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Book Review

Joshua S. Walden. ***Musical Portraits: The Composition of Identity in Contemporary and Experimental Music***

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Reviewed by Maurice Windleburn

Joshua S. Walden's *Musical Portraits* is positioned in the subdiscipline of musicology that addresses interactions between music and the other arts—particularly literature and visual art—as valorised by recent scholars such as Richard Leppert and Simon Shaw-Miller. Walden's book convincingly argues that, while music may seem an underprivileged artform when it comes to human portrayal, the move of modernist art away from mimesis towards the depiction of interior or ephemeral qualities in fact made music the ideal medium for portraiture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Aside from modernist aesthetics, Walden also makes use of post-modern philosophies of the self to call into question the commonly held view that music's ability to depict and portray is impoverished. Relying on an understanding of the individual as ever-changing, multi-layered, fragmented and performed, rather than as concrete and self-determined, Walden argues that the temporality and multi-vocality inherent to music allows it to depict biographical changes throughout time and the various—sometimes contradictory—aspects of the self. This is placed in contrast to the more confined, static nature of visual portraiture. Walden also implements a postmodern framework when claiming that portraiture involves the artistic creation of a subject by the artist and not just the simple copying of an objective presence: that a sitter's identity exists partly as an interpretation within the minds of composers, performers and listeners.

The privilege given to music by modernist aesthetics and post-modern conceptions of the self helps Walden determine the chronological scope of his book: from the 1950s to the present day. Walden's study also primarily addresses musical portraits of artistic figures, which allows

him to draw comparisons between the aesthetic ideals and artistic styles of composers and their portraiture subjects. To achieve this, Walden relies on a rather broad understanding of 'metaphor', which applies to visual or verbal elements that are depicted by comparatively similar musical techniques. There is, unfortunately, no attempt on Walden's part to fit this understanding of musical metaphor into the discourse surrounding the term in musicology, philosophy, or literary criticism, leaving its exact function somewhat vague.

Walden's opening chapter concerns musical portraits of literary figures, looking first at Virgil Thomson's 1928 composition 'Miss Gertrude Stein as a Young Girl.' Inspired by methods Stein used in her own poetic portraits—where she aimed to capture the 'abstract essence' or 'immediate awareness' of a sitter's presence rather than their physical likeness—Thomson would work in front of his sitter to compose spontaneously at the piano a thematic basis for their portrait. Walden shows that Thomson's depiction of Stein, however, reflects not only her immediate presence but also her literary style: the slightly varied reiteration of motifs resembling the familiar repetition of words in Stein's poetry. In what is one of the weaker analyses of this book, Walden also examines the musical portrait Thomson made of painter Buffie Johnson. Walden claims that the mirroring of melodic material between left and right hands in Thomson's piano work 'Buffie Johnson: Drawing Virgil Thomson in Charcoal' depicts in a meta-like fashion Thomson's reciprocation of Johnson's 1963 portrait of him.

The third work discussed in this chapter is Pierre Boulez's *Pli selon pli* (1962, though revised throughout the 1980s), which uses the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and may be considered a portrait of the symbolist poet. Walden finds that the poetry used in *Pli selon pli* outlines a narrative tracing life from birth to death, and that the gradual disintegration of form evinced by each successive movement reflects Mallarmé's own stylistic development away from grammatical syntax and clear semantic meaning. Walden also argues that Boulez aimed to evoke Mallarmé's voice through prosopopoeia—the oratorical practice of speaking in the role of another—in order to instigate an aesthetic dialogue with the deceased poet. The interaction of Mallarmé's poetry and Boulez's music in turn allows the fulfilment of both their aesthetic ideals: Boulez's wish to assimilate the developments of modernist poetry into music and Mallarmé's desire that poetry be 'Musique, par excellence.' It is by way of this observation that Walden explains the title of the work—translated as either 'fold upon fold' or 'fold according to fold'—for it shows how music and poetry 'can be made to fold in on, in the manner of, and as determined by one another' (p. 45). While one of the more illuminating case studies given in this book, Walden dismisses the notion that Boulez shared Mallarmé's ambition to create art that was absolute and anonymous and is perhaps too quick to do so; such as aesthetic would seem rather applicable to Boulez's brand of integral serialism and the openwork aspect of the first movement that allows performers to reorganise elements of the score.

In his second chapter, Walden shifts to musical portraits of visual artists. Beginning with Morton Feldman's *de Kooning*—for the painter Willem de Kooning—Walden compares Feldman's aesthetic ideal of a 'visual' music purged of horizontal temporality to the inverse aesthetic of abstract expressionists such as de Kooning, whose paintings embody dynamic qualities associated with the temporality of music. Walden also demonstrates how a gap exists between the execution and product of both Feldman's and de Kooning's creations. According to Walden, the graphic notation of Feldman's score depicts sharp angles and bold lines in a way that is at odds with the spacious sounds generated by the score's performance. This discrepancy is compared to that between the violent appearance of de Kooning's brushstrokes

and the slow and meditative manner in which they were in fact painted. Phillip Glass's *A Musical Portrait of Chuck Close* is then examined, comparisons being made between the short repetitive gestures of Glass's music and the 'cells of overlapping colors' that make up Close's late paintings (p. 69). Whilst representing Close's artistic style on a microcosmic level, Glass's portrait is also biographical in its three-part structure. According to Walden, the composition depicts Close's early life, his tragic paralysis when his spinal artery collapsed, and his gradual recovery thereafter. Walden concludes this chapter by noting that both Feldman's and Glass's portraits are in some sense self portraits, since both composers depict painters from their own milieus whose styles reciprocate and influence their own.

This observation segues into the third chapter examining the self portraits of György Ligeti and Peter Ablinger. In Ligeti's *Selbstportrait mit Reich und Riley (und Chopin ist auch dabei)*, the composer incorporates Steve Reich's phase-shifting technique and the freedom granted to performers by Terry Riley's *In C*, to highlight stylistic similarities between himself and his American contemporaries. The work's ending also contains a parody of Chopin's B-flat minor Sonata, Op. 35, intended as a homage to the tradition of 'idiomatic piano writing.' Walden argues that this piece is the product of Ligeti's listening in on his own style, through which the composer notices his pianistic heritage and similarities to the American minimalists.

Ablinger's self portrait—entitled 'Quadraturen IV: Selbstportrait mit Berlin'—includes a recording of Berlin city sounds and an ensemble arrangement of these sounds made by temporal and spectral software analysis. Walden claims that Ablinger's ensemble arrangement reflects the composer's unique way of hearing, and that this subjective mode of hearing is set in contrast to the more objective recording of the Berlin city sounds it accompanies. However, Walden rightly notes that as a resident of Berlin, Ablinger's hearing is itself a product of the city sounds he has arranged, and that Ablinger's arrangement of these sounds is mediated by computer software: a testament to the importance of technology in late twentieth-century constructions of the self.

Chapter four concerns multimedia portraits of celebrities, focusing on Robert Wilson's *Voom* project. According to Walden, celebrity portraiture tends to overemphasise a sitter's physicality at the expense of depicting inner qualities. Wilson's multimedia portraits of Robert Downey Jr. and Winona Ryder—which use the music of Tom Waits and Michael Galasso respectively—subvert the genre of celebrity portraiture by alluding to Ryder's and Downey's highly publicised personal lives. This in turn allows the audience to fill in meaning for these portraits with their own mass-media-obtained knowledge. Walden argues that Wilson's operatic collaboration with Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*, similarly assumes prior knowledge from its audience. In avoiding a clearly defined narrative, *Einstein on the Beach* offers a fragmented and abstract depiction of Einstein, yet one which Walden believes is built around the audience's prior acquaintance with Einstein's life. Walden considers this type of portraiture to be post-modern in nature, as it shows that 'identity emerges out of the mixture of engaged social discourse and inward self-examination' (p. 130).

In his epilogue, Walden addresses musical portraits of the posthumous and post-human and begins with an interpretation of the 'Carlotta leitmotif' found in Bernard Herrmann's score for Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Walden rightfully associates this leitmotif with the deceased Carlotta Valdes and the portrait which introduces her character to the audience, noting the appearance of the motif when Scottie—the protagonist of the film—realises his love for this deceased figure. Perhaps the key issue with this interpretation is its austerity and failure to position itself amongst other analyses of *Vertigo*, particularly those focused around the libidinal gaze.

In wanting to show that the leitmotif is a portrait of Carlotta, Walden downplays its other associations and does not push the analysis as far as it could go. Walden fails to note that the leitmotif also accompanies the visual motif of a spiral throughout the film and that these spirals are thought to represent both the gaze and the abyssal void of death;[1] that is, Scottie's libidinal desire as well as Carlotta's mortification, and Scottie's libidinal desire for the mortified (both dead and portraited) Carlotta. Therefore, the leitmotif does not really represent Carlotta, per se, but rather Scottie's own libidinal desire for the dead Carlotta: it is the leitmotif of a subjective disposition rather than of an objective presence (indeed, Carlotta is never actually present in the film at all, since she is dead).

This confusion between subject and object continues through the second half of Walden's epilogue, which considers the artist Neil Harbisson who—severely colour blind—has implanted a device into his head that can convert the light reflected off people's faces into a series of sounds and has released these sounds to the public as compositions. In an attempt to show that the artist's subjective perception of a sitter constitutes the nature of that sitter, Walden asserts that not only Harrison but also his subjects are cyborgs since 'they are portrayed as automated sonic translations of visible and invisible colors of light' (p. 152). Walden here goes too far; while it may be true that an individual is in part constituted by the perceptions of others, Harbisson's filtering of his sitters through technology does not make those sitters into technologically derived apparitions or cyborgs, since these sitters still have a corporeal and mental sovereignty outside of Harbisson's perception.

Walden also gives the technology used by Harbisson a status of objectivity it does not possess, claiming that 'Harbisson's implanted chip transmits tones straight into his head without human interpretive intervention' (p. 152). There is, however, quite clearly human interpretive intervention: that of Harbisson, who has developed and programmed this technology. A scale of equivalences is needed when one substance (light) is converted into another (sound), and that scale must be chosen through human interpretive intervention; it is not objectively given. What is more, the sound into which light is converted is still processed through Harbisson's (or another listener's) subjectivity once heard. It makes little sense to say that something can be transmitted straight into the head without human interpretive intervention, since human interpretive intervention occurs in the head.

Despite ending on this contentious note, Walden's book is still to be highly commended, since its unique aim—to show how music has depicted individuals throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—has certainly been achieved. The analyses provided in the book's middle chapters, especially that given of *Pli selon pli*, are particularly enlightening and well accompanied by black and white illustrations and score excerpts. Even the faults of Walden's epilogue manage to reveal something of importance: showing that the post-modern privileging of subjective reception can collapse in on itself to become its own type of purported objectivity.

About the author

Maurice Windleburn is a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of Melbourne, researching the file-card compositions of John Zorn.

[1] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2001), 198–9.