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Lou Harrison: American Musical Maverick (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Lou Harrison: American Musical Maverick* by Bill Alves and Brett Campbell. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017. 583 pp. ISBN: 9780253025616.

Keywords

book review, Lou Harrison American Musical Maverick, Bill Alves, Brett Campbell

Comments

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first two provide interesting and useful data, but I am puzzled by the inclusion of the third, which is relevant only in that it led to his invitation to join the Charles Ives Society (p. x).

The book is a major addition to Ives scholarship, as it represents the first published attempt at a comprehensive analysis of both the *Essays before a Sonata* and the “Concord” Sonata. While the music analysis is occasionally tedious, most chapters will be indispensable sources for Ives scholars and performers. The overall tone is accessible and free of jargon. In addition to its contribution to the field of Ives studies, this book is a valuable resource for several related fields, including early twentieth-century American music, musical quotation, experimental music, and transcendentalism.

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Lou Harrison: American Musical Maverick. By Bill Alves and Brett Campbell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. [xvi, 583 p. ISBN 978025302561 (hardcover), \$120; ISBN 9780253026156 (paperback), \$55; ISBN 9780253026439 (e-book), \$54.99.] Music examples, tables, photographs, glossary, list of compositions, endnotes, bibliography, index.

In his splendid poem “Pied Beauty,” Gerard Manley Hopkins famously professed that the unexpected things in life that astonish and delight us are occasions for thanksgiving and praise:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled
cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout
that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’
wings . . .
(Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,”
stanza 1)

These evocative verses, which flow like music, proceed to make a moral case: Those very things in the world which one might pass over or ignore, because they are peculiar or unconventional, have important lessons to teach us. The works of American composer Lou Harrison (1917–2003) present such an opportunity to see the world anew and rejoice.

In this new biography, Bill Alves and Brett Campbell share a thorough overview of Harrison’s life in the form of a dense, chronological narrative, rich in details meticulously cited, and interwoven with insightful details about his music. If the biography by Leta E. Miller and Fredric Lieberman (*Lou Harrison: Composing a World* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998]; subsequent edition published as *Composing a World: Lou Harrison, Musical Wayfarer* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004]) contextualizes Harrison the person, and the book by Heidi Von Gunden (*The Music of Lou Harrison* [Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995]) focuses on his musical creations, Alves and Campbell successfully take on both.

The erudite and heterogeneous musical concepts behind Harrison’s compositions can sometimes be thorny to make clear, and, overall, Alves and Campbell provide just enough information to make any work under discussion interesting and accessible to a broad audience. Although this book is not published with an accompanying recording, resources are available for readers to consult; these include the compact-disc set *A Homage to Lou Harrison* (Dynamic CDS 221, 263, 359, available in the Naxos Music Library) along with video performances on YouTube.

The text is certainly readable, though the small typeface and narrow margins suggest that not much was left on the cutting room floor during the editing process. Chapters and sections often

open with a quotation from Harrison—sometimes excerpts from his many poems—or from a friend. A collection of photographs is included with the text along with a few examples of Harrison's prodigious skill as a calligraphist. In appendix B, Alves and Campbell include a list of Harrison's compositions that cross-references and updates the list published in the biography by Miller and Lieberman.

An exceptional aspect of Harrison's work was his brave eclecticism. The list of compositional techniques, styles, and models that he drew upon is truly staggering. Harrison composed using the twelve-tone method and was praised by Arnold Schoenberg himself. In his work as a dance accompanist and composer, he mastered labanotation and theorized a new way to conceive music-dance collaborations. In his studies with Henry Cowell, Harrison learned how to process music as sound, without prejudice, which opened up for him music of other cultures, early music, alternate tunings, and modified instruments. Along with John Cage, Harrison was one of the earliest composers of music for percussion ensemble in the United States. In compositions such as his magnificent *Suite for Violin, Piano, and Small Orchestra*, Harrison imitated the sounds of an Indonesian gamelan and incorporated a style he learned from Indian music called *jhala*.

Like many other composers throughout history, Harrison worked as a music critic for a time to make ends meet. While living in New York City, he wrote for *Modern Music* (the journal of the League of Composers), Henry Cowell's magazine *New Music*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. Despite the inherently tricky undertaking of writing about music (what Charles Seeger dubbed the "linguocentric predicament" [Bell Yung and Helen Rees, eds., *Understanding Charles Seeger, Pioneer in American Musicology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 36]), Harrison's

articles, which number over three hundred, include nuanced appraisals, peppery judgments, and clever turns of phrase; indeed, Harrison's ability to create vivid images in poetry and prose might be of interest to scholars on its own.

Alves and Campbell note that Harrison could be described as an "epicurean" agnostic" in his later life, which is intriguing, considering that religious titles and connotations show up from time to time among his works (p. 121). For example, Harrison composed *Alleluia, Motet for the Day of Ascension* and *Alma Redemptoris Mater* in the 1940s, when he was interested in Christian mysticism. His *Praises for Michael the Archangel*, from the same period, is a composition for organ employing dissonant counterpoint, apparently inspired by his casual organ lessons taken with Virgil Thomson. In *Praises*, Harrison explored an idea that time and rhythm could be connected to spirituality in composition, with an envisaged spectrum of faster and slower rhythms contrasting heavenly light and sound with darkness and silence.

Readers who stand to benefit from this book include Americanists, generally, and those scholars specializing in musicians whose lives intersected significantly with Harrison's, such as Cage, Charles Ives, Thomson, Harry Partch, Schoenberg, and especially Cowell. Graduate students considering a Harrison research project, thesis, or dissertation have a lot of the legwork completed for them here. Furthermore, the major sources concerning Harrison (including his archives at the University of California, Santa Cruz, cataloged by Charles Hanson) are referenced in this volume and cited for those desiring to dig deeper—along with insights gleaned by Alves and Campbell from their own personal interviews with Harrison. Composers seeking out new sounds, theorists fascinated by historical tuning systems

(along with their adaption in the twentieth century), and ethnomusicologists exploring how the gamelan was embraced in North America, along with other related cultural hybrids, can profitably reference this book.

This is a comprehensive life-and-works biography that belongs in academic libraries. It is not hagiography. The reader learns of Harrison's destructive temper, his unhappy and unstable years in New York, and how he sometimes emotionally manipulated those who loved him. Alves and Campbell recount that Harrison's outstanding regret was how he treated people, and they share both the ups and downs of his life.

A reader of this book will note Harrison's boldness in investing himself completely in the art that interested him, without preoccupation with a career trajectory or getting ahead. His willingness to engage fully with ideas off the beaten path made him a catalyst in the development of twentieth-century American music. For example, it was Harrison who shared *I Ching* with Cage, and Harrison's championing of Ives's Symphony no. 3 ("The Camp Meeting") led to Ives receiving the Pulitzer Prize for the work.

One might rightly conclude that Harrison (along with his mentor Cowell) offers an excellent example for musicians today of how they can benefit by approaching all music (whatever its provenance) openheartedly, to the ends of integration, synthesis, and, then, new creativity to share with others. As with other instances of rich and beautiful variety alive in the world, apparent to poets and composers alike, Harrison's works stand ready to inspire, now and into the future. Gerard Manley Hopkins was right:

All things counter, original, spare,
strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows
how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle,
dím;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past
change:
Praise him.
(Hopkins, "Pied Beauty," stanza 2)

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Metamorphosis in Music: The Compositions of György Ligeti in the 1950s and 1960s. By Benjamin R. Levy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. [x, 292 p. ISBN 9780199381999 (hardcover), \$74; ISBN 9780199392019 (Oxford Scholarly Online), ISBN 9780199392002 (updf), ISBN 9780190857394 (e-book), prices vary.] Illustrations, music examples, bibliography, index.

Long a devotee of György Ligeti's compositional theories, aesthetics, and practices, Benjamin Levy has published a book that tells the story of the composer's development up to about 1970. What makes Levy's efforts stand out is his detailed and comprehensive study of Ligeti's sketches. By arranging the composer's works chronologically, Levy narrates the evolution—or, as he puts it, "stylistic transformation" (p. 6)—of Ligeti's compositional techniques from his student days in Hungary to the full flourishing of his career as an internationally recognized artist.

Levy argues for the necessity of studying Ligeti's sketches, because the theoretical systems he employed are complex and cannot be entirely appreciated or understood in isolation. During many visits to the Paul Sacher Foundation in Switzerland, Levy consulted a trove of information pertinent to his subject and had access to additional sketches that have only recently been made available. Ligeti was secretive about his working methods, making this approach even more important. Along with his encyclopedic knowledge of the published literature—in English, Hungarian, and German—Levy inspires a high level of