Book Review

Composing Dissent: Avant-Garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam.

Robert Adlington
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
ISBN 978-0199981014
384 pages

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Compared to other countries, very little of great political relevance happened in the Netherlands during the 1960s. Historian James Kennedy has characterized the Netherlands in the 1960s as "a country without *any* obvious social, political or economic crises" (Kennedy 217–218). Instead, the sense of revolution that swept the Western world was translated in the Netherlands as what Hans Righart called an "expressive revolution," mostly a cultural and artistic rather than political development (Righart 87). Avant-garde music, be it composed, improvised, or popular, played a large role in this development, and the period has generally been described in terms of the political radicalism of composers and improvisers such as Louis Andriessen, Peter Schat, Misha Mengelberg, and Willem Breuker.

Robert Adlington's *Composing Dissent* digs underneath this general image to describe the actual connections and relations between avant-garde music and political movements at the time. In doing so, it shows that the political engagement of Dutch avant-garde musicians, aiming to reform musical practice as well as the musical infrastructure, were by no means self-evident; not only were there plenty of fierce disagreements between them, but they also ran into various unforeseen practical problems in carrying out their political ideals. In general, Adlington argues, the avant-gardists were often unable or unwilling to reconsider their status as composers or their commitment to musical modernism, thereby impeding their political efficacy.

For instance (and crudely summarizing some highly detailed accounts), when Peter Schat became inspired by Situationism, and became associated with the related anarchist Provo movement, he wrote the music theatre piece *Labyrint*. It imagined Amsterdam as a labyrinthine space for collective creativity, but was also an application of the labyrinthine musical structures of Pierre Boulez, Schat's mentor at the time. Torn between two very different avant-gardes, Schat opted for the latter, and the work simply presents highly modernist music and staging to a passive audience, despite artistic statements to the contrary. Or when Schat, Andriessen, Mengelberg, Jan van Vlijmen, and Reinbert de Leeuw thought they had found a sympathetic voice in Labour politician Jan Kassies in their attempts to renew Dutch cultural policy, they soon clashed over the composers' advocacy of modernist music and Kassies's advocacy of a more pluralistic musical landscape. Or when they organized a "movement for the renewal of musical practice" (231) to liberate orchestral musicians from the hierarchies of classical music performance, the musicians soon made clear that they felt no desire to be liberated from anything. Instead, the composers turned to found their own democratically organized ensembles, which not only brought an end to their large-scale Marxist revolution, but also suggests they ultimately found it more important that people play their music than to combat the (perceived) structural inequalities in classical music culture.

Robert Adlington is Queen's Anniversary Prize Chair in Contemporary Music at the University of Huddersfield, though at the time of publication he was still working at the University of Nottingham. After his first monograph on the music of Harrison Birtwistle, he turned to the music of Louis Andriessen. Andriessen's commitment to musical politics may have sparked an interest, for apart from this book on the politics of the musical avant-garde in 1960s Amsterdam, Adlington has edited a volume on avant-garde music and 1960s protest movements more broadly, as well as one on music and communism outside of the Soviet Union.

This review will focus particularly on what this book can contribute to discussions in improvisation studies, before tying this into more general remarks about the book. *Composing Dissent* is perhaps the first to offer a sustained investigation of the role of improvised music within Dutch avant-garde music in the 1960s. The study of European improvised music remains a very small field, so Adlington's work is a welcome contribution. Dutch improvised music, and particularly the Instant Composers Pool (ICP), has been generally acknowledged as an important part of free improvisation, but up until Adlington's book there was little academic literature to be found on the topic. Jazz scholars focus almost exclusively on US musicians, while historians of post-war modernist music focus almost exclusively on composers. The fact that Adlington comes at this from the perspective of contemporary music rather than jazz studies means that some topics—such as the ICP's relation to free jazz and its politics—are less present, but it also provides some refreshing insights.

One of the main strengths of Adlington's book is that it cuts across such pre-conceived categories, and shows that improvised music was an integral part of post-war Dutch modernism. Like the recent work of Eric Drott and Benjamin Piekut (who both provide recommendations for the book on its back cover) on roughly the same historical period, Adlington's work shows how detailed descriptions with a strong empirical focus can help to rethink the theoretical and classificatory generalizations to which we are accustomed. Adlington showcases not only an intimate knowledge of the music of composers and improvisers such as Andriessen, Schat, Mengelberg, and Breuker, but also provides detailed accounts of contemporary Dutch politics and its cultural policies, of the links between protest movements and avant-garde groups in composed and improvised music as well as other artistic disciplines, and of the alliances and disagreements between trade unions and the various counter-cultural movements emerging in this period.

Commenting on an earlier publication of research that also appears here, Georgina Born characterized Adlington's work as an example of what she calls a "relational musicology." Such scholarship moves away from the "bounded, internal, immanent development of the lineages of Western art music" and focuses instead on "their complex interrelation and imbrication with contiguous musical systems existing in the same or proximate physical, geographical, historical or social space" (Born 209). Rather than interrogating the "connections" between avant-garde and popular music, between music and politics, between composers and improvisers, Adlington's book suggests that such categories are flexible and permeable, and that the more interesting question is how they were conflated and demarcated by historical actors themselves, and for what reasons they were more or less successful in doing so. Moreover, connections between politics and music made in the book are based on actual connections and interactions—evidenced by letters, interviews, policy reports, and so on—rather than (or in addition to) interpretations of the music or its performance practice.

The chapter on "Anarchie" (all chapters have a Dutch word as their title), which most explicitly addresses the emergence of improvised music in the Netherlands, reverses the logic of the rest of the book. Where other chapters discuss composers' and musicians' political aspirations and show the difficulties in implementing them, this chapter suggests that the improvisers of the ICP successfully developed a musical practice that might be characterized as anarchist, while acknowledging the refusal of these musicians to align themselves with any kind of political movement. The description of free improvisation as anarchist might seem fortuitous, but Adlington avoids the all-too-common caricature of anarchism as a movement of nihilism and lawlessness and takes it seriously as a political perspective with a diverse and interesting history. This means that the comparison actually serves as a starting point for investigating competing strands of anarchism within contemporary political movements and to emphasize the particularity of the ICP's improvisatory practice when compared to other groups in improvised music.

With regard to the former, Adlington discusses the Provo movement, geared toward reshaping Amsterdam into an environment for a new, playful, human being, and taking its name from its "provocations" of police and state powers through games and ritualist performances. Provo co-founder Roel van Duijn explicitly rejected collectivist ideals of earlier Dutch anarchists in favour of a more individualist and antagonist form of anarchism. Instead of an emphasis on shared responsibility and social cohesion, Van Duijn advocated unlimited individual freedom. This meant that the "social order [was] subservient to individuality" (115), and that the ideal society was better described in terms of constantly transforming forms of disharmony and inequality than of balance and equilibrium.

Adlington compares this to the musical interactions between Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink, Willem Breuker, John Tchicai, Derek Bailey, and other musicians associated with the early ICP. Whereas other groups in European improvisation (such as Musica Elettronica Viva, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, or AMM) sought to develop music in which all voices were equal and the emergence of musical ideas happened on the level of the group rather than the individual, the practice of the ICP was about headstrong individuals. The musicians constantly questioned the prevailing accounts of "freedom" in improvised music; they pestered each other, interrupting or sabotaging the contributions of others, they played lyrical melodic and harmonic material, and liberally quoted and paraphrased from different styles and genres. This undogmatic attitude to improvisational freedom even meant they would frequently compose music for their fellow improvisers. Mengelberg and Breuker (and many other Dutch improvisers since then) have been recognized for their compositional work. Breuker even broke off his engagement with the ICP in 1973 to form his own collective because he felt he could not rely on the other musicians to play his compositions; he concluded that "in practice, it seems that music cannot be made in a democratic manner" (130). After he left, Mengelberg became the unofficial leader of the group and composed a substantial repertoire for the group to play, although he did explicitly seek to develop a democratic practice in which composed and improvised elements could be integrated.

To compare the ICP's musical practice to contemporaneous strands of anarchism goes against what I described earlier as one of the book's main strengths. In other chapters the connections between music and politics is tangible and identifiable, but here it is somewhat speculative. Adlington acknowledges this weakness: rather than suggesting direct influence, he argues, the similarities more broadly indicate "a shared outlook on the relation of self and other, of individual and community" (114-5). The similarities are indeed striking, but with such detailed

descriptions of the debates within Dutch anarchism and of various recordings made by the ICP, the ultimately unclear relation between the two makes the chapter ultimately feel a little inconclusive.

That being said, Adlington's analysis offers some important challenges to the field of improvisation studies. On the one hand, Adlington's argument underscores the claim, often made in contemporary studies of improvisation (not least in the pages of this journal), that improvised music is particularly suitable for exploring new forms of sociality in music. The openness of social relations in improvisation, as opposed to the more rigidly determined (and seemingly more hierarchical) relations in composed music, means it is a fruitful area for socio-musical experimentation. On the other hand, however, his description of the ICP shows that such experimentation may not at all be geared towards community-building, social cohesion, or collaboration. The on-stage interactions of the ICP, especially in its early years, were often combative and jarring. Even if personal relations among the ICP musicians today are much friendlier, such agonistic forms of play, pestering, and sabotage still inform their aesthetic to a large degree. It is precisely in this regard that Adlington suggests that the ICP successfully translated to musical performance the anarchistic ideal of a "war of all against all" in which any temporary form of collaboration was merely a "union of egoists" (128). This analysis challenges us to formulate more detailed accounts of the kinds of social interactions that are being developed in different forms of improvised music. There may be radically opposing views about what constitutes desirable forms of socio-musical interaction, and it is worthwhile to interrogate the significant differences in ethical political outlooks thus proffered, the different understandings of the meaning of "improvisation" that accompany them, and the blind spots and forms of exclusion implied by each of them.

Furthermore, Adlington's relational approach (as I have called it) also calls into question the uniqueness of improvisational practices as a form of experimenting with new forms of organization. As mentioned, the improvisers of the ICP were reticent to ally themselves with any particular political movement or ideal. If improvisers participated in the composers' actions of reforming the musical infrastructures in the Netherlands, this was primarily to secure better opportunities for making their music, and less because of any more high-flown political ambitions. Meanwhile, the composers' more steadfast commitment to restructuring music performance practice meant that they more consciously and consistently experimented with forms of socio-musical interaction. Adlington describes new music ensemble *Het Leven*, led by Victor Wentink and Gilius van Bergeijk. He notes how the ensemble relied upon compositions by individual members, but emphasized the collective interaction and shared responsibility involved in their communal realization. Such an example indicates that there is a wide variety of possible political models of musical practice beyond a simple composition-improvisation dichotomy.

More importantly, by describing how both composers and improvisers had to negotiate the place of their music in a wider social context, Adlington also highlights how both forms of new music ran into fundamentally similar problems. The second chapter in which improvised music plays an important role is that on "Participatie." It describes the difficulties encountered in merging the ideals of collective creativity of Provo and situationism with avant-garde music. The Sigma Centre, founded by situationist and poet Alexander Trocchi and beat poet and psychonaut Simon Vinkenoog with support from Provo, was intended as a leisure centre where people could engage in "active recreation" and "experiment in the use of free time" as a precursor to the new society envisioned by Provo, where nobody would be required to work. It attracted avant-garde improvisers (including Breuker, Tchicai, and AMM) as well as composers to organize workshops and musical events, but disagreements soon arose. For one thing, for professional musicians, this "active recreation" *was* their job, and they expected compensation for their efforts, which obviously went against the egalitarian spirit of Sigma. Furthermore, the free participation of audiences, particularly rowdy Provos, were experienced by musicians as a disruption of their music rather than a collaboration. Soon enough, both improvisers and composers started to instruct their audiences to keep quiet, thereby returning them to the role of passive spectators. The Provos and other Sigma board members felt, justifiably so, that the musicians were more concerned with their personal artistic development than with ideals of collective creativity.

When the improvisers did involve the audience, their actions were closely circumscribed, so as not to interfere with the intentions of the musical performers. Adlington compares this with the forms of audience participation and interaction in the emerging hippie culture and the rise of psychedelic popular music. Such performances, organized as part of various "love-ins", did not actively seek to expound an artistic vision, but offered instruments for audiences to play along with the music–if they felt like it. The more accessible music also helped to engage the audience; however, most composers and improvisers dismissed any form of popular music as ideologically suspect. Indeed, although Breuker would later become a relatively popular composer with the general public, this was long after he had rejected the ideal of democratization in music.

Such examples suggest that an exclusive focus on the micro-social sphere of performance cannot account for the impact beyond musical practice. The strength of Adlington's book, then, lies not only in the way it provides a detailed account of an important but complex part of the history of improvised music. It also challenges us to reconsider how we might properly address musical performance as a form of social and political practice. The complexities encountered by the Dutch avant-gardists in reforming musical practice indicates the importance of addressing not only the socialities found in performance, but also their effectiveness in broader social and institutional contexts.

There are a few less satisfying points about the book. For one, the forms of political activism described only really get underway around 1965—meaning most of the book concerns a timespan of only five years. As Adlington notes in the conclusion, the 1970s were in fact much more politically engaged than the preceding decade, and the political perspectives were even more diverse. The 1970s was a decade in which some of the most vocal composers slowly returned to traditional and largely apolitical composition, while the improvisation scene flourished and professionalized, organizing workshops to educate a new generation of improvisers (with explicitly political goals), but also encountering challenges from feminist or pan-African political discourse emerging from this new generation. Electronic music offered new forms of musical creation beyond either composition or improvisation, and included a critical and innovative approach to the rise of new technologies.

Of course, it is a bit unfair to fault an already hefty book for its periodization, but it would be good to have a justification for this choice. This brings me to a more serious point, namely that there is a relative paucity of methodological or theoretical reflection in the book. Even though it represents, as I argued above, an innovative and rigorous approach to music historiography, this approach is not spelled out anywhere. Adlington also barely engages with the rich field of avant-garde studies; there are some loose references to the concept's origins in Leninism as well as nineteenth-century France, but these are not really expanded upon. The book seems to present an argument similar to that made by Peter Bürger, interrogating to what extent the political claims of the musical avant-garde hold up when seen in the light of the broader institutional contexts that make them possible. At the same time, he also makes clear that there is no *one* institutional context for composed music, and that part of this generation's endeavours were geared precisely toward institutional reform. Bürger's name does not appear anywhere in the book. Renato Poggioli, also a staple of avant-garde criticism, appears once in a footnote but not in the index.

Perhaps Adlington felt this would have impeded the book's strong historical focus and readability, but it does leave some important matters unresolved. In his conclusion, Adlington discusses some general developments in Dutch avant-garde music since 1970, ending with the very recent past, in which coalitions of conservative and far-right political parties have drastically cut funding for the arts. Such cuts were legitimized by pointing out the little social value of the arts (derided as "left-wing hobbies"). The book's Bürgerian argument can be read as a corroboration of this premise—notwithstanding differing intentions and widely different understandings of what constitutes value.

Adlington signals the pressing need for the new music sector to articulate its right to exist, writing that "key factors" look to be "real proximity to a wider public; unashamed engagement with people's worldly hopes and fears; recognition of the legitimacy of popular musical preferences and practices even as alternatives are also advanced" (326). This in itself is unobjectionable, but it does seem to go in against any notion of the avant-garde as normally defined. It also raises the question of how institutions of new music might be organized so that these things are made more achievable. In fact the recent defunding of institutions has meant the end for many orchestras, ensembles, organizations, and archives, and has made clear that the power of institutions, while politically volatile, may also be a productive force. Given Adlington's commitment to musical politics—his current work continues his interest in the connections between music and democracy—his voice remains at quite some distance from the subject matter at hand.

These points of criticism do not undercut the fact that this is a highly informative, meticulously researched, and methodologically innovative book. It challenges us to look beyond the boundaries of the genres, styles, or even artistic disciplines that we are used to studying, and to critically assess the broader impact of the political utopias we see enacted in particular musical practices.

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