

## BOOKS

Kyle Motl, *Bells Plucked from Air: A Guide to (Mostly) Pizzicato Harmonic Techniques for the Double Bass*, Bandcamp, \$26.

The title of this book is revealing of its content: romantic, humorous, practical, three attributes to be highly valued (and all too rarely found!) in the literature of modern instrumental techniques.

Kyle Motl's assertion in the text's introduction that the double bass is 'particularly suited' to performing harmonics is certainly true; the string properties relative to pitch and body length, non-linear between members of the violin and viol family (from the latter of which the double bass descends), favour the scope and clarity of harmonics on the double bass compared to the cello, and the latter compared to the viola and violin. As a cellist researching and performing harmonics and multiphonics, I have long been envious of the expanded harmonic possibilities on the double bass, and of the existence of so many performer -champions of such techniques: Stefano Scodanibbio's ingeniously inventive improvisations and compositions, Bertram Turetsky's early guidebook for performers and composers,<sup>1</sup> Mark Dresser's pedagogical texts,<sup>2</sup> Håkon Thelin and Knut Guettler's parallel physical and musical analysis of multiphonics,<sup>3</sup> and informal documentation by a myriad of performers – see, for example, Florentin Ginot on the Ensemble MusikFabrik You Tube channel.<sup>4</sup> And yet, I consider this literature far from saturated, and welcome Motl's contribution; moreover, I hope that it will elicit not only musical activity, but also other guidebooks, études and academic research. The book's core value is in its open-minded approach and clever musical examples that allow performers to enjoy

discovering harmonics on their instrument, and to develop their technique according to their personal musical taste and framework. The book comprises simple physical explanations and diagrams, technical descriptions, short musical exercises, contrasting examples from the literature, two transcriptions (Ortiz and Scarlatti) and two études by the author.

Motl has a gift for constructing clear explanations and inventing musical examples– for example, in presenting two alternate fingerings (one intuitive, the other less so) to play the same mixolydian scale, or a self-proclaimed 'ridiculous' example of using harmonics to play a four-octave scale without departing from first position – as perfect demonstrations of the accompanying technical text, or in showing how the 21st harmonic can be found by touching the dual nodes of the 3rd and 7th harmonics. He is also careful, intuitive and clear on the physics of harmonics. He is able to describe phenomena in musical terms while staying true to physical fact (a pitfall of other texts in the literature) – for example, the phenomenon of lower harmonics having more 'nodal space' ('wiggle room' in the left hand) than their higher counterparts, or higher harmonics 'jumping out' and destabilising lower ones. He demonstrates the departure of harmonic nodal positions from semitonal equally tempered stopped string positions without going into the mathematics but nonetheless giving musicians a clear overview of the theory. Open questions are also hinted at: the influence of string type and string age, the change in sound quality for different choices of touched node (in a theoretical string equal, in a real string more complex) and the influence of bowing/plucking position. Here, enough information is presented to intrigue musicians and to make physics-oriented minds curious (after all, there are still many avenues for fruitful physical research into stringed instruments), and yet the text is never overloaded. Nonetheless, Motl does not pander to musicians: he convincingly explains why learning harmonics by number and associating these with positions on the fingerboard is more effective than learning harmonic positions relative to equally tempered stopped pitches.

<sup>1</sup> Bertram Turetzky, *The Contemporary Contrabass* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Dresser, 'Double Bass Multiphonics', *The Strad*, 120, no. 1434 (2009), pp. 72–75.

<sup>3</sup> Knut Guettler and Håkon Thelin, 'Bowed-String Multiphonics Analyzed by Use of Impulse Response and the Poisson Summation Formula', *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 131, no. 1 (2012), pp. 766–72.

<sup>4</sup> Florentin Ginot, 'On Harmonic Pizzos on the Double Bass with Florentin Ginot', 13 June 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2RHu3buSh4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2RHu3buSh4) (accessed 31 May 2023).

Discussing his transcriptions, Motl describes Bert Turetzky giving him the task of making pizzicato arrangements of early musical works. I am reminded of Turetzky's lament that 'little or no heed'<sup>5</sup> was paid to Berlioz's proclamation: 'The study of the violin is incomplete. Pupils are not taught pizzicato.'<sup>6</sup> In a clear demonstration of pedagogy in action, this is no longer the case. Motl invents exercises to work on the balance between plucked open strings, stopped strings and harmonics, which presents string players with subtle physical-intuitive challenges; indeed, the disparity between relative and actual dynamics in the case of pizzicato is large, and composers' use of prescribed or described notation is still often unclear. Motl also uses harmonics as a means of working on diverse aspects of technique – for example, polyrhythms using two-handed 'harp' harmonics, or just intonation in sequences of the 4th, 5th and 6th artificial harmonics over chromatically ascending stopped fundamentals ('more fun'). In this sense, the aim he sets out in the introduction of improving 'expressivity, musicianship, listening... and technique' is met. I have discussed inhibitory terminology and overly personalised technique books hampering technical progress.<sup>7</sup> Motl seems to share these concerns, arguing convincingly that 'extended technique' is an 'othering' term, and taking seriously his intention to appeal to double bassists from diverse backgrounds: providing material for improvisation, describing just intonation in cents, including many exercises in modal scales or triadic patterns and assimilating jazz, free improvisation and early music into his études.

In one of Motl's études, he differentiates between 'subtle' and 'clear' multiphonics. I recognise this distinction and was excited to see it notated, but in this case I missed the clear explanations that I had become used to. The tips for right-hand playing in multiphonics are useful, but descriptions of the pitch content, or a reference to where one might find such information<sup>8</sup>

were lacking. While most of the language is both precise and informal, some aspects could have been cleaned up with a final edit – for example, the confusion generated when discussing bow weight and weighting (relative loudness) of a partial within a sound could easily have been resolved by referring to bow pressure, as is more conventional. Finally, short videos to demonstrate each of the examples could be a real asset to this textbook.

In summary, Motl has created a book that is technically challenging, physically accurate, pedagogically sound and musically non-partisan, an achievement indeed, and a model for future work.

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Kerry O'Brien and William Robin, eds, *On Minimalism: Documenting a Musical Movement*, University of California Press, 2023, 470pp. £49.25.

In many ways this is a marvellous book: it presents a documentary history not just of minimalist music but also of many other sorts of musical production that might be thought to relate to minimalism. There are 21 chapters, each opening with a brief introduction – usually no more than a paragraph or two – by the book's editors, Kerry O'Brien and Will Robin, before we are presented with a series of extended passages from existing sources. Chapter Ten, for example, is about 'The New Downtown', and the editors' introductory paragraphs usher us into an exchange of views between Rhys Chatham and Peter Gordon from the November 1978 issue of *Ear Magazine*; later we can read Lee Ranaldo's memories of his first encounter with Chatham's *Guitar Trio*, from an article published in *The Wire* in 2000.

The chapters move, more or less chronologically, from 'Improvisation and Experimentation' around 1960 – accounts of minimalism's various origin myths – to a retrospective survey of 'Futures', running from 2006 to 2021. There is a further division of the book into three parts: the eight chapters of Part One go from the beginnings to Reich and Glass's consolidation of their versions of minimalism in the first half of the 1970s; the ten chapters of Part Two cover minimalism's ascendancy after 1976 and its offshoots; Part Three consists of three more reflective, speculative chapters.

<sup>5</sup> Turetzky, *The Contemporary Contrabass*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hector Berlioz and Hugh Macdonald, *Berlioz's Orchestration Treatise: A Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Fallowfield, 'Rethinking Instrumental Technique: A Case Study in String Multiphonics', in *Rethinking the Musical Instrument*, ed. M. Dogantan-Dack (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022), pp. 45–69.

<sup>8</sup> Dresser, 'Double Bass Multiphonics', pp. 72–75; Guettler and Thelin, 'Bowed-String Multiphonics', pp. 766–72; C. J. Walter, 'Multiphonics on Vibrating Strings', *Tempo*, 74, no. 291 (2020), pp. 7–23; Ellen Fallowfield, 'Cello Multiphonics: Technical and Musical Parameters', *Tempo*, 74, no. 291 (2020), pp. 51–69.