this as music outside history is therefore misleading. What it resists is not history itself, but a particular way of organising authority around established traditions, granting the past an automatic right to govern the present. Free improvisation does not reject the past: it refuses its authority and music history's body of evidence must be widened if it is to account for this practice more fully. Not only scores and institutions, but listening practices, shared ways of responding and the responsibilities performers assume when making sound together need to count as historical material.

As form-orthodoxy has waned somewhat in contemporary art music, improvisation becomes more important in so-called 'score-music'. George

⁶ Kyle Gann, 'Music Notes: AMM's continual quest for failure', *Chicago Reader*, 25 May 1984, p.7.

⁷ Ibid.

Stevenson, for example, is a composer who says that ‘improvisation remains at the core of my music, driven by the pure excitement of seeking out harmonic objects and musical structures that are new and fascinating to me’.⁸ Just as we do not insist that free improvisation take over the music world and that notated music should be forbidden, we applaud such signs that improvisation is gaining artistic ground again.

Human beings improvise in art, as we do in our everyday life. Improvisation and experimentation have been fundamental components of music since its beginnings. From singing and drumming to electronic music, humans have continuously explored new sounds and forms of expression and with the advent of new technologies and studio techniques, the possibilities for improvisation have expanded further still. Electronic music now allows artists to manipulate sounds in real time and thus to improvise. Consequently, free improvisation

is better understood as a method than a genre. It does not prescribe a stylistic identity, but establishes conditions: attention, interaction and responsiveness in real time.

This has several consequences. First, improvisation operates as a dynamic system, in which small gestures can have disproportionate effects on the unfolding musical form. The music is not ‘built’ to a plan but develops through feedback within the ensemble. Second, it depends on what practitioners describe as ‘automatic playing’: a state in which accumulated experience is activated without conscious pre-structuring. This is not the absence of knowledge but its redistribution, from planning to action. Third, improvisation is a form of real-time composition, requiring continuous decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. What is often described as freedom is, in practice, a highly demanding mode of attention.

A way of listening to the improvisational process is to adapt the so-called ‘insist-adjust pendulum’, a state of heightened communication in which the players shift between proposing motifs and building new motifs on suggestions from their co-players. If and how the insist-adjust pendulum plays itself out in a certain session is dependent on the fundamental pref-

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8 <https://royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk/composers/rps-composers-programme/current-composers/george-stevenson> (accessed 5 May 2026).

REVIEWS

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Erwan Keravec in *Music for Commons Sensed++*, MaerzMusik, Berlin, 2026.
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Wittener Tage für Neue Kammermusik

Witten, Germany
24–26 April, 2026

REVIEWED BY ED COOPER

The fifty-eighth edition of the Wittener Tage für Neue Kammermusik was the first under its new Artistic Director, Anselm Cybinski. In his programme introduction, he wrote that this year's festival engages with politics on both micro and macro scales. During a discussion session, Cybinski invited us as listeners to consider each programmed work within a wider social frame, asking how these pieces stage different modes of communication and models for 'living together'. This is a capacious theme—one which might be taken as read in any musical practice—but it was the open-ended filter through which I was encouraged to hear the programme.

The festival opened with a performance by the young musicians of the IEMA—Ensemble der Internationalen Ensemble Modern Akademie 2025/26. Two highlights: Ayane Nakase's *Im Zymtturm*, which combined a whirly tube with mechanical ticking before dissolving into very subtle surround electronics that hovered somewhere between granulated birdsong and a squeaky toy. Nikolas Agrafiotis's *Kythrappos* was boldly relentless, its weighty percussion punctuated by a doggedly repeated oboe-heavy chord (it is

telling that the work's simple A-B-A' form registered as unusual and therefore striking in the context of a New Music festival). Of note, too, were the concert's two conductors, Mariacostanza D'agostino and Delia Ramos Rodríguez, who split the programme between them and combined clarity with an appropriately expressive touch.

It was heartening to see these young musicians given the honour of opening the festival, even if the concert immediately afterwards seemed to be framed as the festival's true opening concert: *Ich im Plural*, performed by Klangforum Wien under the direction of Elena Schwarz. Márton Illés's *Four Sketches for Ensemble and Electronics* opened the concert with a stunning integration of the live ensemble with electronics, oscillating between moments of individual clarity and total synthesis. At one moment, Schwarz tapped a tuning fork and moved it toward a microphone, which sent a metallic resonance spiralling through the hall—the kind of ingenious theatricality that made the piece more than sum of its parts.

Isabel Mundry's *The I's* followed, with the ensemble joined by mezzo-soprano Hélène Fauchère. Unfortunately, the work suffered from being placed after Illés's piece: its integration of instrumental and electronic sounds was less *exciting*, perhaps owing to sonorities being less intriguing in and of themselves. The concert closed with a work by the festival's portrait composer, Chaya Czernowin's *Seltene Erde: Alchimia*



Ensemble hand werk in Chaya Czernowin's *The Redheaded Man* "... and then I realized that I am the world, but the world is not me.", Wittener Tage für Neue Kammermusik. © WDR / Claus Langer

Communicationis. Built around the foundational gesture of the string 'seagull'-glissando, the piece framed the composer's characteristic play between existence and non-appearance. It was the only work of the evening to receive a 'whoop', but left me rather cold: the music suggested an emotional world without actually doing it.

Christian Mason's *Towards a not yet remembered past...* was the highlight of the first concert of the second day. The half-hour string quartet presented an exceptionally tasteful recombination of Medieval materials, inflected with sometimes playful folk-like rhythms. The work opened with graceful, planted and repetitive upward gestures—something of a measured ascension—interrupted by exuberant melodic squeals: perhaps the shriek of the everyday permeating

this quietude. Yet there was no trace of irony or fanboy homage; rather, Mason drew from the genomes of his sources with such attention to craft and detail that it became something unmistakably his own, making the rationale for his recent Grawemeyer Award abundantly clear. Quatuor Diotima proved especially adept at bringing out Mason's drifting, pliant melodic writing that provided a welcome breath of fresh air after the more doctrinaire *Neue Musik* on the programme.

The centrepiece of the festival followed that afternoon: the premiere of Czernowin's music-theatre work *The Redheaded Man* "... and then I realized that I am the world, but the world is not me.", which also marked the composer's directorial debut. The six members of handwerk (a Pierrot+ensemble) turned their hand to ac-

ting, alongside playing their respective instruments. The piece opened with an adaptation of Daniil Kharms' aphoristic poem *The Red-Haired Man*, in which a red-haired man is identified but given no physical attributes—leaving it unclear just who is being discussed, and establishing the work's central play between presence and absence. A nameless character, performed by cellist Niklas Seidel, oscillated between sleeping, waking, feeling sleepy, performing his cello in tatty clothes, whilst moving around the stage; followed by a sequence in which the characters (or non-characters) board a train, accompanied by a blinding light directed at the audience and explosive sounds which I understood to represent bombs falling.

In the final scene, the characters fail to remember the order of seven and eight; they ask a local shopkeeper for help, then collectively recite the opening text about the red-haired man as the central actor dons a scarf reminiscent of a tallit. Taken together, the work reads as a narrative of a refugee's journey. It stages how trauma—both ever-present and elusive—permeates the most mundane actions, even something as banal as recalling the sequence of numbers.

If one takes up Cybinski's invitation to consider the festival's works and their programming as somehow political, it becomes necessary to ask what it means to stage *this* Israeli composer's reflections on genocide and displacement at this moment. As an American-based Harvard profes-

sor, Czernowin enjoys an immense degree of security and privilege, and no doubt her stature brings the festival commercial and aesthetic clout. What's more, I do not imagine that Czernowin's already visible and established career has benefited much from being composer-in-residence at an iconic New Music festival in the way that some up-and-coming composers might have. But I worry that the festival's theme of 'living together' invites an over-determined reading of any composer's artistic works based on their nationality and status, rather than what the composers are *doing* with these structural identities. I wonder, then, just what sort of 'living together' Wittener Tage models?

Similar questions were prompted by the concert that same evening: *Dialog als sprechen* (that is, 'Dialogue as speaking'), in which the Basel Sinfonietta and alto Noa Frenkel performed works by composers from presently antagonistic countries. Iranian composer Amen Feizabadi's *Ungezähmter Fluss* offered something of a Romantic homage; its highly emotive gestures engaged a tonal language throughout, closing with low, ominous sonorities that mirrored the singer's lower tessitura at the opening. Israeli composer Yair Klartag's *The unconscious is structured like a language* was the musical highlight of the programme. Beginning with whispered fragments from the instrumentalists and electronics, followed by uncannily low electronic resonances, the piece included a moment in which the entire ensem-

ble whispered their earliest memory in their native language. A repetitive, rock-inflected riff then emerged, working up to a sensation that felt uncannily like the onset of a panic attack.

Iranian composer Golfam Khayam was unable to travel from her home in Tehran to attend the concert for safety reasons, instead sending a message read out by the conductor before her piece that her family is currently safe and that she wishes for freedom. In her string orchestra work *Seven Valleys of Love*, long, flowing phrases opened out into an emotionally expansive, dramatically devotional space, punctuated by strikingly beautiful singing from the instrumentalists. The programme closed with Italian-Swiss composer Oscar Bianchi's *Zamān*, a dark and brooding work inspired by the Persian word for 'time' in the sense of 'era' or 'period'. Inspired by his great-aunt's account of fleeing from the Nazis into Switzerland, Bianchi describes the piece as an exploration of exile and return as a fundamental condition of human existence.

It was striking that the two works by Iranian composers were grounded in more transparent tonalities and forms than the other two pieces, which drew far more audibly on the complexity-fetish of New Music. I wonder why the curators chose to represent Iranian composers with *these* works, when both Feizabadi and Khayam have varied and daring oeuvres—and whether those works would have been programmed had they been written by composers of

different nationalities. While such broad brushstrokes might risk coming across as condescending, the festival's well-intentioned but loose theme for this programme make me wonder about the sorts of elisions and essentialisms that the curators were working with: how they imagine the distribution of entitlement, and who feels permitted to do what with certain musical traditions, and under what conditions.

The final day of the Wittener Tage began with a short interview between Czernowin and Patrick Becker, followed by performances of two of her earlier works. *Shu Hai Practices Javelin*, sung by alto Noa Frenkel, presented an interplay between the live voice and circling electronic vocal sounds—forms emerged only to dissolve almost immediately.

In the programme note for the second piece, *Ezov (Moss)*, performed by Quatuor Diotima, Czernowin writes that the work explores the plant's associations with renewal, resistance, perseverance and healing through connection, and that the piece represents an attempt to find hope. These themes were, to my ears, not especially audible in Czernowin's seemingly transfigurative threads of material that dissipate as soon as they emerge, and at well over twenty soporific minutes, the work felt overly long. Taking up Cybinski's political filter once again, I cannot help but feel that the attempt to 'find hope' is a comparatively low-risk political position—and one that does not offer a particularly effective takeaway.

The final concert was performed by the WDR Sinfonieorchester under the baton of Yalda Zamani. Øyvind Torvund's *Two Pieces for Electronics and Orchestra* unfolded as a kind of hyperreal Romantic symphony, continually oscillating between lush orchestral peaks and abrupt collapses into procedural restarts: the repetitive oboe A, string and harp glissandi and the clicking electronics that swirled around the hall to produce the sensation of having just 'won' a video game, or of hearing the gleam of the orchestra refracted back at itself. Dai Fujikura's *Ritual* followed, its watery textures cohering with subtle electronic reinforcements. The programme note described the piece as 'Anti-Boulez', though, to my ears it was not particularly clear how: what emerged was gushing tonal melodies batted around the orchestra with electronic adornment, though the ending—an ethereal electronic spectral detritus hovering over the orchestra's silence—was undeniably striking.

Czernowin's *No! A Lament For The Innocent* staged a dialogue between a live chamber orchestra and its pre-recorded double. The solo soprano writing was fraught: long sustained pitches often sounded strained in ways that did not seem intentional, and it was difficult not to notice the exposed position in which soprano Sofia Jernberg was placed. The opening section was filled with inhalations but no words, as though a lament could be voiced but not spoken. When the word 'no' finally appeared, stretched into glissandi, it

took on an almost cartoonish quality, raising uncomfortable questions about what such stylisation does to the word's force, and the characterisation of who is intoning it. This work's final plea, 'don't take my child away', closed the festival. I wonder just whose voice is being staged here, and for whom?

BOOKS

The Routledge Companion to Teaching Music Composition in Schools

Kirsty Devaney et al. (eds.)

Routledge, 2025, 560 pp., €61.99

The Oxford Handbook of Music Composition Pedagogy

Michele Kaschub (ed.)

Oxford University Press, 2025, 968 pp., €178.–

The Cambridge Companion to Composition

Toby Young (ed.)

Cambridge University Press, 2025, 329 pp., €37.–

REVIEWED BY CHRISTIAN CAREY

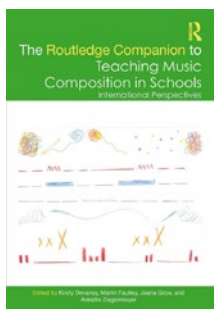
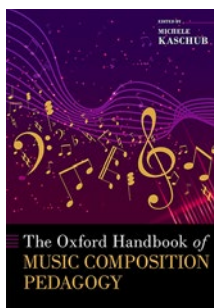
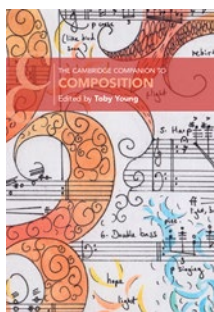
Composition has been an integral part of music pedagogy for hundreds of years, ever since the study of counterpoint and fugue. In the present day, some state accreditation boards require composition

to be a part of music classes in primary, secondary and higher educational settings—and individual and group composition lessons remain popular. The three volumes reviewed here present essays on myriad facets of teaching composition, both practical and aesthetic.

The Routledge Companion to Teaching Music Composition: International Perspectives casts a wide net, not only in terms of the plethora of compositional approaches it discusses, but also the locale of its case studies. The book's geographic reach is enormous, from Iceland and Mexico to New Zealand, with many stops in between. It is fascinating to note the particular issues at play in different cultures. Adam Walters and Renaldo Hamai detail the necessity for students in Trinidad to learn relatively early on in their study how to notate complicated rhythms, as syncopation is a signature feature of the country's music. Lawrence Branco Sekalegga discusses the importance of the principles of ubuntu in education in Uganda. Despite this distinctive set of values in which individuality is discovered in collaborative settings, Sekalegga points out that a Eurocentric mindset

strongly prevails in Ugandan music education, which is often restricted to Western harmony and counterpoint. This can limit opportunities for students to compose in African idioms.

Assessment models are the central focus of several chapters. Sabine Chatelain weighs the outcomes of teaching composition in the multilingual environment of schools in Switzerland, where many creative activities are incorporated in music curricula, but regardless of the language spoken, the word for 'composing' is seldom used to describe them. Chatelain suggests this distinction would help works produced in the classroom to be more valued. Angela Jaap details curricular aims and approaches to evaluating student work in schools in Scotland. She takes a thoughtful and holistic view of Scotland's evolving educational philosophies, tracing the shift towards student-centred learning, changes to accreditation standards and the impact of technology on composition instruction. Helpfully, each section of the book is introduced by the editors in a brief essay. These are thoughtfully crafted and provide valuable insights into the book's various topics.



Despite this distinctive set of values in which individuality is discovered in collaborative settings, Sekalegga points out that a Eurocentric mindset

Tool' is tailor-made for both creators and scholars. Contour modelling, elements of pacing and pitch class set theory are brought to bear in the analysis of pieces by Schoenberg and Debussy.

Questions around composition and ethnicity are given sensitive and thought-provoking consideration. 'Transcultural Composing' by Raymond Yiu is a wide-ranging survey of the ways in which composers have approached identity, race and the integration of traditional music. Liza Lim's 'Composition and Ecological Listening' offers exercises and prompts to guide readers through the unique musical ecologies governing pieces by Alvin Lucier, Ash Fure, Christine Sun Kim, Pauline Oliveros and others, each of which responds to social and environmental issues. Lim brings to this discussion an account of her own work, *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* (2017–18), which reckons with the devastation brought about by man's abuse of our own ecology.

The book's final section usefully addresses the practicalities of building a career as a composer, emphasising the importance of finding a distinctive and compelling musical identity. 'Practical Advice for Emerging Composers', by Hollie Harding and Toby Young, presents a series of short paragraphs that address various situations in which composers will likely find themselves on the journey from student to professional, from writer's block to rejection. Many entries are helpful reminders for composers at any stage of their

careers, such as 'Collect Ideas', 'Work Deep, Not Long', 'Analyse the Things You Love', 'Don't Compare Yourself to Others', 'The Creative Process is Messy, and That's Okay' and 'Find Strategies for When Things Go Badly'.

Indeed, each of these three books provides a great deal of valuable material for novice and experienced composers and instructors alike. Choosing between them isn't a useful exercise, for each offers a distinctive approach to the subject. Instead, best get reading.

RECORDINGS

Tyshawn Sorey, *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*

Kashkashian, Rothenberg, Schick, Tines,
Houston Chamber Choir (cond. Sorey)
DACAMERA Editions, DE2601

REVIEWED BY EVAN JOHNSON

Many readers of *Tempo* will know the Rothko Chapel, both the building in Houston and the now-classic work by Morton Feldman commissioned to celebrate its opening in 1971. When it came time to commemorate the chapel's fiftieth birthday by commissioning a new piece, Sarah Rothenberg (keyboardist and artistic director of Houston's DACAMERA music series) immediately thought of Tyshawn Sorey. With good reason: in addition to being among the most sought-after composers in the US,

a MacArthur Genius Grant awardee and Pulitzer laureate, Sorey's notated compositional work has always existed, unabashedly and contentedly, in Feldman's shadow.

Sorey responded to this forthrightly post-Feldman assignment by working directly in his predecessor's footsteps, with the same instrumentation and indeed the same choral ensemble (the Houston Chamber Choir) at its core. As *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)* evolved through its early performances, Sorey expanded Feldman's twenty-odd minutes to 50, then 70, then 80. What he did not take over from Feldman was the 1972 work's fragility, openness or modesty.

'Modesty' may seem a strange word to apply to Feldman. The durational demands of his late music and the extent of his self-regard are equally legendary. But I can think of no better word for what *Rothko Chapel* has and *Monochromatic Light* eschews. *Rothko Chapel*, like many of Feldman's middle-period scores, moves forward step by step, tentatively, with held breath, in dimmed light. Not until the eventual emergence in the viola of that famous folk-tinged melody from Feldman's youth are we reminded that phrases can be joined after all, that such a thing as musically confident expression exists in this universe.

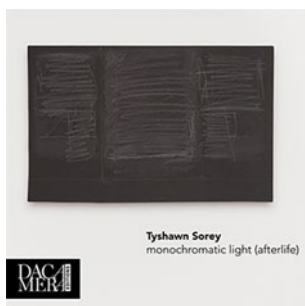
Monochromatic Light (Afterlife), by contrast, takes that confidence as a given from the opening passage. As in the Feldman, the first layer to enter is rolling percussion (Steven Schick; with chimes in place of Feldman's timpani); as in the Feldman, the viola enters almost immediately (Kim Kashkashian; mic'd here with a jarringly analytical closeness) and it holds forth, albeit with substantial breaks, for over an hour. Things happen at a moderate pace and a moderately quiet dynamic level virtually throughout. (Three substantial piano solos were, Rothenberg writes in the

liner notes, added after the premiere, presumably for the sake of increased large-scale variety.)

The role of that viola tune in *Rothko Chapel*—bearer of a melodic expression external to the prevailing language of the piece, with personal

resonance for the composer and his heritage—is taken over here by an extensive part for baritone Davóne Tines built around 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child'. Tines' magnetic and wide-ranging performance is the work's centre of gravity, and a final passage in his ringing head voice is the most impressive thing on this record.

The recorded sound, however, detracts. Aside from the jarring incongruities of soundstage and a general shallow muddiness, there



are plenty of ambient noises and, at a couple of moments, vocal phrases vanish ever so slightly prematurely into digital silence amidst the ensemble texture, as if imprecisely edited in.

After listening to Sorey's much-praised work, I found myself returning to Feldman's original. That may not be fair; *Rothko Chapel* is, after all, a defining work of the late twentieth century. But Sorey openly courts the comparison. The similarities between the two works are inescapable: the omnipresent arioso viola (though Sorey makes extensive use of a most un-Feldmanian tremolo), the punctuating chimes and rolling timpani, the wordless chorus, the mezzo piano. There are plenty of superficial ways in which *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)* is essentially an expanded *Rothko Chapel*, a sort of director's cut for aficionados who want more of the same, with Tines providing a new frisson.

But Feldman places everything so perfectly. His touch is light, the pacing absolutely precise. The fragmentary phrases float, they exhaust themselves gently when they are out of energy, and then they are allowed to evaporate. Every moment weighs what it should weigh, the silences included; every melodic interval functions, and one thing happens at a time.

Sorey pursues something grander with essentially the same ingredients, but the result feels like a smoothing-over and a dilution of focus. It is telling that when Feldman began to write works of this length, almost a decade after *Rothko Chapel*, so much

less happens. His expansion towards hour-long works is an emptying out: a recalibration of the time things take, the way gesture sits in duration and what it means for time to pass in music.

Sorey's ambition is different. It is clear that he is not merely attempting to recreate the rhetoric of late Feldman, on any timescale. But *Monochromatic Light* suffers, I think, from how little it dares to stray from its model's voice. With *Rothko Chapel*'s vocabulary but absent its ambiguity, *Monochromatic Light* treads water in a vast ocean of moderate intensity, its light never quite monochromatic enough. The duration does not exert any pressure on material that just keeps going, without urgency, and without knowing why to stop.

**Whitney Johnson, Lia Kohl,
Macie Stewart, BODY SOUND**
International Anthem, IARCo108

REVIEWED BY CAROLINE PREZIOSI

A trio is a shape of active sound. Spatial and ambulant, but moving within the bounds of the vessel it creates. This stable form of the triangle finds and reconfigures balance within inherent imbalance. In *BODY SOUND*, Chicago-based musicians and improvisers Whitney Johnson, Lia Kohl, Macie Stewart and their analogue machine collaborators are concerned with these poetics

KLANGPLASTIK invites readers into a world where sound shapes space. Featuring photographs, texts, and QR codes, the book captures the ephemeral beauty of Johannes S. Sistermanns' internationally acclaimed sound installations.

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