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Liam Cagney, *Gérard Grisey and Spectral Music: Composition in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), xvi + 297pp.

I'd be prepared to have small flutter on the wager that, if I were to take a straw poll amongst those of us who write about new music, most would agree that, on opening a new book, the thought, 'Oh, isn't this interesting! I'm glad *somebody* has written this', is more common than the thought, 'I wish *I'd* written this'. This volume is, I think, the exception: I would have loved to have written it, though I'm also enormously grateful that Cagney has actually done so. This may not be all that surprising: anyone who's been paying attention to the various shorter Grisey-focussed essays that Cagney's produced over the past few years will have been expecting that the book, when it came, was going to be excellent. And so it proves.

The first large portion of the text is an account of the first, longish period of the development of Grisey's approach, from his youth through to *D'eau et de pierre* (1972). Though this early music has been overshadowed by the beginning of *Les Espaces Acoustiques* (1974–85) with *Périodes* (1974), Cagney convincingly shows that it already contains in embryo a great many of the key elements of his mature style, persuasively arguing for the musics from which they derive. Those distinct, repeated musical figures, which undergo transformation as they repeat, are Grisey's interpretation of Messiaen's *personnages sonores*. The characteristic behaviours they seem to enact in undertaking those transformations are analogous to Xenakis's *métaboles*, possessing a sort of interiorised metabolism, which makes some forms of change statistically likely and others unlikely.

Cagney insists too that the case that spectralism was conceived in opposition to serialism—an approach with a natural basis rather than a synthetic one—is, at best, an oversimplification. The obvious importance for Grisey of the Stockhausen who stressed the ways in which what appear to be discrete musical parameters (rhythm, pitch, timbre) exhibit points of liminality at which they fold into one another always seemed to make this claim implausible. Cagney adduces further that Grisey's first use of a proto-spectral chord seems to derive directly from resonance chords in Boulez's *Don* (1962). Boulez's 'prismatic' thought, too, is fairly explicitly deployed both in *Dérives* (1973–74) and in *Périodes*. Perhaps less expected—but quite audible when listening to, say, Éloy's *Kâmakalâ* (1971)—is the case Cagney makes for the importance of Jean-Claude Éloy in Grisey's imaginarium, not least since Éloy had learned similar lessons from Boulez.

Though Cagney is largely leery of psychoanalytic speculation, he goes a little further in the first chapter of the text, providing snapshots of Grisey's persistent concerns with the themes of religion and spirituality, death and transience, and music, through a sort of ongoing, quasi-Proustian self-narration of his life. His closeness to his mother and grandmother, too, recalls Proust's narrator: the whole text is prefaced by an extract from *The Captive* (1923) which concerns what art reveals, "extériorisant dans les couleurs du spectre", and is, though Cagney does not reveal the subtlety to the reader, concerned with the (imagined) Vinteuil septet, an echo of the forces of *Périodes*

Cagney marshals these contexts in support of the sense that Grisey was concerned with a particular relationship between music and the immediate, almost metonymized in his own instrument, the accordion, which never quite escapes—and perhaps never quite wants to escape—its vernacular connotations. The accordion, too, seems sometimes to stand for Grisey's difference from his colleagues in Messiaen's composition class: Grisey's background

provincial lower middle class, as opposed to the artistic family from which Tristan Murail hailed, or Michaël Levinas's imposing philosopher father; Murail's instrument was the Ondes martenot, beloved of Messiaen, Levinas's practically aristocratic, the piano; perhaps most tellingly, Grisey *wanted* (in, to my mind, winningly chippy fashion) to be a composer, while Murail and Levinas, at least in public, were sure to be much more insouciant about their prospects.

None of this context denies—Cagney does not seek to—nor takes away from the impact on Grisey of hearing *Stimmung* at Darmstadt in 1972 (though he almost certainly already knew the piece), nor of his encounters with Scelsi, but it refigures these well-known events as confirmatory rather than catalytic. The second section of the book deals, in fact, largely with more familiar elements of the narrative but, in each case, these seem transformed by having been placed in this richer, more historically grounded context. At the same time, Cagney pans back from Grisey to the broader *courant spectral*, having the effect that sometimes the argument is forced to infer links that the record as such does not provide concrete evidence for: Hugues Dufourt's knowledge of Risset acts a kind of suggestive hinge for the sorts of links this has to Grisey's work, for instance. There is, by necessity, a sort of loss of detail in this, at least as far as Grisey is concerned, though there is much to compensate, including the best accounts to date—so far as I'm aware—of the compositional experience of the Villa Medici (where Grisey and Murail, with overlapping stays there, came to know one another better than they had in Paris), Grisey's actual work on musical acoustics with Émile Leipp and, vitally, with Michèle Castellengo (with whom he undertook more systematic sonographic analysis of a range of instruments), and the history of the ensemble L'itinéraire, both in its initial and more established phases.

It is with L'itinéraire, above all, that an opposition to Boulez might be sensed, if more institutional than musical, in an environment in which it seemed that nothing would get premiered without Boulez's say so. Grisey was not, mind you, a member of L'itinéraire, though the ensemble played a great deal of his music (including the premiere of *Périodes*, of which Cagney gives an exemplary account). Perhaps Grisey didn't want to sign up, as Cagney proposes, for fear of offending Boulez: again, I recall, that Grisey had no back-up plan if composition didn't work out. But his wariness of being part of *that* collective is set—again rather neatly, but without too much leading of the reader—against Grisey's attempts to get (particularly) Dufourt and Murail to agree with him on a sort of common aesthetic and technical position which they could call *musique liminale*. If they defined it clearly, Grisey hoped, they might prevent some musicologist or other giving them a name they didn't want (like spectralism, a term Dufourt for his part had dropped almost as soon as he'd coined it) and insisting that it could be defined in some narrow technical way (like the use of instrumental synthesis). Perhaps this is where Cagney's teleology feels most plausible: there was, as Murail said, an inevitability to the failure of Grisey's efforts, and the sophistication of Cagney's disentangling of the threads that led to that sort of oversimplified history of spectralism is an important starting point for a correction of the record.

Notwithstanding my enthusiasm, there are certainly imperfections, or at any rate compromises, if largely ones which are probably unavoidable artifacts of the approach taken. The book is an account of the formation of spectral approach and aesthetic, with Grisey's role in that centred. As such, the text more or less comes to a halt at the point at which it becomes possible concretely to speak of something called spectralism, which Cagney takes to happen around about 1982. As such, a reader hoping for detailed exegeses of, say, *Talea* (1986), *Le noir de l'étoile* (1989–90), *Vortex temporum* (1994–96), or perennial favourite

Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil (1997–98) will be disappointed. Equally, as the text moves towards the broader topic of spectral music in France, the musical detail lessens. This means that, though mentioned, pieces like Dufourt's *Saturne* (1978–79), Murail's *Sables* (1975), *Mémoire-erosion* (1976), or *Gondwana* (1980), and Levinas's *Appels* (1974) or the *Concerto pour une piano-espace n° 2* (1980) perhaps don't receive the full treatment they might deserve if this were a book purely about French spectral music's establishment as a force in new music.

There are tantalising, but necessarily un(der)developed hints of the importance for the broader history of what turned out to be spectralism (no geographic qualifier) of the impact of Romanian spectral music—in mind, perhaps, of that encounter with Octavian Nemescu's *Concentric* (1968–69) at Darmstadt in 1972, when French approaches were much more nascent—as well as the significance of Jean-Claude Risset's broader work at Bell Labs, a genealogy which embraces the spectral music of James Tenney, as well as the interrelationships between composers like Grisey and the Oeldorf Group of composers: for a time, as Cagney makes clear, Jens-Peter Ostendorf and Mesias Maiguashca at least were regarded and regarded themselves as very much part of what would become the *courant spectral*. It's no criticism of Cagney to that he doesn't treat these aspects as fully as they deserve: rather it points to how much work remains to be undertaken around these histories, especially in terms of the international dimensions of the spectral.

It's unlikely to have escaped your notice that books about Grisey are, it turns out, like buses, in that you, like me, may have been waiting ages for one, and now, all of a sudden, there are two out: Jeffrey Arlo Brown's *The Life and Music of Gérard Grisey: Delirium and Form* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2023) came out half a year or so before the present volume. They're both, at least in their hardback editions, pretty pricey, so if you're in the market for a Grisey book, it's at least fairly likely that you're only going to want to buy one. Those looking for psychological insights into Grisey's human tics and foibles will not find them in Cagney: he largely lets Grisey's words be interpreted by their historical, cultural, and musical contexts. Brown's account spends much more time drawing links between Grisey's private life and his public work, and does so highly successfully: it's an excellent biography and I'm very glad that it's in the world. By contrast, Cagney's is finally an intellectual history of the formation of (French) spectral music, for the most part through the lens of arguably its most musically significant practitioner, in which spectralism remains both wholly familiar and entirely transformed by the depth of Cagney's reading of its genealogies. In this sense, I think it should signal a shift in the depth in and rigour with which spectralism is dealt with in English-language commentary. If I *had* written it, I reckon I'd be justified in thinking I'd done something really worthwhile: I hope that's just how Cagney feels and that he goes on to tell more of the stories he can only touch on here or inspires others to tell them. For people interested in new music, this is a genuinely significant book.