

Book Review

Arun Chandra, ed. *When Music Resists Meaning: The Major Writings of Herbert Brün.* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004 (ISBN 0-8195-6670-5).

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Throughout much of the history of music in the Western world, composers seem to have had little to say about their own music, or even about the music of others—at least as far as the surviving evidence is concerned. For composers who have written a substantial amount on the subject of music—Schumann, Wagner, Schoenberg, Babbitt, and Oliveros immediately come to mind—such writings are an invaluable resource, not only for understanding the composer’s own work, but for gaining insight into his or her philosophy of music and its relationship to history, society, and culture. *When Music Resists Meaning: The Major Writings of Herbert Brün*, edited by Arun Chandra, provides such insight into the musical and cultural world of one of the late-twentieth century’s most inventive composers.

The essays in this volume span more than forty years—1952 to 1993—and represent a diversity of views on music and the arts. The collection is divided into five main sections. The first four comprise Brün’s essays and lectures, and the last comprises Brün’s poetry and plays. The first section, “Listening,” concentrates on music from the listener’s perspective and on the relationships between listener and composer. For Brün, the centrality of the listener cannot be understated; concerning listening, he writes: “It is absurd that throughout the history of music and its social functions, the word *genius* frequently applied to composers never yet has been applied to a listener” (52). Although Brün’s work ponders the very nature of music (“Under what circumstances will an acoustical event turn into a musical event” (50)), he is primarily concerned with the listener whose *intent* is to listen, rather than the casual listener who happens to hear music, as on the radio. It is therefore no surprise that Brün makes no attempt to hide his distaste for—even hostility towards—background music of any kind.

Central to Brün’s view of the relationship between composer and listener is the concept of anticommunication, a term so difficult to define that Brün himself often writes *around* it rather than define it. While communication is defined as “a human relation between persons and things which emerges and is maintained

through messages required and permitted by already available systems or mechanisms,” anticommunication is a similar relationship “which emerges and is maintained through messages requiring and permitting not-yet-available encoding and decoding systems or mechanisms” (288). Similarly, while “communication is achievable by *learning from* language how to say something,” anticommunication “is an attempt at respectfully *teaching* language to say it” (63). For Brün, anticommunication and communication have a deeper social significance: “Insistence on *communication* ultimately leads to social and physical violence. *Anticommunication* ultimately leads to the insistence on *composition* and peace” (289).

The better part of the second section, “Composing,” consists of two previously published interviews with Brün concerning his compositional philosophy and practices. In particular, “Toward Composition,” an interview with Stuart Smith originally published in *Perspectives of New Music* in 1979, provides a glimpse into Brün’s beliefs about the composer and his place in society. For Brün, the composer should maintain a level of political responsibility. In their relationships with society, people can be either *products* of society or *inputs* into society, and Brün believes the latter to be more socially responsible.

The third and fourth sections, “Composing with Computers” and “Cybernetics,” are naturally the most technical and, consequently, the most difficult to follow for those who might not be familiar with the technology of computer music. In these sections, Brün’s lucid and insightful prose occasionally gives way to writing that straddles the fine line between the seemingly profound and the virtually nonsensical. Consider Brün’s definition of music:

Music is the result of a continuous attempt to reduce to order the assumed chaos in the system of acoustical elements and events, with the purpose of mobilizing the means for the communication of thoughts which transcend the definition of the system. (A creative project.)

These thoughts, consequently called “musical thoughts,” are the result of a continuous attempt to organize a system, called the “composer’s mind,” with the aim of knowing all about the system, and to render the extracted information communicable. (A scientific project.) (186)

The body of the volume closes with the fifth section, a brief selection of Brün’s poetry and plays. Considering the appeal of Brün’s poetry in particular, it is

regrettable that this section is so short: the poetry and plays amount to a scant thirteen pages, comprising five poems and two short plays. Appendices include a brief biography, a list of Brün's compositions and program notes, and chronological lists of compositions and publications.

In general, Chandra has done an admirable job in editing the collection; the book is well organized and free from the types of errors that so frequently plague similar publications. But notwithstanding the virtues, the collection does suffer from a few problems. Perhaps its chief weakness is the lack of editorial material. Considering the value of this collection of essays, not only to composers and computer musicians but to a more general readership of artists and musicians, a foreword by the editor concerning Brün's contributions and his importance to twentieth-century music is certainly warranted. This is all the more necessary considering how little attention Brün has received in general musical discourse during the last several decades. For example, only a scant 225 words have been devoted to Brün in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (a generous treatment, considering that he is just as often not mentioned at all). In addition, a number of the essays contained in the collection are previously unpublished lectures. Additional information about the context of such lectures would be helpful to readers.

One final remark concerning the title: the identification as "The Major Writings of Herbert Brün" is somewhat misleading. Given Brün's substantial list of publications, those that comprise this volume represent a mere fraction. This fact should not diminish the value of this important work, nor should it be interpreted as a criticism of this collection. However, it does underscore the need for further recognition and availability of Brün's additional writings. In particular, his earlier writings, which were printed in German, have never been available to the English-speaking world; even the original German versions are frequently conspicuously absent from American library shelves. It is hopeful that this volume will be only the first pioneering step towards an increased awareness of the life and works of one the most innovative composers of the twentieth century.

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Thank you,
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