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Book review: *The kaleidoscope of women's sounds in music of the late 20th and early 21st centuries*, by Kheng K. Koay

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The kaleidoscope of women's sounds in music of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, by Kheng K. Koay. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015; ISBN: 9781443876520 (£54.30)

Scholarship in the field of women composers has come a long way since Jane Bowers and Judith Tick's anthology *Women Making Music*, published in 1987. The work of Karin Pendle, Ellie Hisama, Sophie Fuller, Denise von Glahn and Rhiannon Mathias, to mention just a few, has opened doors into a better understanding of the lives, works and genius of several generations of overlooked composers, who faced discrimination because of their gender rather than their creative talents.

Kheng K. Koay's *The Kaleidoscope of Women's Sounds in Music of the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries* adds another volume to this hugely important developing field. She has selected six women composers whose works have been recorded and published, and examined their lives, works and the reception of their work through their own words and those of others, and through the analysis of a particular post-1980 piece by each composer. She lays out her intentions very clearly at the start.

Thus this book contributes to an understanding of musical language of late 20th century women composers. It gives an insight into the creative acts of the selected composers, aiming to provide valuable information to those who perform their music, to young musicians learning and trying to understand their music, and to the listener-reader seeking a wider knowledge of contemporary music by women composers (p.xv).

The first chapter, 'Women Composers and Modern Society', describes the difficulties women composers have had in pursuing successful careers in the twentieth century, and through reference to existing scholarship in this area, examines steps that have been taken to change this situation by both individuals and music organisations. Here, Koay includes a considerable amount of biographical information about the six composers. However, some of the material appears to be misplaced, as the second chapter, 'Creativity, Reception to and Background of the Composers', consists partly of short biographies, and therefore includes a great deal of information recycled from Chapter 1. While there is some very interesting material about each of the composers laid out here, such as Chen Yi's experience of the Cultural Revolution in China and its effect on her subsequent music, as a whole, this part of the book seems rather fragmented and poorly laid out as well as repetitious.

In the 'Introduction' we are informed that what will follow is not a comparative analysis (p.viii), however, the remainder of the book consists of three chapters in which Koay pairs off the composers and discusses their music with reference to three different approaches. For example, in Chapter 3, 'Bold Sound Colors and Space', Koay examines Sofia Gubaidulina's *Quaternion* and Joan Tower's *In Memory*. Koay writes brief analyses of the two works in which she draws attention to the use of binary opposition in each. Although she does not deal with the two works point by

point, I reached the end of the chapter feeling that the works had been compared. The same can be said of Chapter 4, 'Straddling Classical and American Vernacular Idioms', which examines the combining of classical and popular culture in Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's *Millennium Fantasy* and Libby Larsen's *Four on the Floor*, and of Chapter 5, 'The Cross-Over and National Influences', which investigates the use of national and traditional elements in Chen's *Ba Yin* and Judith Weir's *Distance and Enchantment*. The writing draws out common themes and ways of using structure, technique and culture very effectively, and the similarities and differences between the ways the composers have worked is very evident from the discussions of their pieces.

Of particular note in these last three chapters is the discussion of Gubaidulina's use of quarter tones and of the way Chen has created the sounds of traditional Chinese instruments using modern Western ones. The analyses are rather difficult to engage with fully, because Koay sets up interesting arguments and then suddenly drops them without having worked out the ideas completely, in order to move on.

There is some unevenness in the text, for example in the discussion of tonality in *Four on the Floor*, where Koay seems to contradict herself (pp.142-144), and a slight laziness with some of the analysis, such as her assumption that short passages of repetition necessarily imply a connection with minimalism. Koay also feels the need to explain the same things again when she revisits an issue. I think that a shorter book, more tautly organised, would have worked just as well.

Despite these issues, the book does fill in some gaps in the story of these women composers and their music, and the analyses are generally well devised. For the performer, there is a lot of useful information about the composers'

lives, the ways they conceived their work, and the stylistic and technical challenges that these pieces present.

In the 'Introduction', Koay makes a very big claim regarding the uniqueness of this book.

There are some significant factors that make this present book quite different from others. It not only provides the biographies of the composers, but also their perspectives on music, the reception of their music, the involvement of women composers in modern society, and an analysis of their compositions (p.xii).

If this was so then it would have been a great achievement indeed, however, one only has to think of books like Hisama's *Gendering Musical Modernism* (2001) and Mathias's *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music* (2012) to realise that this concept has already been conceived and put into print by other musicologists. What Koay does provide the reader with is a useful new text looking at composers whose work deserves to be better known.

References

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About the review author

LUCY HOLLINGWORTH is a composer, musicologist and writer currently studying for a PhD at The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She has a Master's degree in Composition from Edinburgh University. Her research area is autoethnography and women composers and she is preparing a creative portfolio and a dissertation. Recent performances include, *What The Living Do* performed by Sinae Lee, and a music theatre piece *The Poetess*, premiered at RCS in 2016. She previously worked as an IT lecturer and web designer and is the Web Editor of the *Scottish Journal of Performance*.