a journal of the Society for Music Theory

Volume 4, Number 1, January 1998

Review of David Cope, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997)

Benedict Weisser

KEYWORDS: composition, pedagogy, serialism, pitch-class sets, indeterminacy, postmodernism, notation, algorithmic composition

ABSTRACT: *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* represents at once an updating, an elaboration, and a pedagogically-oriented codification of material presented by David Cope in previous books such as New Directions in Music. It is a useful resource if only for the novelty of the large amount and variety of techniques and issues addressed in the space of a single text. Though a worthy addition to a contemporary music library, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* contains a number of serious flaws which prevent it from being a truly authoritative source. The most grievous is the fact that Cope composes his own musical examples rather than reprinting excerpts from other composers' works. Though potentially useful in the study of composition and relevant disciplines such as notational/performance practice, it should not be adhered to as an authoritative classroom text. In addition, it should be supplemented generously with the original scores of the works whose techniques Cope addresses.

---

[1] David Cope (Professor of Music, University of California, Santa Cruz) is a composer who is perhaps best known as the author of a series of textbooks dealing with various aspects of contemporary music.(1) His *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* represents at once an updating, an elaboration, and a pedagogically-oriented codification of material presented in previous books.

[2] In many respects the aspirations of this book are quite admirable. Cope aims to provide a resource of twentieth-century (and, as he writes in his introduction, "early twenty-first century") compositional techniques which can be used both as a reference by composers and scholars and as an introductory guide for the engaged contemporary music listener.(2) In its sheer scope, one can think only of a work such as Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* that attempts to cover as much ground as does Cope.(3) *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* is a useful resource if only for the novelty of the large amount and variety of techniques and issues addressed in the space of a single text.

[3] *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* is divided into twenty-one chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by an extensive bibliography. Each chapter is roughly 10–20 pages in length and presents a very cursory treatment of the subject matter at hand (which becomes especially superficial when Cope is dealing with broader topics such as tonality, serialism, and

notation). There are copious music examples (over 300 examples in the book, all of them by Cope, a state of affairs I will address further on) and references to representative works by other composers in each subject.[(4)] Each chapter ends with a set of "Composing Suggestions," pieces and exercises that students may write utilizing germane techniques and materials. The authorial tone throughout is both incisive and non-patronizing, always welcoming and encouraging no matter the level of complexity or abstractness inherent in the basic concepts being discussed.

[4] Several chapters stand out as notable and of potential pedagogical use. Chapter 2, The Tonal Legacy, encompasses chromaticism and polytonality. Chapter 6, Serialism, includes basic row concepts, combinatoriality, serialism of other parameters besides pitch (duration, dynamics, tempi, and timbre), pointillistic distribution of pitch material, and klangfarbenmelodie. This chapter exists in tandem with chapter 7, Pitch-Class Sets (which quite handily comes with a chart of the 208 "most commonly used" pitch-class sets).[(5)] Chapter 8, Rhythm and Meter, covers among other areas metric modulation and proportional notation. In chapter 9, Texture and Modulations, Cope uses the term micropolyphony to describe a textural situation characterized by a simultaneity of different lines, rhythms, and timbres.[(6)] Chapter 10, Microtones, deals with equal temperament, intonation, and tuning systems. Chapter 14, Indeterminacy, will be familiar to the reader who has made acquaintance with *New Directions in Music*. Here Cope employs a distinction between "Composer Indeterminacy," where the score is fixed but the outcome of the generative processes were unforeseen, and "Performer Indeterminacy," where the score sets up a situation whose details of realization are unforeseen. Also familiar to the reader of *New Directions* will be chapter 18, Media Forms. Cope adds the subcategory "Virtual Reality" to those of "Multimedia," "Mixed Media," and "Intermedia," attempting to bring up to date material which might have been more relevant twenty or thirty years ago. The strongest chapter, I believe, is chapter 20, Experimental Music, as Cope is on firm ground here and not merely attempting to cover a wide variety of genres for the purpose of writing an authoritative textbook. The discussions in this chapter of "Biomusic" and "Antimusic" are particularly fruitful.

[5] Though worth having, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* contains a number of serious flaws which prevent it from being a truly authoritative source. The most grievous is the fact that Cope composes his own musical examples rather than reprinting excerpts from other composers' works. I understand that doing this may allow an author to be more concise, to have his/her examples truly relate to the concept he/she is trying to convey in a more concrete manner than by scavenging through a pre-existent score for something that might be applicable and optimally effective (not to mention, of course, the legal complications which are avoided by composing one's own examples). However, when one is endeavoring to explain the prepared piano, for example, it is simply not enough to reference certain techniques and then parenthetically cite John Cage's works in the following manner: (Cage 1944, 1948, 1951). One needs to be able to consult Cage's introductory preparation tables to works such as Sonatas and Interludes (1948), as well as score excerpts. The same weakness applies to virtually every chapter; I cannot imagine how it would not be preferable to present score excerpts by members of the Second Viennese and Darmstadt Schools in chapter 6 (Serialism, pre-and-post 1945 vintages), or Babbitt in chapter 7 (composition with pitch-class sets), or Carter in chapter 8 (the section on metric modulation within the larger chapter on rhythm and meter), or Reich in chapter 19 (the section on phase music within the larger chapter on Minimalism). One reason the chapters on media forms and experimental music are so much stronger is that there is much less of an accepted canon of works in those genres, making it easier for Cope to compose his own examples.

[6] Other problems with the book have more to do with the very nature of Cope's enterprise. In attempting to put together a textbook of twentieth-century techniques, Cope is by definition codifying a series of movements, manners, and behaviors (often of a radical, iconoclastic relationship to each other) which resist simple codification and are often irreconcilable. In his introduction, Cope takes great pains to dissuade the reader from deriving any sense of progressive narrativity one might normally ask from a textbook:

> There is no progress in art . . . A comparison of progress in the arts to, for instance, progress in the sciences is inappropriate.[(7)]

It would follow, then, that Cope's book is "not . . . about rules, but about resources."[(8)] The problem with this, however, is that the layout and conventional aspects (explicatory music examples, exercises at the end of chapters, the fact that the twenty-one chapters are designed to coincide with two semesters of composition study) make the book seem like it wants to

be a straightforward textbook of twentieth-century compositional techniques. Yet the disposition and arrangement of material is generally without a sense of narrative purpose (with the exception of the two chapters on serialism and pitch-class sets), so the result seems unfocused; it is unclear how this book would translate into a coherent course syllabus. In adopting an intermediary, "resource-providing" stance, Cope has not come to terms with the ramifications of his materials, and his work pays a price for it. I am not sure if, at the end of the twentieth-century, something more is now required.

[7] In a number of chapters and categories, one gets the sense that Cope is grappling with the changed cultural environment of the last generation. Chapter 21 is entitled "Decategorization," and in this final category Cope attempts to merge a number of previously-discussed techniques into broad compositional frameworks of eclecticism, quotation, sectionalization, integration, etc. These sub-categories are not mutually exclusive, and to treat them in the same formal manner one treated fourth chords and microtones earlier in the book strikes me as both rigid and inappropriate. To portray this slice of musical postmodernism is a very difficult task (especially in the span of eight pages), and I am not at all sure Cope brings it off.

[8] This leads to a larger question: how does one transmit a more value-neutral, pluralist cultural orientation within a university environment? The very materials Cope is dealing with in *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* would suggest the formation of an alternative strategy, yet the conventional, unsatisfying textbook framework does not enable him to deliver on such promise. How will this subject be taught in the next century? How necessary will much of the book be, after one has achieved such "thoroughness"? How many of Cope's categories will be relevant?

[9] There are other, more local aspects of this book which are problematic as well. The chapter on pitch-class sets falls into the trap of being overly analytical in orientation; this will inevitably serve as a barrier for a young composer in need of material being presented in as generative a behavioral model as possible. The material on multiphonics in chapter 12 is disappointing; not only is it way too cursory, but after having provided the 208 common pitch-class sets in chapter 7, Cope could have provided a chart of some common multiphonic fingerings rather than just referencing source texts such as Bartolozzi's *New Sounds for Woodwinds*.[(9)] Also cursory is the discussion of MIDI in chapter 16, which gives the impression of being purely obligatory. I was delighted to see an entire chapter devoted to algorithmic composition (chapter 17), but a process in which a work of acoustic music can be generated, permeated, and informed by a computer algorithm was not presented in a convincing enough fashion. As someone who frequently consults Cope's *New Music Notation*, I find the section on new notations (chapter 13) surprisingly lacking and incomplete; I recommend the earlier text to anyone interested in a thorough-going treatment of notational sigla and performance-practice issues.

[10] In summary, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* is a worthy addition to a contemporary music library. It is to be admired for its scope and reference value, and would be of a certain value in the study of composition and relevant disciplines such as notational/performance practice. However, it should not be adhered to as an authoritative classroom text, and it should be supplemented generously with the original scores of the works whose techniques Cope addresses.

Benedict Weisser
Visiting Instructor of Composition
Oberlin College Conservatory
Oberlin, Ohio 44074
Benedict.Weisser@oberlin.edu

Footnotes

1. These include *New Music Composition* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976), *New Music Notation* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 1976), and *New Directions in Music* (Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown, 1976; 6th ed., 1993).
Return to text

2. David Cope, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), xi.
Return to text

3. Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930).
Return to text

4. Several of the music examples are also available in standard MIDI file format and can be downloaded from Cope's Internet site at UC Santa Cruz.
Return to text

5. David Cope, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer*, 78–80. This chart can also be found in Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), and Joseph Straus's *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990).
Return to text

6. Cope, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer*, 101.
Return to text

7. Cope, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer*, xi. Cope cites this as one of three basic concepts central to the book.
Return to text

8. Cope, *Techniques of the Contemporary Composer*, xiii.
Return to text

9. Bruno Bartolozzi, *New Sounds for Woodwinds* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). By the way, in this chapter, as well as in the bibliography, Cope neglects to cite the predominant source on flute multiphonic practice, Robert Dick's *The Other Flute: A Performance Manual of Contemporary Techniques* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
Return to text

Prepared by Jon Koriagin and Rebecca Flore, Editorial Assistants