Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus, eds. 2006. *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music.* London and New York: Routledge.

Reviewed by Sarah Schmalenberger

This collection of essays announces the assembly of music scholars who have incorporated disability studies into their research. Although the hybridization of disciplinary perspectives is hardly new, the careful preparatory arguments in the introduction and elsewhere throughout this collection nevertheless remind us of the palpable schism between "traditional" music scholars and those who have embraced more liberally the intersections of music and cultural theory, literary criticism, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. The seeming impenetrability that historical musicology and theory have represented in the past may well be further refuted by the addition of disability studies into the field of musical scholarship.

Both the Foreword (Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, xiii–xv) and Introduction (Lerner and Straus, 1–10) prepare readers for the speculative premises of the essays in this volume. Immediately the layers of interdisciplinary collaboration are apparent, first in situating the collected essays within the field of "cultural disability studies" that grew out of identity studies (xiii), and then in aligning the "lens of disability" used to assemble these essays with a similar agenda that produced examinations of musical subjects using the lenses of race, class, and gender (1). Garland-Thomson perceives these subjects as a challenge or corrective outlook that "understands and investigates disability as a cultural product . . . [arguing] against dominant traditional understandings of disability as medical pathology or individual inadequacy" (xiv). Lerner and Straus do not necessarily intend to correct or, in their word, "police" language about the topic of disability, but rather to use this particular scholarly lens to focus attention on "music as a physical manifestation of our embodiment, whether that be as listeners, composers, or performers" (1). Thus there is a very broad area to cover, which makes for an inclusive environment to display various investigations of how disability has been represented musically.

Such breadth of coverage carries a liability, however, of seeming vague to the point of incredible relativism. Garland-Thomson's quip that "Disability is everywhere in culture once you know how to look for it" (xiv) suggests that the boundaries of this new field of inquiry are defined locally by individual case study or subject. Perhaps this merely confirms the nascent stage of the dialogues developing between music and disability, but even so this

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should caution readers to be especially thorough in assessing the merits of speculation and preliminary research that promise further investigation. On the other hand, a new field of inquiry can hardly be expected to have fully formed criteria and methodologies. Statements like the above are hallmarks of this newness, as are some of the less successful applications of analytical models wholesale in order to navigate through new ideological territory.

In sketching the preliminary discursive parameters of this new interdisciplinary field, the editors proffer topics that "chart the cultural and social construction of disability in relation to many different kinds of nonnormative bodies and minds" (2). The emphasis on theorizing the cultural and social constructions *surrounding* disability is, they argue, different from studies that typically limit discussion to describing physical impairments such as blindness, deafness, bodily disfigurement, and mobility issues. Offering different views on what "disability" means in terms of musical sensibilities, sixteen authors present a myriad of subjects that generate far more questions than answers. Overall, these questions are generally lively and interesting, although some provoke serious reservations about the feasibility of further development in selected topics.

The editors have grouped the sixteen collected essays into three sections: "Narrating Disability Musically," "Performing Disability Musically," and "Composing Disability Musically." Each section of essays addresses a diverse range of topics related to the group heading. For example, the six authors in the first section describe musical narrations of experiences with AIDS, cancer, stuttering, bereavement, blindness, and amputation. The authors cite musical styles and genres that narrate these experiences, and the repertoire encompasses popular song (past and present), film music, and "classical" music. The second section, comprised of five essays, presents essentially case studies of specific conditions affecting the performance, cognition, and perception of music. Probing the unique peculiarities of conditions (mental and physical) that connote how an individual engages with music, these authors examine the disabilities of celebrities like Glenn Gould and Julie Andrews, but also the interior auditory world of people who are autistic, blind, or socially ostracized for other reasons. This middle section contains an essay by Adam Ockleford, the only scholar whose disciplinary specialty is not music. The five authors of the final section model methods of discerning disability encoded in musical form, rhetoric, and reception in specific musical repertoires.

There are numerous topical cross-references throughout the anthology, which seem to be intentional strategies to prevent readers from classifying musical disability along an exact continuum or set of criteria. Obvious spillovers of topics include the prodigious amount of attention paid to stuttering roles and lyrics (which appears in essays featured in both the first and second

sections) and the divergent interpretations of autism that figure into essays from both the second and third sections. The resulting effect of these and other linkages is one of confounding any tendency (conscious or otherwise) to construct from this collection a singular narrative argument that could constrict the field of inquiry before the scholarly community has thoroughly considered the ramifications of all that has been suggested here.

In lieu of offering an extensive critique of each essay in this anthology, the following highlights of its more cogent hypotheses affirm the benefits of theorizing disability in music as a rewarding avenue of research. Some cautionary comments are also offered in the hope that authors and readers alike will interrogate specific points that require clarification and correction. Readers new to disability and music studies may wish to begin with essays that examine conditions familiarly understood as disabling or essays that address repertoire and genres that are familiar to them. Working outward from known concepts, and noticing the connections between related topics, readers can then chart their own path through the concepts presented in the collection.

Those familiar with concert repertoire composed for one-handed pianists, for example, will comprehend easily the implications of demonizing this condition in Neil Lerner's critique of the 1946 horror film *The Beast with Five Fingers* ("The Horrors of One-Handed Pianism: Music and Disability in *The Beast with Five Fingers*"), that featured a murderous disembodied hand that plays a quasi-Brahmsian Chaconne when not strangling people. Lerner argues convincingly for the "anxiety-provoking connotations attached to one-handed pianism" (75) by documenting the musical and dramatic precedents that led to the film project, and by noting the important contributions of film composer Max Steiner. In another effective essay on how film music can be read as encoding disability, Kelly Gross ("Female Subjectivity, Disability, and Musical Authorship in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blue*") considers the disability of disempowerment as rendered by bereavement in the film *Blue*. Carefully and clearly, Gross narrates points in the film score where the bereaved widow strives at first to cling to her husband by preserving his compositions. As the score shifts from sounding his music to that of the bereaved protagonist's own emerging compositional voice, the debilitating effect of her grief that initially disabled her eventually succumbs to the power of new musical sounds discovered by "composing herself" a life without her husband and their daughter.

In the second section of essays, Dave Headlam ("Learning to Hear Autistically") and Laurie Stras ("The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect") reinterpret conditions of disability that have been understood as tragically excluding an individual from "society": autism and vocal damage. Headlam argues persuasively for rejecting the simplistic notion of autism

as a developmentally disabled medical condition of social disengagement, and he describes autistics as comprising a richly diverse culture of people who simply exist and engage with their world on different behavioral and sensory planes. His speculation—that research on the musical cognition and perception of pitch in autistic people reflects a high-functioning mental and social capacity—suggests some truly enticing possibilities for developing new ways to engage with atonal and post-tonal music more deeply. Stras offers some equally thoughtful observations comparing the socialization of medical diagnosis upon specific groups of people, in this case the different social values bestowed upon trained voices. Whereas the misfortunes of Maria Callas and Julie Andrews, both of whom "lost their voices," are interpreted as tragic losses among classical music connoisseurs, Stras notes that audiences for other stylistic traditions interpret physically altered, damaged, or damaged-sounding voices (e.g., Bessie Smith and Joe Cocker) as gaining cultural credibility or "authenticity." If Stras were to reinforce her observations with additional data from research in medical trauma and from methods of reception theory more clearly, then she would not need to rely so heavily on references to Barthes and Freud, which seem tangential to her argument.

Several authors document the psychological traumatization of the differently abled through various musical markers of their social stigmatization. Daniel Goldmark ("Stuttering in American Popular Song, 1890–1930") and Andrew Oster ("Melisma as Malady: Cavalli's *Il Giasone* (1649) and Opera's Earliest Stuttering Role"), discuss stuttering in popular song and opera respectively, and they position music as a not-so-subtle reinforcement of the social discomfort in seeing or hearing a person who moves or sounds unique from a group. The extent to which music has been crafted to humorize conditions of difference (not only stuttering in and of itself, but also the connotation of the stutterer as mentally or socially subfunctional) that are not funny to those castigated as different denotes the power of music to broadcast a community's methods of social wounding. Their work, along with the work other authors in this collection who acknowledge the painful experiences of public response to difference (S. Timothy Maloney on Glenn Gould, Stephanie Jenson-Moulton on "Blind Tom" Wiggins), depicts the mean-spirited nature of societies whose members' fear and loathing of impairment, disability, or "other" conditions contribute to their need to contain and reject anyone perceived as too different for majority inclusion. Moreover, these authors link the familiar or common understanding of music's representational capacity to the social construction of disability, and in so doing illustrate methods conducive to unpacking the contextual underpinnings of music and disability studies simultaneously.

Readers who wish to explore how disability can be discerned *in* musical structures should consider carefully the essays that are grounded in analyzing "the music itself." Some of these more traditional approaches to musical scholarship constitute the most problematic essays in this collection. Most points of contention involve instances where the authors have conjectured too extensively about the interpretive gestures of a work, adopted analytical models too uncritically, or assumed an easy transference of perspective and method between disciplines. Although these problems do not negate entirely the authors' basic hypotheses, some issues warrant further substantiation and/or explanation of their theories.

The fashionable application of the "close reading" technique from literary criticism to music scholarship has benefits, but not without the risk of validating the interpreter's perspective as absolute. Maria Cizmic offers a close reading of musical representations of pain in the film adaptation of Margaret Edson's play *W;t* ("Of Bodies and Narratives: Musical Representations of Pain and Illness in HBO's *W;t*") about a terminal cancer patient's debilitating treatment. In detailing correspondences between the dramatic gestures and measures of the film score comprised of music by Shostakovich, Górecki, and Pärt, Cizmic's interpretations seem rather micromanaged if she assumes others would perceive the same inferences. L. Pundie Burstein's provocative essay ("*Les chansons des fous*: On the Edge of Madness with Alkan") suggests correspondences between the virtuoso pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan's stylistic eccentricities and his reportedly "mad" comportment. Burstein could substantiate further his arguments that Alkan's nonnormative musical gestures signify mental or emotional malady by identifying more clearly how they articulate difference beyond what others have documented as an overarching musical rhetoric of challenge to normative structures (both in the score and in performative displays of virtuosity) in nineteenth-century repertoires of concert music. Diagrams intended to illustrate disability in music pose additional problems, as seen in two essays that are in dialogue with existing theoretical models in music. Stephen Rogers ("Mental Illness and Musical Metaphor in the First Movement of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*") distorts the intended meaning of "deformation" in sonata theory beyond the conclusions of the scholars he has summarized in his essay. In tracking the autobiographical structures in the *Symphonie fantastique*, Rogers has done little more than summarize the work of Brattan, Hepokoski, and Darcy, and it would be best if readers consult those sources for a more thorough discussion of the work. Similarly extending existing models beyond reasonable potential, Joseph Straus conflates to extremes Schoenberg's concept of a "tonal problem" with embodied states of balance and symmetry ("Inversional Balance and the 'Normal' Body

in the Music of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern"). To be sure, new scholarship pushes the boundaries of existing theories; nevertheless, the process of illustrating the advantages of extending current concepts demands substantial documentation and explanation in order to project realistic new trajectories toward their logical and practical applications.

Among the more global theoretical models offered here for exploring disability in music, an ambitious one proposed by Marianne Kielian-Gilbert ("Beyond Abnormality—Dis/ability and Music's Metamorphic Subjectivities") advocates for a method that will explicate the rich texture of intersecting methods, perspectives, and critiques as transforming ("metamorphically") the fundamental nature of scholarship in this field. Arguing against affixing perceived qualities of disability to one-dimensional physical signifiers, Keilian-Gilbert suggests blending "the aesthetic and material together in the sparks of unfamiliarity, contingency, and unforeseen connections that underlie their potential interactions" (232). Unfortunately, these kinds of statements do not lead to clear enough applications of her ideas to either music or disability, and the crux of the essay remains grounded in proposal only.

The imbalance between speculation and feasible pragmatic applications in subsequent research may signal problems in further defining the tenets of scholarly inquiry in this new area of interdisciplinary thought. Theorizing disability in music, however, can offer opportunities for exploring new ideas and reinterpreting old ones, and this collection of essays suggests some of these possibilities. Additional critique and scholarship will certainly test and refine what has been presented here. Perhaps these preliminary explorations will encourage scholars to consider other constructions of disability, such as aging and its impact on musicians and musical repertoires, or the connections between music and healing that ethnomusicologists and music therapists have conducted in their research. Finally, the need for critical documentation of the lived experiences of those who struggle with the social constructions of disability could expose the barriers to musical participation by people with disabilities in general. This would move the dialogue more toward advocacy and away from speculation about the role that music plays in representing these experiences, which perpetuates the access that able-bodied scholars have to musical and academic forums that substantiate (implicitly perhaps) their privilege to examine the disabled at their discretion. Just as the impact of previous interdisciplinary collaborations in music scholarship could not be predicted from the reception of their representative introductory anthologies alone, it will take time for *Sounding Off* to reverberate through the scholarly community before we can assess its full effect.