



Review of Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 493 pp.

Michelle E. Hakanson



Received October 2003

[1] Carol J. Oja's book, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s*, published three years ago, has already made a splash in the world of historical musicology. As the sub-title suggests, its purview extends beyond music to the broader culture including art, literature, and criticism. The scope of the book is limited geographically and chronologically, rather than topically or thematically. Still, an overall theme of the work does emerge which is the idea that modernism was a collective effort resulting in an "extraordinary network of composers and ideologies." (page 4)

[2] A significant contribution of this work, then, is to deconstruct cherished notions regarding certain composers. Professor Oja directly challenges what may be called the American Frontier Myth of the Lone Pioneer. Her painstaking research into composer societies, the relationship of composers to certain key critics, and systems of patronage all challenge the historical view of Edgard Varèse and Charles Ives, in particular, as pioneers working alone and unrecognized. Even if scholars disagree with her findings, the burden of proof will be upon them to rebut her arguments and re-establish their position.

[3] If satisfaction can be defined as a match between expectation and results, then a book should be reviewed in terms of its stated goals. Professor Oja sets out to:

“. . . reexamine well-known figures and recover lost voices, discussing selected compositions within shifting historical frameworks. I have aimed for neither a chronological survey nor comprehensive coverage, and I adhere to no single method of musical analysis. Rather, I situate new concert music within what the composer Marc Blitzstein once called 'the economic, spiritual, ethnic, and esthetic facts of our time.'" (page 5)

[4] The organization of the book thus follows no line of continuity either chronologically or thematically. Anywhere from two to four chapters appear under one of seven broader themes: Enter the Moderns, The Machine in the Concert Hall, Spirituality and American Dissonance, Myths and Institutions, New World Neoclassicism, European Modernists and American Critics, and Widening Horizons. Each chapter carries its own title as well. The result is a series of discrete chapters of varying length, some as short as six pages. It is left largely to the reader to find relationships between the chapters as Professor Oja's occasional sign-posts are widely spaced.

[5] If the book lacks organization in a linear sense, it is nonetheless a reference gem for its 40-page Appendix of "Programs of Modern-Music Societies," in New York, 1920–1931, as well as for its "selected" but nevertheless extensive bibliography.

However, since publishers opt for what is economical for them, the valuable and detailed notes are all in the back of the book between the Appendix and Bibliography, a distinct disadvantage for the user. If readers happen to decide to go to the effort of reading a note, they have to flip back to where the notes are. Marking the place of the notes in advance is highly recommended.

[6] Organizational issues aside, what is admirable—even awesome—about the book is the time Oja devotes to archival research. Her return to the whole, big, complicated picture that was the early 20th century, a revisiting that points out possible flaws of the reductive narrative passed down to the present, is the primary gift of this work. It draws the reader into the vibrant artistic and intellectual network in New York in the 1920s. This book exemplifies the virtue of interdisciplinary study that shows how artists, writers, poets, and critics alike all shaped, influenced and reflected one another.

[7] Certain chapters of the book are decidedly frustrating. Some otherwise illuminating discussions are obfuscated by an imbroglio of names, dates, and places presented with no discernible narrative sequence to help a reader track what is going on. While reading the chapters on “Organizing the Moderns,” (Chapter 11), and “Women Patrons and Activists,” (Chapter 12), I found myself making charts to track the information. People reading for enjoyment would just skip over the trouble spots, but people trying to use the book for future research will have to mine the nuggets out of the ore.

[8] Some of the best things about the book, or perhaps it is more accurate to say what I find most satisfying about it, are the chapter-length surveys of two members of the avant-garde, Leo Ornstein and Dane Rudhyar. Their presence is first justified by the extremely narrow scope of the book, New York in the 1920s, a topic which allows a broader net to be cast over the people of the time. However, what begins as a close look under the lens of a narrow time frame, ends by begging the question, “how did these people get left out of the broader historical narrative?” While some possible reasons are tentatively forwarded, the question is really left as an open challenge to historians of the period.

[9] This is not to say that I agree with her assessments, particularly of Rudhyar. While the details are right, the larger picture of Rudhyar is distorted through the very academic biases she seeks to revise. Take, for example, the following statement:

“Spiritual rather than mathematical, intuitive rather than logical, he challenged the dominance of European cultural values, promoting instead a trans-Asian mix of religious philosophies and musical practices.” (page 98)

Parsing the elements of this statement reveal the misunderstandings. The pitting of “spiritual” against “mathematical” is oblivious to the Pythagorean and Theosophic equation of the two. Theosophy, by the author’s own words, “turns up only occasionally in Rudhyar’s writings, yet its tenets inform almost every page. . .” Therefore, to understand Rudhyar, a broader knowledge of Theosophy is required. Likewise, the pitting of intuition against logic as though they are antithetical binary oppositions, also misreads Rudhyar for much the same reason. His discussions are logical, if logic is defined as a coherent argument that follows in an orderly way from a set of premises. In other words, a person can be both intuitive and logical. It is the academy that has deemed them incompatible.

[10] The part of the statement that refers to Rudhyar “promoting a trans-Asian mix of religious philosophies and musical practices” is also misleading. Rudhyar regarded Asian music as the thesis in the Hegelian sense, and occidental music as the antithesis. Oriental music had to be recovered in order to force a crisis with Occidental music which would, in turn force a synthesis of the two, something brand new.

[11] Denying Rudhyar the qualities of being mathematical and logical also shows a lack of understanding for what it meant to be an astrologer before easy access to computers. Astrology, in its calculations of the planetary positions, is the equivalent of astronomy. It is the assigning of significance to the placement of the planets that separates the two. Rudhyar knew how to read ephemerides, use logarithms, calculate geometric angles, and adjust to different time zones and calendars. His formalist ability was not impaired. His whole argument was that reason and the intellect were overvalued in society, resulting in a negative consequence to art in particular as well as the culture at large.

[12] If specifics can be quibbled with, nonetheless, it is a gift to those interested in “fringe” composers that an author of Professor Oja’s stature has provided a forum for discussion. By returning to the whole complex and messy picture of New York in the 1920s, she has once again given equal stature to all the participants, that is, she has leveled the playing field. How interesting to read history in which Copland, Ives and Varèse have yet to emerge head and shoulders above the others, and in which Schoenberg and Stravinsky are the names mentioned in passing!

[13] Overall, as interesting as Oja's historicist approach is, a journal of music theory is probably most interested in the author's analysis of specific pieces. A statement was previously quoted declaring that no single method of analysis is used. Again, the author's Introduction sets up further expectation in this area:

“Along the way, I sketch portraits of an eclectic array of compositions, from Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* to Copland's Piano Variations, Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, Marion Bauer's *Four Piano Pieces*, Cowell's *Irish Legends*, Crawford's *String Quartet 1931*, Ruggles's *Angels*, Sessions's Piano Sonata, Still's *Levee Land*, and Thomson's *Capital, Capitals*.”

Therefore, the reader is alerted not to expect a single method of musical analysis by which these pieces may be related to one another. Each piece is, in fact, treated individually. In a certain sense there is no analysis at all—if analysis is understood as a search for coherence within a piece or style of composition. But perhaps the reader's curiosity will be piqued into wondering just how an author might sketch a portrait of music in print, particularly pieces lacking programmatic titles. As an aside, if nothing else, everyone must read the opening of Chapter 5 which describes the New York premiere of George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*. Her understated narrative of the event is laugh-out-loud funny.

[14] A pleasant surprise in a historical discussion of musical modernism is the engaging writing style. Professor Oja puts a masterful turn on phrases and does not shy away from the occasional pointed remark or acerbic comment. There is nothing pedantic here. The book also avoids the argot of what can loosely be described as post-modernist theories, even as she takes advantage of such theories in forming her own opinions.

[15] There are parts of the book that leave the reader wanting more, and are for that reason unsatisfying. In a way, however, this is a merit of the book, because questions are posed, but not entirely answered, thus inviting others to join the party of 20th-century historical scholarship. One such teaser in particular is provocative: what was the effect on reception of their music of composers who were either Jewish or homosexual or both?

[16] These things having been said, this book is a perfect foil for standard survey texts such as Morgan's venerable study, *Twentieth-Century Music*. I hope instructors will consider Oja's book as a supplement for their survey courses. It is a must read for specialists in the time period. It will cause anyone who reads it to reconsider and rethink their views of American art music of the early twentieth century.

[17] In conclusion, it is obvious that every word of *Making Music Modern* was carefully considered, and that Oja's opinions, insights, and theories have benefited from maturation over time. She acknowledges that her editor “gently but firmly prodded [her] to let go of the manuscript when she felt it was ready.” That is, the author was somewhat reluctant to bring it into print—even after nearly a dozen years—probably feeling that there was so much left to do. There is. But that is the hallmark of a trailblazing book. The first one down a new path has a difficult time knowing where it will lead. Everyone who follows has a clearer path, more perspective, and is able to focus on questions that are already asked. To point out where the trail is rough going tacitly acknowledges the efforts of the first one down the path.

Michelle E. Hakanson
School of Music
1225 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1225
hakan@darkwing@uoregon.edu

Copyright Statement

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for Music Theory. All rights reserved.

[1] Copyrights for individual items published in *Music Theory Online (MTO)* are held by their authors. Items appearing in *MTO* may be saved and stored in electronic or paper form, and may be shared among individuals for purposes of scholarly research or discussion, but may *not* be republished in any form, electronic or print, without prior, written permission from the author(s), and advance notification of the editors of *MTO*.

[2] Any redistributed form of items published in *MTO* must include the following information in a form appropriate to the medium in which the items are to appear:

This item appeared in *Music Theory Online* in [VOLUME #, ISSUE #] on [DAY/MONTH/YEAR]. It was authored by [FULL NAME, EMAIL ADDRESS], with whose written permission it is reprinted here.

[3] Libraries may archive issues of *MTO* in electronic or paper form for public access so long as each issue is stored in its entirety, and no access fee is charged. Exceptions to these requirements must be approved in writing by the editors of *MTO*, who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

This document and all portions thereof are protected by U.S. and international copyright laws. Material contained herein may be copied and/or distributed for research purposes only.

Prepared by Brent Yorgason, Managing Editor and Rebecca Flore and Tahirih Motazedian, Editorial Assistants