

Ruhrtriennale from 2012 to 2014. McKeon is expansive, even a touch nostalgic, about a staging of Andriessen's *De Materie* and the length to which it goes to dislodge the work-concept. As Goebbels takes Andriessen's idea that 'music is always related to other music' to the extreme, McKeon explains how he is able to maintain consistency and coherence through an 'absent centre', in this case the continued backdrop of the Ruhr basin's post-industrial landscape and the huge, almost limitless warehouses of the festival (plus the range of encouraging yet hands-off support from relevant bureaucratic structures), allowing 'a limited set of possibilities from which a space for improvisation – for something unanticipated – [can] appear'.

McKeon's book is dense yet short, and thus an accessible way into concepts that are difficult to grasp. It also makes me a little sad, realising that the kinds of things made at the Ruhrtriennale (and the atmosphere which they are made in) are almost impossible to imagine happening in the UK any time soon. It could do with a finer copy-edit, and yet conversely could be a bit more expansive than its svelte 68 pages allows. Nonetheless, it's admirable in its concision, and I hope that composers who don't fit into the mould – sonically or philosophically – find some solace in it, and take some inspiration from the distinctive outlook of Goebbels. On page 46, McKeon includes a footnote from Goebbels' *Aesthetics of Absence*:¹ 'What we urgently need in addition to the repertoire theatres are laboratories for theatre and music-theatre, in which *everything* can be called into question'. Amen to that.

Hugh Morris

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wtRobina, *Technical Manifesto for the Deviant Sound Engineer*, independently published, 2021, 110 pp. £5.99.

wtRobina's *Technical Manifesto for the Deviant Sound Engineer* is an elegant, playful and vital piece of writing for engineers and performing musicians alike. One thing it is not, really, is (that) new. Having been published in 2021, I am frankly a little furious with anyone out there who was aware of this book and did not alert me to it. Now I am here to ensure that you cannot hold the same charge against me:

¹ Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theater*. Edited by Jane Collins. Translated by David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao (2015), p. 80.

over its bristling 110 pages, wtRobina ranges from succinct and unimpeachable explanations of the tools at sound engineers' disposal to rhetorical flourishes about the conditions of performance, to deep observations about the relationships between performing musicians and the engineers who connect them to an audience. If I were you, I would stop reading this review here and simply go read the book.

For those of you already ignoring my advice, I want to dwell briefly on how virtuosic a writer must be to define gain, equalisation, PFL, compressors, gates, auxiliary sends and output faders in *fewer than two A5 pages*. Such an author must be utterly clear, in their own mind, about what these tools are. Throughout the book – but especially in places like this – I was struck repeatedly by an altogether urgent desire to hear wtRobina at a mixing desk. That is because, on top of being virtuosic and clear, the writing is everywhere just so damned musical.

The first half of the book is largely the placement of such technicalities amid a taut, compelling argument that quickly comes to the point: with these tools, the engineer has everything they need to distort sound beyond all recognition. Yet while art has evolved beyond any desire for simple representation, the engineer works in an industry that demands that the engineer avoid abstraction and instead attempt to preserve some illusion of sonic 'reality':

To create an optical analogy for what the sound engineer is expected to achieve, imagine: *visual* elements travel to separate channels of a mixing desk – here comes the sun, a tree, the sky, the sea. . . The engineer collects the isolated elements, foreground and background, arranging them into a visual scene, taking care that the tree does not obscure the woman, and the sky is located as usual overhead. The house ought to be positioned on land, not in the sea, because absolute expectations have to be met. . .

Because the time it takes for the engineering process to occur is so short the 'action' (musical voice/action of the performer) and its 'replica' (the sound emerging from the audio system) are perceived as one and the same thing. But this is the crux of the matter: *they are not the same thing*:

The overarching point comes into focus: the sound engineer is fundamentally constrained by the *expectations* of both the performers and the audience. Whether it is the voice of an actor on stage, a band or a full orchestra, the engineer is expected to reproduce a preconception of the sound everyone else thinks they *ought* to hear:

But is it engineering, or is it, in fact, art? . . . Performers behave as though the sound-person is fixing their

boiler. The boiler works when hot water is required to run from a tap; that is the expectation. A guitarist opens the tap of their instrument expecting the sound they feel from their amplifier to be precisely reproduced in the auditorium. Perhaps a little hotter. That *does* seem like an act of engineering.

In this light, deviations and/or flaws in that sound become a critical error because they highlight the presence of the audio system and point out that, in fact, we are engaging in a sleight of hand: the professional sound engineer is *always* manipulating the sound. wtRobina gives an insightful, penetrating discussion of how important Reverb is to this work, and how the best engineers use this part of the illusion to actually draw audiences *into* an event.

Embedded in but (fairly, I think) mostly outside the scope of the discussion here are the roles of celebrity and money in all this. The PA system might *seem* like a neutral player, but it is built around capitalist success stories. It has developed along lines that allow it to amplify the experience of those attending sporting events, bathe massive crowds in the words of mega-preachers and bring ever larger audiences into a grander but also more intimate contact with celebrity musicians on stage. Take the current *Eras* tour as one example: it is necessary and important to the entire idea of concerts like this that each individual audience member really believes that they have heard Taylor Swift herself. Both the intimacy and grandeur of the experience rest in the hands of the sound engineer: Detectable plate-reverb, overaggressive de-essing, feedback or audible auto-tune would not be a sculpting of sound but the destruction of an entire – partially fictional – universe.

I found myself circling back to this imbalance of power in the system, especially in economically high-stakes conditions. It is – even in avant-garde circles – quite difficult to find instances of sound engineers truly embedded in a collaborative creative process, because the sound system is just so powerful. We are no strangers to the problems that arise in the concentration of power when musicians gather, but even a conductor cannot – at the push of a button – forcefully silence every other musician on stage, turn a bassoon into an electric guitar or blow the roof off with a sudden scream of violent feedback.

wtRobina argues that “Engineers need to form bands, now, which they own from the console, located in the audience.” I am not so sure. There are surely some fantastic sound engineers out there who could make amazing things out of the opportunity, but it is hard to imagine that the current culture and economic conditions would

– over time – allow them to become anything more than glorified DJs.

Compared to this anarchic *dénouement*, for me the more exciting answer to wtRobina’s question – is it possible to be an avant-garde sound engineer? – is yes, so long as you have the right collaborators and conditions. And though we, in new music, have very little economic or celebrity power, we have exactly such collaborators and conditions available. wtRobina has led me quite effortlessly to the conclusion that it should be normal for any ensemble to have a sound engineer as an *artistic* member of the group. Sometimes this person will be responding to the needs of a composer, or another musician, but they should be there as a recognised performer, inputting and participating in the making of things. Playing the mixing desk as the musical instrument it is. Sculpting the sound. Painting the air. Just like the rest of us.

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The Cambridge Companion to Serialism, ed. Martin Iddon, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 418 pp. £29.99.

Joseph N. Straus, *The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis, Thirty-Three Graphic Analyses*, Oxford University Press, 2022, 230 pp. £64.00.

The Cambridge Companion to Serialism takes a big-tent approach to discussing its topic. Serialism impacted and was impacted over time by notable composers and the evolution of their music, increased technical resources in electronic music and the development of music festivals that allowed sharing of music and ideas, Darmstadt the earliest and most prominent among them. Moreover, serialism waxed and waned in various geographies at different times, sometimes for aesthetic and polemical reasons, and often for political ones. Readers may be surprised by some of the contents of the *Cambridge Companion* and their connections to serialism, but the authors, for the most part, make compelling arguments for inclusion rather than exclusivity.

The book is divided into four sections, ‘Contexts I’, ‘Composers’, ‘Geographies’ and ‘Contexts II’. Editor Martin Iddon has commissioned some of the most prominent scholars