

***Compositional Crossroads: Music, McGill, Montreal.* Edited by Eleanor Stubley.
Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. ISBN-10: 0773532781 ISBN-13: 978-0773532786. 383 pp. \$85.00**

Compositional Crossroads is a quasi-reflexive exercise in the practice of self-representation. This is made explicit in the introduction where Eleanor Stubley, the editor, states that the goal of the book is to study the Faculty of Music at McGill University as a public institution that understands itself as “a centre of new music.” For Stubley, *Compositional Crossroads* is an analysis of “place.” As such, the thirteen chapters that comprise the book can be considered studies in the way that space is constructed and invested with purpose and meaning by virtue of the activities and expressions that occur within its compass. Thus, the activities spoken of in this collection are those that express an institutional “imaginary”—the system of meanings that directs a given social order—which in regard to McGill’s Faculty of Music revolves around the notion of the “new.” *Compositional Crossroads* therefore does not argue whether the Faculty *is* “a centre of new music” so much as it aims to *show* the ways in which the Faculty represents itself to itself (and ultimately to the public it serves) as just such a “centre.”

Compositional Crossroads is comprised of two sections, each of which features an introductory essay that contextualizes the individual works therein. The first section examines the Faculty’s imaginary—that the Faculty is a hub of contemporary music studies—in six chapters each of which reflect upon the activities of the various “institutional pathways that...define the architectural infrastructure of the Faculty” (4). These essays are largely historical and personal accounts of the role played by the Faculty’s departments and programs in shaping the “flow of the ‘new’”(25). For instance, John Rea’s essay, “Better than a Thousand Days of Diligent Study,” recounts the impact made by the Visiting Foreign Artist Program on the composition department during the late 1970s; Paul Pederson’s contribution details the history and logistics of McGill Records; and James Harley’s “The Making of New Music” describes his experience as a doctoral student in composition involved with the Composer in Residence initiative, a scheme aimed to promote the collaboration between the composition and performance departments.

The second section of the book is comprised of work-studies that examine the musical stylistics and languages of Faculty composers. These writings, which deploy a rather conventional musicological approach that treats music as a numerable field of figures and tropes, function here as discursive paths into the expressive practices of the institution. Each essay focuses on a single composer whose musical “language” exemplifies a calculus of “the new,” in relation to Western musical history, technological change, or the impact of globalization. Particularly representative of these concerns are two essays. One is Jerome Blais’ essay, which examines John Rea’s “musical schizophrenia” as an aesthetic response to the contingency of “external forces” that buffet contemporary musical practices in Canada. The other is Patrick Levesque’s chapter on

Denys Bouliane's self-described identity as an "illusionist or chameleon" who practices a form of magic realism. Pamela Jones and Bruce Mather examine the predilection for collage and quotation techniques exhibited by many McGill Faculty composers in chapters on alcedes lanza's and Bengt Hambræus. Whereas Rea and Bouliane's work might be heard to intervene in cultural discourse at a meta-level—in which music comments "anonymously" on its own symbolic valence—Hambræus and lanza's use of quotation and collage is theorized as a personal reply to Western art music's historical past and its nationalist evocations, respectively.

The book ends with an epilogue by Stublely who reflects on her own experience at McGill as a musicologist, conductor, and director of graduate studies. Whereas the preceding chapters serve as what Derrida in *Archive Fever* terms "archivization" of the Faculty's past—a process that "produces as much as it records the event" (Derrida, 17)—Stublely's epilogue contemplates the image of the Faculty of Music, cultivated and articulated over the past thirty years, in light of its recent transformation into the Schulich School of Music. This closing essay, though verging at times on the sentimental, characterizes the rechristening of the Faculty as a peculiar moment wherein the imaginary of the "new" becomes both a past and a future, a "new" that grows old in its own wake.

Insofar as the Faculty of music sees itself as "centre of new music," it does so entirely on its own terms, terms that assign the concept of "the new" to whatever activities these institutional pathways carry out. Except to the extent that the editor in her introductory writing places the term in scare-quotes ("–"), the "new," though it serves as the central theme around which the school imagines itself, is never problematized. This is unfortunate considering the fact that the new "new," let's call it a "postmodern suspicion of the new," is something that composers like Rea and Bouliane have attempted to explicitly articulate in their expressive work. Because of this, *Compositional Crossroads* expresses a peculiar tension between what the editor identifies as the Faculty's ideology of the "new" and the seemingly acritical deployment of it by the majority of its essayists. This points to a further drawback of *Compositional Crossroads*, which is its relatively dated feel.

Compositional Crossroads could have been published about ten years ago. The notion of "self-representation" is a typical Canadian anxiety, and though it was particularly relevant in the "postmodern" conceits of the Faculty composers during the 1970s and 80s, it is late not only to current compositional practices but to scholarship as well. Admittedly, the identity politics played out at an English university in a French speaking province are a relevant study, but *Compositional Crossroads* comes across largely as a recollection, a "witnessing" of the Faculty's past by those who taught and studied there. As quasi-memoir, the historical essays can be excused for the nostalgia they implicate in their telling, and the composer-work studies, as discursive exposition of recondite compositional techniques, are useful documents for entry into a more critically sustained examination of a "cosmopolitan regionalism."

To conclude, this book should be lauded for contributing to an overlooked area in musicological and cultural studies—namely, contemporary practices. That the Faculty of Music has played a significant role in the North American extension of a decidedly European tradition is clear, but it remains under-theorized both in itself and in relation to the wider trends in music production and consumption. By unabashedly assuming the importance of contemporary (art) music (which

itself constitutes another dimension of the Faculty's on-going practice of self-representation), *Compositional Crossroads* represents an important step in opening cultural studies to the relevance of a contemporary music and the study of music to contemporary culture.

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Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Archive Fever*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.