

BOOKS

Jeffrey Arlo Brown, *The Life and Music of Gérard Grisey: Delirium and Form*. University of Rochester Press, 2023, 288 pp. \$115/£97.

The year 2023 marks a quarter of a century since the untimely death of Gérard Grisey (1946–1998), a date marked by the publication of Jeffrey Arlo Brown's biography of the composer. Grisey tends to be categorised as a spectral composer, though Brown stresses that he disliked the term. This 'life and music' focuses more on the composer's life, and the author interviewed many of Grisey's family and former lovers and many friends and composers who knew him well, with the notable exception of Tristan Murail who did not respond to an interview request.

Grisey was from a modest and non-artistic family; his first musical experience was playing the accordion. In the centre of the book, there are lovely images of Grisey as a young virtuoso accordionist, as an altar boy, and with family and friends. The book includes two appendices: a list of recordings and a list of Grisey's published works (there are 30, dating from 1968 to 1998, including two separately listed versions of *Anubis Nout* and an orchestration of four Hugo Wolf songs).

Brown also shows that the young Grisey was not only a talented musician, but also an intellectually curious autodidact with a strong religious faith. He was educated in Catholic schools, and when he moved to Paris in 1965, he took a room in a Catholic educational institution in exchange for helping out with chores. He spent key periods of his life in Germany, first as an accordion student at the Hohner Conservatory in Trossingen; later, he lived for a year in Berlin and he was invited to participate in the Darmstadt Summer Course three times. Grisey was also employed for a few unsatisfactory years as assistant professor of composition at Berkeley, where he did not fit in aesthetically with his US colleagues and there was a culture clash between what he expected from the job and the requirements of the US academic system.

But Paris was the most important city in his life, and his studies in Messiaen's Paris

Conservatoire composition class were the strongest formative influence. Grisey gradually lost his Catholic faith (Brown speculates that 'an almost obsessive dedication to the arts replaced the intensive religious practice of Grisey's youth'; p. 105), and in this context Brown avoids discussing the Messiaen-shaped elephant in the classroom: by distancing himself from religion, did the young composer want to avoid direct comparison with his teacher, the contemporary French musician most strongly associated with Catholicism? The teacher and pupil were not close; Brown reports a Grisey student saying that Messiaen 'was a little bit afraid' of Grisey because the young man's long hair in the short period of unrest starting in May 1968 suggested he was a revolutionary, and in Liam Cagney's words, 'Messiaen kept Grisey at arm's length' (p. 92). What is incontestable is that Messiaen was politically reactionary.

While Grisey met Murail in Messiaen's class, they did not get to know each other well until they overlapped at the Villa Médicis in Rome in 1972–73, where both had a scholarship to live in Rome for two years and focus on composition. It was Murail who proposed that Grisey join him to create a new collective with an attached ensemble, though Grisey, whose independent nature is constantly stressed in Brown's book, was a reluctant group-joiner (p. 93). However, *L'Itinéraire* (which eventually comprised Tristan Murail, Hugues Dufourt, Michaël Levinas and Roger Tessier alongside Grisey and the ensemble of the same name) certainly drew attention to the composer. The differences in background and personality between Murail and Grisey are stressed, but their names remain linked through *L'Itinéraire* and in other contexts, not all of which are fully explained. Brown mentions in a footnote on p. 253 the intriguing detail that 'Grisey founded CompAct, a sort of composers' political action committee, with Tristan Murail.' When? What were their aims, and what, if anything, did they achieve? Another important encounter in Rome was with the poet Christian Guez Ricord, whose words Grisey would set in his final work.

The book is strongest when Brown draws convincing connections between Grisey's life and

music. The composer's interest in ancient Egyptian artefacts and spirituality, deepened by a visit to Egypt in 1974, is reflected in pieces including *Anubis Nout*, *Jour, contre-jour* and *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*. And Brown does not hesitate to suggest links between Grisey's search for human connection through multiple relationships and the theme of duality/two-ness in his oeuvre: so many of his pieces have two movements, or are written for two instrumentalists, or deal with the concept of opposites. The tellingly titled *Solo pour deux* (1981) for clarinet and trombone has the two instruments fusing into one, or at least trying to, as if a new instrument is haltingly created from the union. Interviews with Grisey's former wife Jocelyne produced much valuable detail about his aesthetic development and struggles to make ends meet as a composer, and Grisey told her that 'physical desire, the breath, the beating heart' (p. 113) were central to his music. Anyone who thinks that Grisey's music is all about the sound spectrum and the acoustic phenomenon of sound will have their ideas expanded by this book: *Partiels*, perhaps his best-known work, is modelled on 'the stages of human breath, with areas of inhalation, exhalation and repose' (p. 112).

While Brown's book is unlikely to be superseded as a biography of Grisey, his music – which is, after all, the reason we are interested in him – is less well handled, to the extent that I could not help wondering for whom the book was written. The book features no music examples, and the audience interested in a book on Grisey is unlikely to need to be told that 'Brian Ferneyhough [...] writes music of staggering complexity' (p. 131). At the same time, as Grisey does not have the reputation and name recognition of twentieth-century composers such as Messiaen, Boulez and Stockhausen, the audience for a biographically-driven study is limited, particularly – let's be frank – at this price point. Footnotes provide minimal details about the source of a quotation – annoyingly, academic readers wanting full details need to turn to the bibliography – and the original language of non-English quotations is not provided, which limits the usefulness of the book for researchers. I particularly wanted to see the original French text of poetry set by Grisey, but we have to make do with translations. I enjoyed Brown's clear and lively writing style, apart from some journalistic turns of phrase: for example, many people, from Simone Weil to Alfred Cortot to Jean-Paul Gaultier, are described as 'legendary',

which is also the chosen epithet for Messiaen's composition class.

Above all, the limited amount of music analysis is reliant on other authors (especially Jérôme Baillel, author of a book in French on Grisey, and Liam Cagney), and Grisey's music could have been contextualised in more detail. On pp. 118–19 the subtitle of the book 'Delirium and Form' is revealed to be drawn from Grisey's description of his *Prologue* for solo viola (1976): 'what I believe to be music: a dialectic between delirium and form.' The composer used a similar expression in a 1984 letter to his lover France Detry (pp. 188–89): 'Music is not my *thing*, my hobby [...] It is the meeting of delirium and the forms of drama and number.' While Brown cites these important statements, their relevance to Grisey's work is left vague. And I was surprised that the author did not make a connection between these words of Grisey's and Boulez's well-known wish to 'take delirium and organise it' (disclaimer: my 2024 book on Boulez's formative years is subtitled 'Organised Delirium' and one of my principal aims was to show that Boulez's early works exist at the confluence of these terms). There is, however, insight into the difference between Grisey's and Boulez's approach to the orchestra thanks to the IRCAM researcher Stephen McAdams (p. 147), who recalled Boulez rehearsing a piece by Grisey (probably *Modulations*): 'Boulez had a very analytical ear and could hear anything out of anything, regardless of how complex it was. He was trying to make it so that he could hear everything. Grisey was like "No, no, no, no. It's supposed to all melt together".'

Aged only 52, Grisey fell into a coma after an aneurysm and never regained consciousness, or as Brown puts it, evoking the title of his final work, he 'crossed the threshold' on 11 November 1998 (p. 275). It is irresistible to view *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* (1996–98) as his 'autorequiem' and Brown does not resist this temptation, though he notes that at the same time, the work represented a new direction for Grisey. In fact, Grisey told Julian Anderson in 1996: 'I'm sick of the harmonic spectrum' (p. 255), and the book mentions some projects Grisey planned but would not live to realise. The book ends almost as abruptly as Grisey's life did, with a short concluding chapter titled 'Berceuse', the same title as the final section of *Quatre chants*.

Brown's book is most valuable for its biographical detail and for suggesting future lines of enquiry. He cites a fascinating review by

Jonathan Harvey of *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* (1970–72) (p. 81), and the common ground between Grisey and Harvey – spirituality, properties of sound, close listening – is surely worth exploring (Grisey’s work has an epigraph drawn from a Hindu text). Even more, it would be good if the resurgence of interest in Grisey on the anniversary of his death prompted more performances of his music.

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John Snijders, *Ixion*. Marmalade Publishers of Visual Theory, 248pp. £24.99

An immediate impression of *Ixion: Morton Feldman, Notation, Performance Practice and Jackson Pollock* is prompted by its dust jacket: a balanced juxtaposition of minimal serif text upon a monochrome lemon. The positioning of ‘Marmalade/Publishers of Visual Theory’ on the front cover communicates the bent of the book and the approaches that Snijders will take in approaching Morton Feldman’s pioneering yet relatively unnoticed work *Ixion* (1962).

Ixion, in Snijders’ estimation ‘the first example of a purely graphic notation for compositional and performance purposes’ (p. 32), does not maintain the same position in public consciousness as works by some of Feldman’s contemporaries, such as his friends within the ‘Cedar Street Tavern’ crowd: John Cage, Jackson Pollock and co. This being said, *Ixion* dominates in David Cline’s *The Graph Music of Morton Feldman* (2016), though mostly from a music analytical perspective. Snijders, first and foremost a performer, though also an expert on contemporary visual arts and an art collector, is thus well placed to provide pragmatic and performance perspectives in addition to those we might conceive as more traditionally ‘analytical’.

Snijders is an arresting storyteller; a skill honed through teaching ‘performance practice’ and one which draws you into this slight and charming pocketbook. Opening with an anecdote from Middelburg, Netherlands, in July 1985, Snijders recounts his first interaction with Feldman wherein the composer was drinking heavily while offering suggestions to the musicians rehearsing his *Trio* such as ‘too loud!’ and ‘more sexy’ (p. 11). This humorous opener is revealing of much that is to follow: the exceptionality of Snijders’ experiences working with seminal composers and performers of ‘classical

music’ post-WWII, his ability to time and proffer these appropriately, and the challenges concomitant with interpreting Feldman’s musical philosophy and material scores.

Several difficulties arise upon approaching the performance of *Ixion*. These include the removal of a bar-like structure, indeterminacy of pitch and lack of metronome mark. Snijders consults a diversity of sources (choreographies, essays, interviews, letters, and recordings of various qualities) in shaping his exploration of the work, despite their scarcity and frequent unreliability. For example, Feldman’s chronology is often erroneous while his musical musings often lack philosophical grounding – note his references to ‘living thinking’, ‘dead thinking’ and ‘pre-thinking’ (p. 19). Snijders navigates these issues that affect conceptualising and playing the work by putting performance considerations front and centre.

While the title of Snijders’ inquiry is *Ixion*, not *Ixions*, the piece exists in two versions: one for ensemble (three flutes, clarinet, horn, trumpet, trombone, piano, three to seven cellos, and two to four double basses) and one for two pianos. A whole chapter, almost entirely in tabular form and lasting for 71 pages, is dedicated to a comparative analysis of these two versions. Although Snijders illustrates impressive care, precision and temporal commitment, readers may be forgiven for questioning the utility of such a large section of the book. The tables consider each ‘ictus’ of the respective ‘versions’ in turn, indicating the instruments featured in each instance, how their sonic material is distributed between six registers (high high, middle high, low high, high low, middle low and low low), resultant numerical discrepancies between the two versions, etc. The enterprise requires seeing to be believed, and the act of checking its accuracy falls far beyond the remit of this review! That being said, one of the primary conclusions of the book stems from this painstaking exercise, insofar as the two *Ixions* ‘can be seen as two versions of the same material, but with their own musical identity, enough to treat them as separate compositions in their own right’ (p. 235).

The fourth chapter, ‘Ixion – Performance Issues’, is perhaps the most ‘useful’. Snijders interrogates the indeterminate natures of the scores and their performance instructions, situating *Ixion* within its musical and social context and using his vast performance experiences to intuit interpretive possibilities that are either in keeping or against the ‘spirit’ of the work. While limits of notational specificity are present