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*Spectral World Musics: Proceedings of the Istanbul Spectral
Music Conference* (review)

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Spectral World Musics: Proceedings of the Istanbul Spectral Music Conference. Edited by Robert Reigle and Paul Whitehead. Istanbul: Pan, 2008. [xxxvii, 457 p. ISBN 9789944396271. YTL 50.] Abstracts, music examples, illustrations, contributor biographies, 2 compact discs.

The writings contained in this collection of conference papers are, on the one hand, a celebration of the classic spectral techniques and attitudes of composers like Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail and, on the other, an attempted redefinition of the term “spectral.” According to the opening remarks by Robert Reigle, this conference was organized in the interest of integrating the awareness of timbre into all levels of music discourse, in a way equal to that of pitch, rhythm, and harmony. It is certainly true that, for the most part, musicologists and theorists tend to ignore timbre as an informing element of musical thought and structure, which is likely due to the fact that timbre is infinitely more difficult to quantify than pitch, rhythm, harmony, style, etc. It is time, however, for those invested in the analysis and academic study of music to accept the importance of timbre.

The immediate problem that I have with these opening statements, and with many of the papers for that matter, is an obsession with labeling. The “spectralism” label has become yet another “ism” used by musicologists and theorists who have an unexplainable desire to put every piece of music in its “proper place.” While I agree with the first part of the conference goal—to integrate the study of timbre into musical analysis—I do not agree that there is the need for a broadening of the definition of “spectral” to include any music making use of timbre as a structural element. Compelling arguments are made toward this purpose, but parts of the proceedings of this conference seem obsessed with the “spectral” label. Far more often than I would have liked, I had to read statements along the lines of “this is spectral and this is why.” Yes, given that this conference is specifically addressing spectral music, a certain amount of this is understandable and makes sense, but the incessancy with which it is handled (in some cases) seems a bit pointless. What is to be gained by such ex-

cessive labeling, beyond achieving less specificity with regard to terminology? Is it not more worthwhile to read about music than to read about how something fits a label? This is a small point, however, that does not address some of the great strengths presented in these writings. Although there is a wide range in quality of scholarship within these pages, a handful of contributions are truly remarkable.

The book is conveniently divided into six subsections: “Spectral Ideas,” “Ethnomusical Perspectives,” “Composers Discuss Their Music,” “Spectral Compositions,” “Performance Perspectives,” and “Improvisation with Spectra.” Each section has its strengths and weaknesses, “Spectral Ideas” being the weakest. The majority of the papers in the section generally present interesting and thoughtful ideas, but either do not explore them with adequate depth, or in the case of Tildy Bayar’s “Music Inside Out: Spectral Music’s Chords of ‘Nature,’” base wild generalizations and misconceptions on questionable research. While Bayar’s paper is disappointing in its shortcomings, I do appreciate her attitude toward challenging the idealistic attitudes present in much spectral music scholarship. With the exception of Joshua Fineberg’s keynote address, the papers in this section set a poor tone for the book as a whole and discourage further reading. I don’t intend to imply that there is no value in the papers here, however. Mine Doğan-Dack and John Dack’s papers both offer good ideas, but do not seem to be as useful as each author would like. Doğan-Dack offers many strong arguments in support of the fact that timbre is an expressive element in music, but every point is so over-elaborated that a cumbersome argument is made toward a point that would be more effectively argued with fewer words and more music examples. Dack’s paper offers a new means of timbral analysis that is well argued and well executed. I remain skeptical, though, that this method is a viable system for meaningful musical analysis. Fineberg’s “What’s in a Name?” is a very useful addition to the body of writings on spectral music. It is concise and serves a simple purpose: it provides a basic history of spectral thought and its development over the last forty years. I would recommend this essay to anyone interested in grasping the most basic concepts of spectral music and its history without doing a

lot of highly technical reading. It does not go into the level of detail found in many of the writings, but that is not its purpose. It simply attempts to set a baseline understanding for the following selections.

The "Ethnomusicological Perspectives" section contains several interesting research topics, all presented in thought-provoking ways. Although they investigate wildly different topics, what each of these papers has in common is a lack of depth. This is not meant as criticism, rather it is an observation that these essays should be viewed as points of departure for their respective topics. Very striking ideas and observations about the important role of timbre in the music of many cultures are present here, and some of the ground work has been completed; this opens the door for more researchers to dig deeper, eventually creating a large body of research.

The section "Composers Discuss their Music" features some ideas that are very interesting as well some that are irritatingly naïve. It is not entirely clear, but most of this section seems to be made up of the transcripts of presentations given by the authors rather than actual papers. While they are all somewhat interesting to read, most are insufficient to express the depth of ideas being presented without the inclusion of more examples (visual and audio). Yes, some examples are included in the text, and two compact discs of audio examples accompany the volume, but it seems that some of the examples shown or played during these talks are not included in the book. So while interesting at times, these transcripts seem to act more as a record of the conference proceedings than as something meant to deepen the understanding of topics at hand for those not present. Even with this missing information, though, the presentations by Ana-Maria Avram, Joshua Fineberg, Tristan Murail, and Curtis Roads are useful and open interesting windows into their music.

"Spectral Compositions" is the strongest segment of the book, far stronger, in fact, than what I expected based on the previous sections. Three essays here are particularly good. Tolga Tüzüns's analysis of Murail's *Winter Fragments*, Chris Arrell's analysis of Grisey's *Partiels*, and Robert Wannamaker's overview of James Tenney's spectral tendencies are all very well written and researched. Tüzüns' work on *Winter Fragments*

is a refreshing piece of analysis that finally extends beyond pitch classes, timbre, and structure, and actually investigates the music that is made with all of these elements. The investigation of timbral development and imitation was particularly striking. Regarding Arrell's paper, I was skeptical when I saw that this book contained yet another discussion of *Partiels*, considering the multiple existing analyses. This one, however, was not what I expected. It took what has been done already, addressed the existing analyses, and went further by discussing how the spectra, processes, and basic structures resulted in a work of musical art. In fact, this analysis turned out to be the most interesting writing about Grisey's *Partiels* that I have read, and is certainly one of the most valuable aspects of this book.

Wannamaker's writing on James Tenney is another truly valuable addition to this collection, though it is very different in nature from the preceding papers. It is clear, as concise as can be considering the amount of material covered, and thoughtful. Wannamaker offers basic information and brief analyses of several works by Tenney that are either overlooked or simply unknown in the spectral world. Although there is no great analytical depth offered here, the essay serves a clear purpose. Wannamaker brings to light a vast collection of work by a composer not widely regarded as "spectral."

The "Performance Perspectives" and "Improvisation with Spectra" sections are comprised of workshops and performances given during the conference. The transcripts of "Performance Perspectives" have some interesting elements, and the workshops were likely useful to attendees of the conference, but their inclusion in this book offers little more than a record of their existence. Without the inclusion of audio from the workshops, there is little to be gained. The improvisations, however, are included on the compact discs. These tracks, along with the accompanying discussions, offer unique perspectives on the use of new techniques in improvisation. Improvisation in new music is something that, even today, is often looked down upon in academic environments. I am happy to see it included in a scholarly conference.

Generally speaking, this collection of papers is what can be expected from any con-

ference: some good, some mediocre, and a few that are terrible. Several topics in this collection seem promising, but do not always deliver what is promised, either through a lack of depth, spotty research, or examples that appear to have been offered during the conference that are not included in the text. For these reasons, I do not recommend that anybody bother to read the entire collection. The papers that are most worth reading are those by

Avram, Fineberg, Murail, Tüzün, Arrell, and Wannamaker. Also, the "Ethnomusical Perspectives" portion, while lacking in depth, could potentially spark more intensive study from other scholars. The few strong elements here are likely to make a difference in the body of scholarship on contemporary music—all labels aside.

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FIN-DE-SIÈCLE AND MODERNISM

Las claves madrileñas de Isaac Albéniz. By Jacinto Torres Mulas with the collaboration of Ester Aguado Sánchez. Madrid: Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2008. [235 p., 19 facsimiles of primary documents. ISBN 9788478127122. €30.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography.

On 18 May 1909, the Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz died just short of his forty-ninth birthday in the French resort town of Cambo-les-Bains, in the French Pyrenees, where he had gone seeking relief from a chronic kidney ailment (Bright's disease) that had plagued him for years. The son of a Basque father and Catalan mother, he had entered the world in 1860, on the other side and at the other end of the Pyrenees, in Camprodón, Catalonia. It was here and in Barcelona that he spent the first eight years of his life, and he would return to the Catalan capital many times, even maintaining a residence in the suburb of Tiana. During the final fifteen years of his life, however, his principal residence was in Paris, where he imbibed French impressionism and composed one of the greatest of Spanish works for piano, the twelve *nouvelles impressions of Iberia*.

These few geographic and biographical details in many respects define how we understand Albéniz as a creative artist. He was a liberal and forward-looking composer, a son of Spain's most progressive region, and he developed into a figure of international renown, one as comfortable in London or Paris as he was in Barcelona or Granada. However, as crucial as Barcelona and Paris were to his growth as a performer and composer, one other city merits far more consideration than it has received as a crucible of his art: Madrid.

Albéniz spent the years 1868 to 1875 in Madrid, then moved again from Barcelona

to Madrid in 1883, remaining there until his departure for Paris and London in 1889. This final tenure there was a formative epoch in his evolution as a composer, and no study of his later masterpieces can tell us much of value without a clear and thorough understanding of precisely these six years. It may well be that only a *madrileño* could provide us with such a foundation, one on intimate terms with the city's cultural geography and history. Fortunately, such a scholar exists, one whose knowledge of the Spanish capital is matched by a profound comprehension of Albéniz's life and music, a comprehension cultivated over three decades of painstaking and groundbreaking research.

Jacinto Torres Mulas is professor of musicology at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música in Madrid. The author of numerous major articles on the composer, he also compiled the indispensable *Catálogo sistemático descriptivo de las obras musicales de Isaac Albéniz* (Madrid: Instituto de Bibliografía Musical, 2001; ensuing T. numbers derive from this catalog), previously reviewed in this journal (*Notes* 59, no. 2 [December 2002]: 332–33). In this latest opus, he explores in depth Albéniz's connection to Madrid and the crucial impetus his residence there provided to his career.

It should be stated at the outset that, in his later years, Albéniz did not hold the capital city in high regard. He viewed it as provincial and backward, and he retained bitter memories of the savage treatment