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EMILY PETERMANN, *The Musical Novel: Imitation of Musical Structure, Performance, and Reception in Contemporary Fiction*, (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014), 250 pp.

The descriptive structuralist semiotic analyses presented in this book evolved from discussions at the Word and Music Association Forum (WMAF; viii). The WMAF was formed in 2009 under the auspices of the International Association for Word and Music Studies, which was founded in 1997 to “promote interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry devoted to the relations between literature, verbal texts, language and music” (6). The Association organizes biennial conferences and edits a book series, *Word and Music Studies*, published by Brill, that currently comprises fifteen volumes.¹

From examples of jazz novels by authors such as Albert Murray, Michael Ondaatje, Xam Wilson Cartier, and Toni Morrison, as well as novels based on the *Goldberg Variations* such as Nancy Houston’s *The Goldberg Variations* (1981/1996), Richard Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), Gabriel Josipovici’s, *Goldberg: Variations* (2002) and Rachel Cusk’s *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009), Emily Petermann argues that the literary subgenre of the musical novel—that is, the novel based on a musical precept in the widest sense—is not a derivative genre, but valuable in itself (1). It is equally performative (100–47; 208) in extending “the palimpsestuous nature of performance art (or art in general) to the written text” (208). Thus it should be seen in the context of the movement in contemporary art towards destabilizing the reader or spectator, since music for a reader “poses an unfamiliar challenge” (214). In terms of literary history and philological analysis, and given the focus on both the generic qualities and the specialized nature of the topics, one of the strengths of her study is the inclusion of examples from other languages such as Thomas Bernhard’s “Goldberg novel” *Der Untergang* (1983/1991).

Historically, the musical novel is an offspring of Romanticism as seen through the prism of literary Modernism. Its analysis will therefore have to be measured by how fully it

¹ “WMA Forum,” International Association for Word and Music Studies, http://www.wordmusicstudies.net/wma_forum.html, May 18, 2018; *Word and Music Studies*, Brill, www.brill.com/products/series/word-and-music-studies, May 18, 2018.

accounts for the changes brought about during the periods of Romanticism and Modernism concerning the relationship between text and music, bearing in mind that this applies both to musical works of art and those of literature, as well as for the successive “encroaching” of verbal commentary on musical works themselves. Surprisingly, Petermann discusses Romanticism only in passing (1–2, 11, 16, 188–89, 193–200). She quickly moves on to the Modernist interest in the formal aspect of music which superseded the Romantic view of a perfect integration of form and content in music as an absolute art. She thus furthers the literary fascination with absolute music as a counterpoint to the inevitable references to literary texts, but eschews analyzing the relation of her subject, contemporary (long) fiction, to either Modernist or Romantic predecessors more fully. Her interest is thus profoundly presentist, but it is not clear why she avoids the profundity of analysis a more historical argument might have provided.

Similarly, despite an avowed interest in intermediality (238), it is curious that she does not more fully consider the way other arts have been informed or influenced by music. For example, film is a central tangential art form for the evolution of the subgenre of the musical novel, but it is mentioned only fleetingly (17–19; 36–41), as is ekphrasis (236).

Petermann plausibly differentiates between more content-based and more formal concepts of the musical novel (3). However, the restriction of her inquiry to “novels that can unambiguously be said to imitate either the musical genre of jazz or the particular theme and variations by J.S. Bach” (4) is very imprecise, considering the multifariousness of musical developments currently subsumed under the rubric of jazz (44–45).² Her claim to the autonomy of the literary genre “musical novel” in this respect reads like an apology for not engaging with pressing musicological and philological questions, such as: What precisely is understood by “jazz” in each of the novels and how does this understanding relate to the state

² See for example Richard Williams, *Jazz: A Photographic Documentary* (London, UK: Studio Editions, 1994), 12; Justin A. Williams, “Soweto’s War: Race, Class and Jazz/Hip-Hop Hybridities,” *Black British Jazz: Routes, Ownership and Performance*, ed. Jason Toynbee, Catherine Tackley and Mark Doffman (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 139.

of jazz at the time each novel was composed? Do the novels privilege listener or practitioner perspectives on the music and what significance do musical novels accord musical notation and auditory perception? How are we to distinguish between form as genre and form as compositional technique?

Rather than addressing these kinds of questions, Petermann sets out by acknowledging the lack of a “continuing focus on the general theoretical framework of the field” (6). She therefore refers to theories of intermediality³ (7) and semiotics (11) to develop her own model of intermediality, which she lays out in diagrams in an appendix (219–22). Since she contends that the jazz and *Goldberg Variations* novels share the same techniques (8), the reader might also desire a reflection on the well-established relationship between jazz and Baroque music in relation to the musical novel genre, although this is made more difficult by the complex reception of Baroque music within jazz itself.⁴ In taking the *Goldberg Variations* as an instance of “classical” music, she repeats her over-generalizing approach to jazz. Since the *Goldberg Variations* have become such a prominent model, she might have discussed why writers feel drawn towards jazz and this particular piece. The selectiveness of novelistic engagements with music unfortunately is not addressed. Her approach to the subject-matter itself forces her to deal with novels of very different aesthetic qualities; and especially with the “Goldberg novels,” adapting models of musical “form” may lead to emotionally imbalanced, overly constructed, hence artistically flawed, novelistic expressions (especially since the fugue is not a musical “form”, but a compositional technique). Thus in several respects the methodological decision to forego closer musicological engagement leaves the reader wanting.

³ Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 35 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999); Irina O. Rajewsky, *Intermedialität*, UTB für Wissenschaft 2261. Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (Tübingen: A. Francke, 2002).

⁴ William Russo, *Jazz Composition and Orchestration* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1997), 130.

In her chapter layout, Petermann attempts to structure the novelistic techniques that respond to musical phenomena. Her “intermedial” approach focuses on “features” rather than “categories” of intermedial phenomena (23). She takes up semiotic analysis by distinguishing the “intersemiotic relations” of a given novel into its “intramedial” aspects, that is references to other fictional or non-fictional literary texts, and “intermedial” dimensions, the way the text thematizes or imitates—in this case—music, thus extending the models of Wolf and Rajewsky upon which she draws.⁵ However, in addition to being overly selective in adhering only to these two theoretical models, her approach serves to camouflage the lack of multidisciplinarity that a more comprehensive study of her subject would have required. Although she repeatedly refers to Walter Pater’s famous dictum that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (2; 21; 33), she neither draws any conclusions nor reflects further on how the musical novel as a genre reacts to the hierarchy of the arts which has dominated inter-art dialogues at least since Romanticism.

Petermann does convincingly demonstrate the significance of the jazz chorus for the jazz novel in its relation to the episodic structure of the picaresque (70–87). It is also salutary that she considers the importance of poetry for the jazz novel (49–63), although it is not clear why she eschews considering other genres like short stories or even non-fiction, at least in passing, especially since some of the authors she considers, such as Stanley Crouch, wrote on music in other genres. As a result of this neglect, her own theoretical approach remains unnecessarily focused on useful descriptive schematizations rather than on multidisciplinary deep analysis. Since her labels of thematization and imitation are provisional (24–25) they may help to identify areas for further research, which in turn will depend on the further development of musicological research.

To be fair, it must be said that the present level of musicological research as a comparatively neglected field within the humanities exacerbates the kind of intermedial work attempted here. The lack of historical analysis in this study certainly results in part from the dearth of research in historical musicol-

⁵ Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction*, 50; Rajewsky, *Intermedialität*.

ogy. Petermann's valid textual observations throughout more than make up for this theoretical dearth, and may lead one to wonder how she would see such a prominent recent case as Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*⁶ in the light of her approach and thus, to hope that she will continue such work.

Overall, Petermann's investigation has the merit of being a first survey of the development of the Anglo-American musical novel since the 1970s, thereby beneficially invest-

ing, both theoretically and practically, in this sparsely researched field, and simultaneously demonstrating the lack of musicological research at the intersection of art forms. The book has a helpful index and recommends itself to literary or music libraries, as well as to all those interested in the sounds and structures of the contemporary Anglo-American novel.

Philipp Reisner (Düsseldorf)

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⁶ Paul Beatty, *The Sellout: A Novel*, First edition (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).