

Judith Michelle Crispin, *The Esoteric Musical Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni and its Reinvigoration in the Music of Larry Sitsky: The Operas Doktor Faust and The Golem*

Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007

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Reviewed by Patricia Shaw

Anyone interested in Australian contemporary music is heartened by the addition of a good book to the relatively limited scholarly literature, especially a book on such a prolific and influential composer as Larry Sitsky. Sadly, there will not be much rejoicing at the publication of Judith Crispin's *The Esoteric Musical Tradition*.

This book is a reprint of the dissertation from the author's doctorate in composition completed at Australian National University in 2003. Crispin's topic—tracing the interest in mysticism that connects Busoni, via his students Egon Petri and Winifred Burston, to their student Sitsky—is a potentially interesting one, and her thesis that these ideas are encoded in the operas mentioned in the title (amongst other works) is defensible. However, there are numerous fundamental problems with the author's approach that make her arguments and conclusions unconvincing. These stem from the fact that Sitsky was simultaneously her composition teacher, dissertation supervisor and subject of study and, as is quite clear from Sitsky's preface (p. ii), Crispin is far more acolyte than scholar. Her work reveals the problem of using only the subject's own point of view as the basis for research: a distinct lack of the distance and objectivity needed to investigate, interrogate and critique the ideas underlying the topic.

Crispin seems to agree with Sitsky's views on everything, beginning with his view of musical scholarship, much of which he dismisses as 'a sort of forensic science' that investigates the trivial and uncovers only the obvious (p. ii). Her own work abounds in contradictions, for example, her complaining about the elitism of musical scholarship (p. 9) while discussing an esoteric tradition which is, as she herself points out, quite deliberately elitist. She bemoans the 'disgraceful paucity of secondary literature about Larry Sitsky and his music' (p. 3) and the 'lamentable state of Sitsky scholarship' (p. 144), while simultaneously railing against the academic establishment that produces good scholarship on Australian music. Crispin also does not seem to realise that Sitsky is one of the most written-about Australian composers, after Grainger and Sculthorpe; as for the quality of the scholarship, it is as variable as it is for any subject, especially a living one.

Crispin acknowledges value in some scholars' work; for example, she praises Lawrence Whiffin's structural and serial analysis of Sitsky's *Music in the Mirabell Garden* (p. 4). However, she complains that Whiffin's paper has not been reproduced since its original appearance in *Musicology Australia* 10 (1987), 'although it most certainly should have been,' as if the organ of Australian musicology's national organisation were not a prominent and easily available source. Crispin provides no evidence of having consulted the extended version of Whiffin's analysis in his 1982 MMus thesis, completed at the University of Melbourne, and there are other examples of an apparent failure to follow up relevant sources, especially musical ones.

Rather puzzling is her dismissal of the 1997 Greenwood Press bio-bibliography of Sitsky—of which I am, with Robyn Holmes and Peter Campbell, one of the authors—as ‘a somewhat premature collection of biographical anecdotes and an incomplete list of works’ (p. 3). By 1992, when the book was first proposed to the publisher with Sitsky’s support,¹ the composer was already an elder statesman of Australian music; a biography was thus well overdue, rather than premature, and Greenwood Press allowed forty-nine pages for one, much longer than usual in this series, because of the lack of any other substantial biography. Our work made extensive use of primary sources, including interviews with the composer, and amounts to far more than a series of anecdotes. This description could be applied to Jim Cotter’s *Sitsky: Conversations with the Composer* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2004), but Crispin believes this ‘has been unfairly criticised as insufficiently musicological’ (p. 4) just because it makes no reference to secondary literature. As for the list of works in the bio-bibliography, the highly detailed, indexed and cross-referenced bibliography, discography, lists of works and writings includes everything produced up to the time the book was sent to the publisher, including sketches and incomplete works.² The lists are only incomplete insofar as the prolific Sitsky has produced much more since 1997. Crispin’s updating of them for her Appendix 1, the presence of which is in no way relevant to *The Esoteric Musical Tradition*, contains less information than is available from the Australian Music Centre catalogue.

In her treatment of the central materials on esoteric traditions—most of which are not actually musical ones—Crispin seems to share Sitsky’s paranoid-sounding grievance that the occult is not treated seriously enough by academia (p. iii), with no consideration of why scholars might treat such a subject with caution, if not scepticism. A case in point is her discussion of Sitsky’s interest in Rosemary Brown (1916–2001), the London housewife who ‘received’ music written posthumously by famous composers. Sitsky believed her to be genuine; there is extensive correspondence between them from 1978 onwards—five folders in the National Library of Australia Sitsky archive,³ not ‘several boxes’ as Crispin claims—and Sitsky has given numerous lecture-recitals and concerts of her music. However, while Brown has attracted considerable attention and interest, especially in the 1960s and 1970s,⁴ she has long been widely

¹ Sitsky was, hardly surprisingly, very keen on the idea of a substantial book on his work, and had an existing connection with Greenwood Press, who had published his *Busoni and the Piano* (1986) and *The Classical Reproducing Piano Roll* (1990).

² All of Sitsky’s papers have been archived at the National Library of Australia (MS5630) or are still in the composer’s possession. See Shaw and Campbell, “The Larry Sitsky Archives: Seeking Pearls in a Maggie’s Nest,” *Voices: Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia* 5.1 (Autumn 1995): 47–60, and Shaw, “Documenting Sitsky’s Life,” *Newsletter of the Centre for Studies in Australian Music* 6 (Dec. 1997): 1–2. Sitsky provided manuscript copies of every one of his completed scores, and all his sketches; he also reviewed the works list himself so that nothing would be missed.

³ MS5630 Box 1 Folder 6, Box 12 Folder 118, Box 31 Folder 241, Box 48 Folder 345 and Box 65 Folder 451.

⁴ Brown’s first memoir, *Unfinished Symphonies: Voices from the Beyond* (London: Souvenir Press, 1971) was widely available in the 1970s through several reputable publishers, and she published a second volume, *Immortals at My Elbow*, in 1974. Brown also found music publishers, principally Basil Ramsey, willing to bring out volumes of works ‘dictated’ to her by Chopin, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, Rachmaninov, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt; these appeared between 1974 and 1981. Notable musicians to have expressed faith in Brown, apart from Sitsky, include the British composers Richard Rodney Bennett and Ian Parrott; the latter’s writings include *The Music of Rosemary Brown* (London: Regency, 1978), as well as monographs on other composers with links to the occult, Peter Warlock and Cyril Scott.

considered a fraud,⁵ as Crispin could easily have discovered if she had consulted sources other than Brown's two volumes of memoirs, and Sitsky.

While Crispin begins by acknowledging that Brown 'claimed to have channelled more than twenty deceased composers' (p. 95; my emphasis), she then proceeds to a credulous discussion of Sitsky's interest in Brown, and particularly in the possibility of making 'contact' with Busoni through her. Brown eventually wrote on 5 July 1995: 'I have had some contact ... but so far I have had no music from him' (letter cited on page 96), but Crispin was unable to elicit any further information from Sitsky on the subject, only the somewhat implausible statement that he 'could not recall' whether the spiritualist ever mentioned Busoni again. Why would he not be able to recall something which had been important to him for nearly two decades? Did he lose faith in Brown and, if so, why does he obfuscate about the matter? These, surely, are questions a good scholar would ask.

Worst of all are Crispin's confused and unconvincing lines of argument, and failure to relate the esoteric traditions convincingly to the music discussed. The chapter on Busoni's *Doktor Faustus* outlines many sources of influence, and provides numerous but contradictory explanations of large-scale structure, with little discussion of actual music. Chapter Four, on *The Golem*, crams into a few pages a disjointed and superficial discussion of interconnected ideas related to Kabbalah, with no critical examination of any. Crispin also gives unnecessarily convoluted explanations of ideas that often turn out to be relatively straightforward and not very esoteric at all. The long discussion of Gematria could be summed up in one word, numerology, while the esoteric explanation of the relationship between the words Adam, Golem and nostril ignores the fact that many people would make these links simply from their familiarity with Judaeo-Christian creation stories.

Crispin's insistence that *The Golem* can only be interpreted adequately through the prism of Kabbalistic teachings drives her 'analysis' of the music. She simply ignores the many other ideas that give insight into Sitsky's music, such as ciphers and serial or quasi-serial procedures, which Sitsky has used in dozens of works and which derive in no small part from his strong interest in the work of Schoenberg and Berg. Crispin's analysis comprises simplistic lists of words or phrases whose musical settings use the same pitch classes and intervallic patterns, with brief mention of links made through instrumentation, all divorced from their musical and dramatic contexts. No attention is paid to features such as rhythm, melodic contour, harmony, text setting or tessitura, features which the author presumably considers 'trivial' and 'obvious.' However, Crispin's analyses offer little or no musical insight into either *Doktor Faustus* or *The Golem*, and make one long for a systematic approach such as thematic analysis or set theory that would elucidate how Sitsky's web of ideas might be constructed and perceived musically.

At least the reader is unlikely to gain a false impression of the quality of *The Esoteric Musical Tradition* from its presentation. The dissertation shows no signs of having undergone any editing or even copy-editing, and even the layout I found to be irritating. The most annoying feature is that each chapter has its own endnotes containing only author-date references, with

⁵ See Bernard Gittelson and Laura Torbet, *Intangible Evidence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Isolde Vetter, "'Musik aus dem Jenseits:' Der Fall Rosemary Brown und seine soziokulturellen und psychologischen Bedingungen ['Music from the Beyond: The Case of Rosemary Brown and its Sociological, Cultural, and Psychological Circumstances]," *Musikwissenschaft zwischen Kunst, Ästhetik und Experiment: Festschrift Helga de la Motte-Haber zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Reinhard Kopiez, et al. (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen und Neumann, 1998) 619–33.

full details only in the bibliography. The reader interested in sources is thus forced to flip between three different places. Over half the book is taken up with pointless appendices. After the list of works in Appendix 1, there is a transcript of Crispin's 2001 interview with Sitsky, which would have been much better had it been edited, rather than the conversation transcribed verbatim and then reproduced in full. Appendix 3 is a selective list of Busoni's library of esoterica, compiled (according to a passing mention on page 57) from an auction catalogue of the composer's library. If this information is at all relevant, why is there no comparable list of Sitsky's library? The large bibliography contains a huge amount of esoteric literature, much of it of tangential relevance, which was, I suspect, borrowed from Sitsky's extensive collection conveniently located in his house in Canberra. There is at least an index, but it is rather limited.

In the end, even the author herself seems unsure about the validity of her claims, with her conclusions hedged with phrases such as 'It is undeniable that ...' (p. 141), 'It is difficult to refute that ...' (p. 141) and 'It seems obvious that ...' (p. 143). She is unlikely to convince any but the most credulous readers with her assertion that the *only* way to interpret the music of Busoni and Sitsky is through reference to their shared interest in esoteric traditions. Both men are, after all, first and foremost musicians, not magicians, and consummate musical artisans, not Rosemary Browns.

Michael O'Loghlin, *Frederick the Great and his Musicians: The Viola da Gamba Music of the Berlin School*

Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008

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Reviewed by Ruth Wilkinson and John Stinson

Michael O'Loghlin's detailed and extensive study of the viola da gamba music of the Berlin School is a welcome book for players of the viola da gamba and for musicians interested in unexplored corners of eighteenth-century repertoire. It is written in lucid and lively language, and its research methodology is exemplary. One of its special strengths is its unusual combination of sound musicology with a performer's insight.

The popularity of and renewed interest that is shown in the gamba music of the Berlin School is evident in the growing collection of recordings that has appeared in recent years, especially from the Wiener Akademie and the ensemble Il Gardellino. Composers such as Christoph Schraffath and the brothers Johann Gottlieb and Carl Heinrich Graun have, at last, come into the musical canon for gamba players. Fine performances by modern virtuosi such as Vittorio Ghielmi and Christoph Coin attest to the quality of these late works for the viola da gamba, and allow us to admire from our position in the twenty-first century the musical abilities and virtuosic skills of Ludwig Christian Hesse, the most influential gambist of the Berlin School. Through these recordings and the erudite studies such as those that Michael O'Loghlin has produced in *The Viola da Gamba Music of the Berlin School*, we can appreciate a repertoire that represented the last grand era of virtuoso viol playing, and get to appreciate the