Ashley is at work on Quicksand, which he says will be the longest and most ambitious work: ‘It’s a shoot ‘em-up spy thriller written in the form of a novel and paying homage to the hard-bitten styles of Elmore Leonard and John Le Carré’ (p. 127).

Early in his book, Gann details the attributes of Ashley’s operas which do not conform to most people’s expectations or associations: ‘The voices chant ecstatically on one pitch, echoing and overlapping in almost unintelligible profusion. The piano beats out a sporadic, dissonant pointillism, though the background electronics reinforce an immobile tonality … a peculiar formal symmetry given the seemingly frantic outpouring of words from someone’s babbling subconscious … people sing in a style that resembles speech, within a small pitch range and with pitch and stress inflections based on one speech … plots are rarely evident in his words, or, rather, if there’s a background plot … you can’t necessarily reconstruct it from the text’, and adds, ‘His works are made not for the stage but for television’ (pp. 1–2). Ashley’s work represents an intention to rethink opera in a computerised, digital, multi-dimensional world, rather than in the confines of a theatre, which he sees as being ‘from another time, like the pyramids [where] “we don’t go”’ (p. 2). Thus far, only Perfect Lives has been realised in the video form for which he envisions all of them.

Although Gann is a passionate admirer of Ashley’s work, his book goes far beyond mere advocacy. It contains thorough and detailed discussions of all the elements of the construction of the operas, as well as many of Ashley’s non-theatrical works. If the book is, as he claims, inadequate to do justice to Ashley’s music, it certainly is, at the very least, that which he wishes it to be: ‘an incitement for listeners to begin exploring it for themselves’ (p. 127).

Rodney Lister

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Brian Ferneyhough by Lois Fitch. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013. £28.00

By now it cannot seem shaming, not even surprising, that we had to wait until the year of Brian Ferneyhough’s seventieth birthday to have a book on him in English. As Lois Fitch observes in her exceedingly welcome if not altogether unproblematic monograph, two substantial French studies preceded hers, as well as a thorough exploration in German of a key work, the Carceri d’invenzione cycle, not to mention collections of essays in both these languages. It is, of course, good that Ferneyhough is widely recognised and valued, but it is taking the export effort a bit far that, to mention another symptom, there has been no premiere of a work of his in this country since 1982 (Carceri d’invenzione I, introduced by the London Sinfonietta).

As Fitch also observes, Ferneyhough’s scores, his way of expressing himself verbally and even the ‘new complexity’ label itself may all have played into the hands of a British anti-intellectualism. The seeds of discord, however, were sown before. For all the thoroughness of Fitch’s analytical chapters, her capsule biography – only ten pages long – is fascinating in revealing where Ferneyhough came from, which so much governed where he was likely to go. Here was a boy from the wrong side of the wrong tracks (a working-class area of Coventry), studying the wrong subject (trumpet teaching) at the wrong school (the Birmingham School of Music). He had some good instrumental instruction, but mostly, it seems, he taught himself, sufficiently to be able to write a symphony in B flat when he was sixteen and then rapidly recapitulate the development of music to Varèse and beyond. By the age of 20 he could turn out a wind sonatina that would have earned him a smile from Poulenc (anyone who doubts his command of basic skills, or his humour, should hear it). He had needed immense resolution and energy to get this far, and those qualities were unlikely to leave him after he had found his way, still in his early twenties, to his mature music.

When that music gained recognition – first of all thanks to Harry Halbreich’s presentation of several pieces at the 1974 Royan Festival – it was welcomed partly as a renewed modernist thrust at a time when minimalism and neo-Romanticism were on the up and the leaders of the previous generation were either producing very little (Boulez) or growing strange (Stockhausen). Fitch’s book, however, helps us consider to what extent Ferneyhough was and
is himself a postmodern phenomenon, partly in reconvening aspects of style from the past (admittedly only a decade or two in the past, but decades were long in those days), more so in re-injecting music with expressive force. This has to do, of course, with pitch contours and instrumental techniques on the edge of the achievable, but it is perhaps largely a question of dynamized time, the quality implied by his frequent use of such terms as 'energy' and 'vector'. His music moves through time – zooms, struggles, loops, but always moves, and usually in two or more directions and speeds at once – in ways foreign to, or only sporadic in, such totem ancestors as Kontra-Punkte or Le Marteau sans maître.

The matter of Ferneyhough in his age arises in Fitch’s book, but only here and there. It is highly interesting to learn, for example, of the attention he pays other composers, and by no means only in polemical contention with them, but from a sense of kinship at deep levels. One wonders what mileage there would be in a comparative study of, say, Ferneyhough’s Fourth Quartet (1989–90), with its words by Jackson Mac Low, and Reich’s Different Trains (1988), with its words by former Amtrak employees and others.

It is, however, and quite properly, in relative isolation that Fitch conducts her researches – in isolation, that is, from the larger musical world (no mention, therefore, of the Tudor machinations of a Maxwell Davies or Roger Smalley in connection with Ferneyhough’s appropriations from Christopher Tye), but certainly not from the wealth of material at the Sacher Foundation. This, as she notes, is invaluable, for ‘an examination of the sketches provides an insight into the precise relationship of … concepts [of style and expression] to the compositional process: a comparison of scores with the composer’s published writings alone often leaves more questions than it answers, particularly because of Ferneyhough’s sometimes gnomic writing style’ (p. 229).

Sketch studies run deeply through this book, and are illuminating on several levels. The sketches may have value just for the words they contain, since Ferneyhough is evidently less guarded when writing for himself than when addressing the world. ‘Empty, cold and desolate. Echoing spaces. Fearful and Exposed. (Like turning a painting round and seeing only dirty, featureless canvas and a primitive wood frame)’ (p. 172): this is what seems to be an early note on the first movement of the third quartet, a work for which Fitch finds other notations, in this case largely verbal, that allow her to show something of how the music was made and what it is. Those things are, of course, by no means identical, for, as we also learn, this is a composer who is quite capable of forgetting his process partway through and inventing another to carry him to the end, or cutting up a carefully plotted movement to place the fragments in a completely different order. The impressive sense of wholeness and uniqueness – the sense that keeps bringing us back to this music – may therefore be attained despite rather than through the conscious compositional procedures.

It is also reassuring to have the ‘gnomic’ character of Ferneyhough’s public writings acknowledged, a quality of embattled self-defence that may (though Fitch would disagree) be found in the music along with tearing wonder and tremendous invitations to open our experience. However, Fitch can herself be more obscure than need be, as when she tells us that the poems for Etudes transcendentes ‘were treated as a total reservoir from which the composer selected a number for use that tessellated best with his musical formal and expressive objectives’ (p. 246). Had she (or her editor) noted the misspelling here, perhaps the redundancies and other unnecessary locutions could have been eliminated too, and the point made more simply: Ferneyhough wanted a stock of poems from which to choose what he needed.

This may be an extreme case, but one senses throughout the book a writer conscientiously striving to remain within the terms set by the composer. The effect can be marvellous when she breaks free, as in this passage on Algebrak: ‘Ferneyhough creates shifting states, from gloomy (there is a wholesale change of mood at bars 12–18, and again attrition at 55–60, which so contrasts with the opening as to give the impression of linear energies suddenly becoming caught in molasses) to hyperexpressionistic’ (p. 119). Most of the time, though, she reins in the metaphors.

There is also some lack of narrative drive, arising from her decision to deal with the works in lengthy chapters by genre. The Carceri cycle and Shadowtime rightly have a chapter each, but this creates problems of its own, since Carceri d’invenzione IIa and Les Froissements des ailes de Gabriel, from Shadowtime, could equally be considered to have initiated and ended (so far) the group of chamber concertos considered in an earlier chapter. Especially since there is no list of works to which to refer, the chronology of the output may be unclear – and this is important, because, as Fitch’s non-chronological structure
obliges her to keep reiterating, Ferneyhough’s music exhibited shifts in 1980 (simpler notation) and again 20 years later (greater range of materials and references).

Nevertheless, this is a book of enormous value, plentifully and always usefully illustrated with music examples (except for the larger works, whose pages are impossible to scale down), and with a charming small portfolio of photographs (though I wonder if what is captioned ‘school play’ could not be more accurately described as representing a May Day celebration, with our hero, half a century before the premiere of Shadowtime, as King).

Paul Griffiths


Musicology has faced many challenges in recent decades, including critiques of canons and the exclusive focus upon ‘great composers’ and autonomous ‘works’, the centrality of Western art music and the privileging of authorial intent, as well as the increased interest on issues of class, gender, sexuality as they relate to music and its contexts, an increased focus upon musical performance and reception, and the effects of musical institutions upon music-making. Yet I would find it difficult to identify many ways by which such concerns have affected the worlds of composition and performance of contemporary scores, in which fields there continues a discourse mostly sealed off to wider concerns as might be raised by non-practitioners. The divide can be stark; the possibilities of constructive dialogue between those convinced that modernism represents a last-ditch manifestation of hegemonic ideologies of autonomy, which serve to perpetuate white male bourgeois privilege, and those who revere the music, writings and world-view of now elder figures such as Brian Ferneyhough or Helmut Lachenmann, are practically zero.

The history of recent German music is by no means simply one of a steady canonisation of masterworks within a framework of general assumptions of musical autonomy and the virtues of increasingly sophisticated compositional technique, whatever Richard Taruskin or others might like to claim. Rather, at least from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, this field was characterised by ferocious opposition between musical factions, replete with charged polemics, withering critiques and counter-critiques of all aspects of avant-garde ideology and work, and a plurality of approaches and attitudes towards music’s relationship to wider society and politics, to an extent not witnessed since the 1920s. Alastair Williams’s new history of German music since 1968 displays a surprisingly conservative approach and a relative lack of methodological reflection in the face of new musicological challenges – surprising given that many of these challenges are outlined in the same author’s Constructing Musicology.1 Williams does not match the dialectical oppositions within the field of enquiry with much of a dialectical sensibility of his own. The result is a ‘history’ which is in large measure a study of two ‘great men’, Lachenmann and Wolfgang Rihm, with other composers and issues viewed relative to their work and world-view.

Williams makes clear at the outset that he does not intend to cover ‘the full range of art, popular and traditional musics’ existing in Germany during the period in question, preferring instead to concentrate exclusively on the area of ‘new music’ (p. 2), but this term is never adequately defined.2 Williams alludes vaguely to some definitions by Nicolaus A. Huber and Carl Dahlhaus (p. 2), but finds neither really adequate for the range of music he wishes to cover, and does not provide any alternative workable criteria.3 Issues of institutions supporting and propagating this ‘new music’, the relationship of new music to other aspects of concert life, and reception of new music and the extent of its impact upon a wider German public, are either omitted entirely or dealt with in a perfunctory manner. And there are only

1 Alastair Williams, Constructing Musicology (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
2 The term Neue Musik gained most widespread currency in the 1919 essay of that name by Paul Bekker, reprinted in Bekker, Neue Musik: Dritter Band der Gesammelten Schriften (Stuttgart and Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1923), pp. 85–118, a polemic against the staid nature of German music at the time which nonetheless held up the work of Debussy, Schreker and Schoenberg as possible catalysts for change. Bekker’s article provoked a wave of writings in the next years from Hermann Scherchen, Walther Krug, Bartók, Paul Stefan, Schoenberg, and others. For a thorough overview of the history of the concept, see Christoph von Blumröder, Der Begriff „neue Musik“ im 20. Jahrhundert (Munich and Salzburg: Musikverlag Emil Katzschbacher, 1981).
3 In particular, he justifies the omission of all East German composers other than Reiner Bredemeyer and Friedrich Goldmann on the grounds that new music did not flourish in this country. But it is not clear why then Paul Dessau, Georg Katzer, Steffen Schlesiermacher and Jakob Ullmann, all of whose work makes of interesting comparison with that of composers in West Germany, should be excluded, yet Detlev Müller-Siemens or Manfred Trojahn, identified by Williams himself as associated with neo-romanticism, should.