

Opponent review

Michael Andrew Burt: Manufacturing expectation and predictiveness in orchestral music of the past eighty years with respect to my own compositional practice (Master's thesis)

The thesis of Michael A. Burt is focused on expectation as one of the compositional aspects and the author aims in finding and describing possible processes which can lead to the result. Generally, expectation and predictiveness in music have been a theme since early music and I find it a very broad and interesting topic. As there might be more reasons to search for „unpredictiveness“ in contemporary (or generally 20th century and newer) music though.

The thesis is divided into five chapters which I find rather confusing. The first chapter named „Introduction“ takes almost a quarter of the thesis and in my opinion is not just the introduction itself but explains the topic, research, terminology etc. Usually, an introduction is used to set the goal of the thesis and introduce the hypothesis and possible ways of research. That is why it is recommended to write an introduction as the last piece of the thesis. In this case, we have quite a long explanatory chapter which I would consider already a main chapter of the thesis. It is not clear to me what information is quoted or freely transcribed from different sources and which are the author's thoughts, there is almost missing a note apparatus (a total of 9 notes in the whole thesis). This should be better recognizable in the text as well (using italics and quotation marks). Formally, Introduction usually is not numbered as it is in this thesis. Thus, the real “introduction” is missing.

The following three chapters “analyse” compositions by Messiaen, Penderecki and Silvestrov. More as analysis I would call these descriptions. I can imagine a deeper and more contextual form of analysis at this level of study – in a master's thesis – especially when the selected works are extremely interesting, very well manufactured and less formally could be named “masterpieces”.

What I find the most interesting part of the thesis is the last chapter about the author's composition. I just wished he was as detail-focused in the previous analytical chapters as in this one. Of course, it is much easier to describe own compositional thinking than decode similar processes in others' works.

The thesis shows the author's interest in listeners' expectations, using them consciously in compositions and manipulating them, and good knowledge of the literature on the topic. As well, the reader can receive rather an informative view into his compositional processes. The formal part of the thesis is not perfect though, translations of the title page and abstract into the Czech language are more a joke than a real translation – for a student living and studying in Prague it shouldn't have been such a problem to let the text translate (or at least correct) by a native speaker.

Generally, many thoughts are repeated many times in the thesis which wouldn't be necessary. The thesis feels a bit too “talkative” to me and shortening certain parts, deleting what already was said, being briefer and more constructive would help. Bibliography should be alphabetically organized, ISBN codes are missing.

I recommend the thesis for defence.

Suggested assessment: B

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