# BOOK

Louise Devenish, Cat Hope, eds, *Contemporary Musical Virtuosities*, Routledge, 2023, 214pp. £135.

Drawing on Louise Devenish and Cat Hope's 2020 manifesto 'The New Virtuosity: A Manifesto for Contemporary Sonic Practice',[1] this edited book presents a series of provocations about virtuosities in new music today. *Contemporary Virtuosities* aims to go further than merely destabilising or decentring the hegemonic classical concept of virtuosity, instead proposing alternative, distributed and embodied models generated largely through reflexive practice-based research. The editors argue that 'the key feature of virtuosi – as musicians whose activities contribute to the advancement of their artform – remains, but how this is defined is reflective of our time and place, with advancement understood on social as well as musical levels' (p. 7). The book facilitates a wide range of modes of knowledge production, with a mixed format of works in progress, interview transcriptions, a manifesto and email correspondence presented alongside more traditional theoretical, empirical, auto-ethnographic and practice-based research.

The book has 16 chapters by a range of scholars and practitioners. Jonathan Impett (Chapter Two) explores the historical contingency of the classical notion of 'virtuosity', and in doing so argues for its resituating. In locating virtuosity as 'ascribed', notions of virtuosity become co-constituted with an audience, allowing a virtuoso to refract 'new potentialities that inhere in a particular moment and space' (p. 26). Salomé Voegelin (Chapter Three) offers a complementary theoretical approach through a deliberately unfinished essay that proposes 'open paths' for reconsidering the pursuit of virtuosity, suggesting that while it serves as a standard and measure of quality, it also acts as a means of exclusion. She critiques the postmodernist inability to fully abandon the modernist formations of virtuosity, arguing that 'even its off-the-line can be measured in relation to the line, which limits the radicality of its extension and keeps it orderly' (p. 37).

A concerted effort is taken to de-emphasise the specificity of the concept of virtuosity for Western classical music, with three chapters focusing on music outside the tradition. Clint Bracknell's chapter (Chapter Four) on Noongar song and revitalisation explores presentations of virtuosity in the concepts of the 'songman' and a 'good song' in Aboriginal traditions from the southwest of Western Australia. He explores historical Noongar practices to inform decisions about music revitalisation in the growing song tradition, placing the role of a virtuoso as one of a cultural facilitator. In Chapter Seven Sandeep Bhagwati reflects on his experiences of cross-genre musical collaboration and the virtuosities that materialise in the process of collaboration between practitioners of Western art music and those of 'traditional' global musics. He derives a toolbox for collaboration: Śabdagatitāra, a Sanskrit-based neologism that translates as 'the intertwining (tāra) of methods of making (gati) sound (śabda)', which requires a virtuosity in negotiating power differentials between musical expressions and musicking environments. Chapter 15, '"Rrrrreaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrghhhhh!!!!"': Evolving Vocal Virtuosity in Extreme Metal', is a discussion between Cat Hope and Karina Utomo, the metal vocalist. Through discussion of the virtuosity in relationship to extreme metal, it touches on ideas around authorship, training and authority, which have fascinating implications for thinking about genre.

This book also gives voice to embodied and practice-based forms of knowledge. Molly Joyce (Chapter Five) writes about the intersection of music, dance and the disabled body. She juxtaposes 'normative virtuosity' that celebrates extreme ability and physicality with 'virtuosity from disability' that 'reveals and embraces a variety of physicality and embodied experiences' (p. 59). Drawing on the work of Marc Brew and Kayla Hamilton, she offers a non-comparative path that affords new, undiscovered norms and possibilities for virtuosity, taking on Sieber's 'ideology of ability'.[2] In Chapter 16 David Moran presents a practice-led perspective on instrumental technology in Liza Lim's *Invisibility,* for solo cello. Moran explores the experience of a modified

[1] Cat Hope and Louise Devenish, 'The New Virtuosity: A Manifesto for Contemporary Sonic Practice', *ADSR Zine*, 11 (2020), https://f3a7ef68-fbab-4d89-9436-183b772ae50a.filesusr.com/ugd/884980_2687012fc8764872904f6db14cf1b64c.pdf#page=3 (accessed 23 June 2024).

[2] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

cello and the function of the prepared 'guiro-bow' to look at new instrumental encounters engendered by the work. He proposes that virtuosity in *Invisibility* requires a performer's relationship with the instrument to acknowledge it as an active agent and co-creator in the work, rather than as a passive object, while Ros Bandt (Chapter 14) explores the distribution of virtuosic processes between collaborators, acoustic spaces and audience participants in a selection of site-specific works. She presents collective creativity and an embrace of uncertainty as engendering virtuosity. This is complemented by Cathy van Eck's (Chapter Ten) exploration of the technical virtuosity developed when performers use sensors in electronic music, a virtuosity often unappreciated by an audience. Similarly, Iran Sanadzadeh (Chapter 11) explores bespoke electronic instruments for which visible performative actions are less overt. Drawing on the Terpsichora Pressure-Sensitive Floors as an example of virtuosity that constructs a performance vocabulary on an electronic instrument, she destabilises the direct association between gesture and sound.

Maggie Nicols' chapter (Chapter Seven) on 'social virtuosity' explores her work as part of FIG (Feminist Improvising Group), Contradictions and The Gathering. She uses the term 'social virtuosity' to express excellence from collective music-making across varying levels of ability. She marks individual virtuosity and social virtuosity as having important yet distinct roles in the arts, with varying cultural impacts, which she traces in alternative arts scenes. A similar emphasis on collectivity is found in Chapter Nine, where Margaret Anne Schedel and Suzanne Thorpe write about 'virtuosity and the commons', pointing out the disconnect between the aura surrounding a virtuoso performer and the material reality of the time, effort and labour of the performer and the communities from which they come. They argue that this disconnect allows an operationalisation of virtuosity to reinforce hierarchies of Western art music that de-emphasise community in favour of prioritising singular figureheads. They offer an auto-ethnographic perspective that explores the distribution of labour that 'makes a virtuoso possible' (p. 105).

Experimental, non-linear, informal and unfinished forms of knowledge are presented alongside traditional scholarly essays. Chapter 13 presents an email dialogue between Louise Devenish and Jennifer Torrence. The two percussionists, who are collaborator–composer–performers, explore the nature of virtuosity in a demotic, conversational way. Echo Ho, Hannes Hoelzl and Alberto de Campo's chapter (Chapter 12), 'Always Preparing for Spontaneity', invokes Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's Oblique Strategy 'Gardening, Not Architecture' and presents an experimental non-linear conversation exploring a variety of flavours of virtuosity – exploring how these various strands (virtuosity of unknowing, virtuosity of listening, virtuosity of cultivation, virtuosity with coding and more) have the potential to shape new branches of music-making. Chapter Eight reproduces 'The New Virtuosity' manifesto, by the editors of the volume, along with brief commentary.

The book is expansive in its open-ended exploration of formations of contemporary virtuosities and is an excellent contribution to this burgeoning field of scholarship. While I'm sympathetic to the intention to forego a conclusion, so as not to assert a singular authorial voice in lieu of the diverse range of contributors, this leaves the reader without critical comparison of the chapters. One of the beauties of plurality is that it allows for rich and deep comparison that can provide new theoretical insights; yet here the plurality is left disconnected, which inhibits the ability to draw wide-ranging theoretical conclusions from the individual contributions. Some of the theoretical precedents for the move to (re)define the historical concept of virtuosity are also missing – such as Goehr's rendering of the work concept historically contingent, Adorno's writing on virtuosity, Jankélévitch on the socio-aesthetics of virtuosity and Bourriaud and Born et al. on relational aesthetics.[3] But overall this volume represents a substantial destabilisation of notions of virtuosity, collapsing them into an altogether more plural, embodied and situated phenomenon that bodes well for future research.

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[3] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction: Notes, a Draft and Two Schemata* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Liszt et la rhapsodie: Essai sur la virtuosité* (Paris: Plon, 1979); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002); Georgina Born, Eric Lewis and Will Straw, eds, *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).