

# Being About Music

## TRACING THE AMERICAN POST-WAR MUSICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

by jef chippewa

*Being About Music* (BAM) is a collection of texts written by Benjamin Boretz and J.K. Randall between 1960 and 2003, taking on a large range of subjects in a multitude of formats: book and CD reviews, analyses and socio-musical commentary, text compositions, journal entries, course descriptions and more. Most of the texts were previously published in journals and magazines such as *The Nation*, *Journal of Music Theory*, *The Open Space Magazine* and *Perspectives of New Music* (PNM). As Boretz is one of its co-founders, and both are veteran contributors, it is not surprising that more than half of the previously-published texts first appeared in PNM.

Published by Open Space in two volumes, BAM presents the reader with an overview of the evolution of musical thinking which occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century via the voices of two engaged authors and practitioners of New Music. Initially, the tone and content somewhat resembles those of articles written in the same time period by European authors, but a distinctly American flavour gradually becomes evident in many of the articles as the authors struggle, on the one hand, to escape what they feel to be the excessively rigid confines of European Art Music, and on the other, to actually define those aspects of the American musical identity which could possibly justify a distinction from the European musical identity.

The articles are predominantly concerned with instrumental music issues, although the practices and implications of electronic music are not entirely ignored. Too often such articles concentrate so intensively on the purely technological aspects of electroacoustic or computer music that, due to the pace at which the technologies evolve, the articles, in direct proportion to the technologies they articulate, become obsolete. With a more detached perspective on the impact the use of various electroacoustic technologies has made on musical thinking and practice – and vice versa – the BAM articles considering electronics continue to have relevance today, with Randall's report on the potential of the Music IV computer at Princeton (1965) being perhaps the single exception (it nevertheless holds historical and musicological interest).

### **Anti-Europeanism**

Some of the specific and general reasons for the increasing outrage towards and aggressive disengagement from the European Musical Institution in the early PNM articles are elucidated in the edited transcript of an informal discussion between Arthur Berger and PNM co-founder Boretz ("A Conversation about Perspectives," 1987). Unfortunately, the clarity of thought on such issues apparent in this article is overshadowed by typically unfocussed disdain elsewhere in the collection, which, in its most vulgar excesses allows contemptuous comments such as "Germanoid bullshit" (an extract occupying a single line in a PhD thesis for which Randall gave a report to The Graduate School of Princeton University in 1991).

It is truly unfortunate that a potentially relevant critique of the European domination of the Western post-war musical scene so often degenerates into a sort of rant rather than a cultivated and poignant reflection: the issues themselves are significant and merit reflection as much today as they did when the articles were originally written. But arguments – entirely lacking in contextualisation or references – against the "self-important, high-seriousness" nature of European music are not terribly convincing when throughout the collection we encounter equally generic, self-aggrandizing commentary and blind patriotism to the American New Music milieu, the essence of which is never

fully defined. The insufficiencies of Boretz' and Randall's argumentations against European practices, and their avoidance of virtually any articulation of, or credible reflection upon the inherent problematics, unjustly reinforce the misunderstandings the American reader might have regarding the European New Music milieu, and may even serve to incite further fear; the lack of clear insight into what constitutes an inherently American practice – what is specific to the American New Music cultural identity – can only reinforce the American composers' anxious suspicions that their European counterparts view them as cultural dilettantes.

Such articles could hold great potential in ruminating the more general question of cultural heritage (which, in my view, is equally problematic to the European and North American New Music composer). The problem is far more complex than the authors seem to want to admit and, in the end, their unabated insistence that American Music is fundamentally different than European Music remains nothing but a vague and even unfounded accusation, predicated essentially on the idea – untested, unproven and unjustified in BAM – that, well, it is just plain different. To consider such issues in more than a superficial and even meaningless manner, the authors might have more fully explored and better articulated the implications and intentions of those practices to which they are so vehemently opposed, in order to justify and elucidate claims to the inherent differences of the two supposedly exclusive poles of creative activity. Conscious ignorance of the nature of the “other” does not advance anyone's comprehension of the complex problems of musical identity and cultural heritage, and it certainly does not bring us to any meaningful conclusions.

Instead of contributing to a generalised amelioration in comprehending the complexities of post-war New Music (on both sides of the Atlantic!), the intellectual downsizing of the authors regarding these matters leads to such a radical simplification of the Europeans' ideas and work that they can utterly ignore the implications of the entire post-war European musical context. Having contemptuously destroyed any potential interest the reader might have in the writings or compositions of their European counterparts (PNM in particular has long been one of the main reference publications in the North American New Music community), the writers effectively avoid any consideration of American New Music works within the larger traditions of Western Music, and, more importantly, evade any comparison of their own practices and writings to those of their European counterparts. Such a display of conscious ignorance only serves to reinforce the myth of independence of American New Music.

### **Complexity of Language vs. Complexity of Thought**

The brevity and simplicity of some of the reflections in BAM is sometimes disappointing, not specifically for their frugality but rather because the modest character of their content is not reflected in their form. The second of “Three Lectures to Scientists” (Randall, 1966), an otherwise lucid and pertinent critique of scientific analysis and research of artistic matters with complete disregard to the intricacies of their relation to the surrounding context, could be reduced by about half without denying the author ample space in which to make his self-avowed “predictably brief and anti-climactic” point. Moreover, it would allow him to do so in a far more concentrated and focussed – not to mention convincing – manner. If textual excess is already a problem with an article of no more than three and a half pages, the problem becomes more acute in more generous and unnecessarily convoluted texts in which the underlying ideas are in fact no more perplexing than in the second Lecture. Admittedly, when reflecting upon and articulating complex issues, it may be difficult for an author to avoid elaborate grammatical structures and intricate argumentation, but when the paring down of a text to its essential points exposes important deficiencies and considerable simplicity of the reflections contained therein, structural complexity may be seen to serve justification of its own existence and the concealment of the author's lack of fundamental and profound mastery of truly complex conceptual matters.

*Being About Music* would certainly have benefitted from having a third editor who was not also one of the authors. The potency and general reading interest of the collection as a whole would be more noteworthy, if the length of some of the articles had been condensed to restrain their textual excesses, and if the number of articles in the collection had been selectively reduced. I am not suggesting that it should have been more thematically restrained: the diversity of the topics and of writing styles is in fact of great interest, and despite the fact that they occasionally suffered inadequate development at the time of their writing, many of the issues covered in the collection (spanning almost half a century) remain relevant today. It is however difficult to comprehend, for example, what relevance Randall's "Statement to the New Jersey State Environment Committee" (1993) concerning a wildlife issue has to a collection of articles compiled under the title *Being About Music*.

It should however be noted that an utterly convincing purpose can in fact be discerned periodically through Randall's otherwise opaque writing. In the central section of "Electronic Music and Musical Tradition" (1968), through a series of statements, rebuttals and counter-rebuttals, he deliberates the inherently problematic terminology and definitions of "musical tradition" and "piano music" in a refreshingly intense and concentrated manner. Yet this section is preceded by a pedantic "instructive aural exercise" for the electronic music initiate, and before any attempt at conclusiveness or resolution appears, the sober deliberations are abruptly abandoned in favour of a "personal anecdote partly to plug [his] composition," wherein a comparison of his *Lyric Variations for Violin and Computer* and Mozart's last piano concerto (K.595 in B $\flat$ ) is made to close the article. The comparison concerns no more than the most superficial resemblances of the compositions, most notably "an initial decision to use both the [solo instrument] and the [orchestra/electronics] for long stretches alone". Such an association is not only incredibly forced, but even nonsensical: given the pre-determination of certain aspects of form, once Mozart had committed to writing a piano concerto, there was quite obviously no "decision" to be made whether or not to compose solo piano and tutti passages. In the wake of a succinct reflection upon musical tradition, his over-confident self-referential commentary comes across as little more than an attempt to vicariously claim a position for *Lyric Variations* in the Western musical canon. And even this fails, because instead of clarifying aspects of his work which could possibly be used to justify such an association, he goes on to elucidate how two seemingly disparate sonic entities (solo and orchestral passages) are integrated... in Mozart's work.

## Conclusion

Despite its glaring inconsistencies of style, presentation (there are close to fifty different typefaces used throughout the collection<sup>1</sup>) and content – radical commentary (the scathing condemnation of Persichetti's *Twentieth Century Harmony* is a fun read) through American inferiority complex in the form of tirades against European music through text compositions through obtuse intellectual poetic masturbations – *Being About Music* can nonetheless provide the reader with a valuable resource which articulates an historical survey of the constantly changing issues concerning New Music (in particular, American) since the 1960s, as expressed by two practitioners and proponents of a particular subset of the larger – international – New Music milieu.

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<sup>1</sup> Had there been more attention to assuring general typographical consistency in the collection (a fundamental practice in professional publishing), the authors might have developed a certain maturity and artistic effectiveness in their otherwise vulgar experiments in the "creative" use of typography.