Benjamin Piekut. 2011. *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Thomas Fogg

This is an original and important book, one that will pique the interest not only of an eager band of twentieth-century music historians, but also of scholars throughout the humanities. Piekut's is one of those hard-to-pin-down projects, cutting across the boundaries that separate music history, ethnomusicology, and broader humanistic study. As a history of the nearly-present, or still-living past—much of the book's material stems from interviews conducted between 2004 and 2009—"ethnography" is probably the best summary term. Call it what you will, the approach here is impressive in its scope, providing a social and political history as well as a musical one. Most commendable is the manner in which the author has wrestled with so many disparate sources (ranging from the anecdotal to the archival) to produce a concise and focused account, but one that also manages to retain some of the messiness of his subject.

Four chapters tell stories of avant-garde music making, each loosely connected by time and place: a performance of John Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis* by the New York Philharmonic; Henry Flynt's encounter with Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale*; the establishment of the Jazz Composers Guild; Charlotte Moorman's performance of Cage's *26' 1.1499" for a String Player*. All are presented within the context of New York City in 1964. An epilogue shifts to Ann Arbor, where possible resonances between the performance styles of Robert Ashley and James Osterberg (Iggy Pop to you and me) are explored.

Of the many themes, two stand out: conflict and failure. Members of the avant-garde repeatedly find themselves at loggerheads with various counter forces. Cage wars with the traditionalism of Leonard Bernstein and the Philharmonic; Flynt, regarding Stockhausen as a mouthpiece for capitalism and "old" Europe, pickets Judson Hall with his group, Action Against Cultural Imperialism (AACI); disagreeing about (among other things) racial politics, the Jazz Composers Guild soon disintegrates; Cage lambasts Moorman for "murdering" his piece. Such conflict has in the past often been seen as the stuff of avant-garde legend, assuring entry into the pantheon of renegade artists; but the situations described here are complicated by the fact that much of the antagonism arose between artists with similar creative aims. Piekut shows an avant-garde not only battling against conservative institu-

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tions and unadventurous publics, but one that is fractured and at odds with itself. To give just one example: having distinguished between the free jazz movement and the "European American scene downtown," he writes that "The key task for a fresh appraisal of 1960s experimentalism is to register the ambivalence of the connections between these two avant-gardes, the ways in which these communities were both connected to, and separated from, each other in powerful ways" (3).

With such conflicts in mind, Piekut introduces the idea of failure, a word that might, on another day, have found its way into the book's title. In the introduction, he writes that "I am . . . intrigued by the idea of experimentalism as an arena of risk, testing, and even (productive) failure" (19). That parenthetical airbag is replaced by the time the conclusion arrives, where the episodes are more assertively called "successful failures" (175). Refreshingly, little space is given to the "success" side of the ledger: a side which, with the exception of the concrete influence of the Jazz Composers Guild on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), leads back to expected avant-garde lore. In his unsuccessful encounter with Bernstein and the Philharmonic, for example, Cage's avant-garde credentials were enhanced; similarly, the Philharmonic gained cultural capital by sticking with their traditional values.

Piekut refuses to sweep such failures—"successful" or otherwise—under the rug: "All experiments harbor the possibility of failure," he writes (174). Failures are "markers of limits . . . [that] indicat[e] the areas that lie beyond the New York avant-garde, as well as the varied means through which the resulting experimentalist formation gained strength and stability" (176). This is one of Piekut's chief concerns: how what he calls "actually existing experimentalism"—experimental events themselves, and the life-stories of the characters involved—interacts and interferes with the abstract category of experimentalism. Rather than offering a definition of experimentalism that seeks commonalities between different sorts of experimental music (a task that, referencing Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, Piekut suggests has been the *modus operandi* for previous histories of experimental music), he asserts that "Experimentalism is a grouping, not a group" (6). In that case, the pressing question becomes "How have these composers been collected together in the first place, that they can now be the subject of a description?" (6). With a hard line drawn between empirical fact and discursive chatter, this question opens up the opportunity to be wholly revisionist: historical detail can be mobilized to test, disrupt and critique the stability of the historical category of experimentalism, as well as histories that uphold that category.

How exactly is experimentalism approached? As I have already noted, Piekut is not in search of a definition that tells us what experimentalism is. His aims are historical: he asks what experimentalism *was*. More specifically, he conceives of experimentalism as a result rather than a starting point; a result, that is, of a complex negotiation between discourses, practices, and institutions. Piekut outlines the various players in this game, provocatively heading the list with practitioners of his own trade:

> This formation is the result of the combined labor of scholars, composers, critics, journalists, patrons, performers, venues, and the durative effects of discourses of race, gender, nation, and class. The continuing performance of this network—and not an experimental "ethos" or "spirit"—explains the extension of experimentalism through time. (7)

The term network is imported from the work of sociologist of science Bruno Latour, whose actor–network theory Piekut has taken to heart. "When studying a network," Piekut writes, "it is important to identify everything that has an effect in a given situation . . . It is a heterogeneous network—these are things of different kinds, and thus their connection necessarily requires translation" (8). Translation, he seems to imply, occurs "out there," at the empirical level among the many strands that are woven together as experimentalism; but the process also suggests a role for historians. Creating their own networks anew through research and writing, historians perform translation in order to make sense of their data—or, perhaps more realistically, they sometimes translate, but at other times simply juxtapose or arrange different elements between which there is no common ground. Despite his many theoretical turns, Piekut views his task simply enough: "Pick a point in this network—composer, venue, critic, publication, performer, event—and follow where it leads" (5).

Learned also from Latour is the command to "follow the actors." For Piekut this means "pursuing an individual or argument even when it seems to be leading outside of experimental music studies proper" (8). He continues: "one must abandon the limit of limit . . . Abandoning the limit of limit means disregarding any artificial and normative separations among fields and actors and embracing the messy assemblages that result" (9). Here we get another indication of Piekut's resistance to disciplinary restraints, his commitment to individual method and thought; although he dismisses the idea of an experimental "ethos" or "spirit," it is hard not to regard his work in these terms. To put the matter in the style of his title, this is certainly musicology otherwise. And about "otherwise" Piekut relaxes his stance toward definition: "It seems to me that [the] restless desire to be elsewhere, [the] searching for an otherwise, might be the closest thing to an 'essence'

of experimentalism that we will ever get" (19). The title, then, is more than a statement of historiographical revisionism; it is also the maximal definition of experimentalism that Piekut is willing to concede.

In the opening chapter on *Atlas Eclipticalis*, "When Orchestras Attack!: John Cage Meets the New York Philharmonic," the figure of Bernstein looms large: his solemn address to the audience about the difficultly and seriousness of the music on offer perhaps masked a deeper insincerity. Bernstein's and Cage's correspondence, in which the two disagree over the decision to have the Philharmonic perform an improvisation, is particularly revealing of the distance between the two men. Improvisation, Cage argued, had nothing to do with his piece. The presence of Bernstein's voice in this retelling is just one way in which Piekut attempts to divert the path from the usual composer-centered narratives; his interviews with the players are another step in this direction. These alternative points of view contradict the radicalized version of events advanced by Cage; his claim, for example, that "many in the orchestra were furious at the music and tore the microphones off their instruments and stamped on them and smashed them" is denied by the performers' accounts (38). And yet tales of orchestral horseplay (unexplainable noises, digital watch alarms, laughter) persist among the performers' memories. It was not the shock of Cage's music that caused the musicians to misbehave; it was a lack of respect for the composer and his demands.

Piekut understands this particular conflict in terms of choice: the Philharmonic musicians chose to reject Cage. Searching for the logic of this choice, he makes a surprising move, asking whether the confrontation could "be dubbed an experimentalist 'rumspringa'" (54). This refers to the Amish practice of sending children in late adolescence out into the real world, where they can experience earthly delights unknown and usually forbidden. After a period, they are expected to choose between staying with the party or sobering up and returning to the Amish community. If they choose the former, they are frozen out of the communities in which they were raised; most often, they choose the latter, having been completely unprepared for life outside. The choice therefore is not free. Piekut borrows this illustration from Slavoj Žižek's *The Parallax View*, where he writes that "The lesson of all this is that a choice is always a meta-choice, a choice of the modality of the choice itself" (55). Naming this the "Žižekian paradox," Piekut notes that "if the choice of rumspringa is to be a true choice, it cannot be made by a true Amish" (55).

This argument is transposed onto the Philharmonic musicians, who rejected an "alternative future in favor of returning to the music of Vivaldi and Tchaikovsky" (55). Like Amish teenagers, the performers were completely unprepared for Cage's piece: "These musicians could only have made

a real decision if they had been educated in the experimental tradition, had learned its philosophical underpinnings and become thoroughly entrained into the soundworld and social mores of the Cagean community" (55). At this point, it appears that translation between points in the network has broken down; there are two irreconcilable musical worlds. But it might be argued that Piekut draws too rigid a boundary here between experimental and "classically trained" musicians, treating the latter as *nothing but* classicists. The Philharmonic musicians, he implies, were fundamentalists.

That was exactly Cage's view, and Piekut points out as much, borrowing once more from Žižek. The charge of fundamentalism, according to Žižek, marks the limit of "tolerant" liberalism: a person is branded a fundamentalist when their (usually religious) beliefs are to be tolerated no more. This formulation shows the ideology lurking behind liberalism: choice is free, but within certain limits. The overall arc of the chapter is to temper the political radicalism of *Atlas*, to point to "themes of liberalism, that hegemonic political formation of Western modernity: autonomy, choice, the will to reason, justice as fairness, and small government" that its performance suggests (23). But the liberalism Piekut proposes is of the qualified kind. A "successful performance of Cagean indeterminacy in the 1960s," he writes, ". . . depended upon a performer who had already internalized the expectations of the composer, significantly undermining Cage's well-known goal of accepting the unforeseen" (25). Piekut describes how David Tudor had assimilated a Cagean soundworld; he would be allowed to perform "freely" because Cage knew exactly what he would get. The Žižekian paradox is thus far more provocative when applied to the experimental musicians; rather than reducing them to experimental fundamentalists, Piekut suggests that they were not really experimenting, at least not in the way they imagined: "If Tudor is to create a situation of indeterminacy, he cannot be Tudor" (58). The conclusion, then, is strikingly revisionist: "Cage's work evidences a peculiar status as both model and mirror—a mock-up of utopian anarchism and register of hegemonic liberalism" (25).

The discussion of Moorman's performance of Cage's *26' 1.1499"* offers another intriguing moment in which high cultural theory is brought to bear on "actually existing experimentalism." Moorman's interpretation of the piece diverged significantly from Cage's expectations, hence Cage dubbing Moorman a "murderer." In a 1991 interview, Cage's comments about Moorman returned that assumed violence: "The striking thing was to take this piece of mine and play it in a way that didn't have to do with the piece itself. I didn't like it at all. And my publisher said, the best thing that could happen for you, would be that Charlotte Moorman would die" (150). True to form, however, Piekut's aim here is to show that the disagreement over

performance style was not a mere clash of avant-garde sensibilities in which Moorman's was more radical than Cage's. In 1964, the difference of opinion, he suggests, surrounded Moorman's less than strict approach to rhythm. As the years went by, Moorman made the piece her own, incorporating all kinds of "non-musical" sounds into her performance. Although in theory Cage's score makes room for such sounds, Moorman's choices betrayed the Cagean aesthetic of "natural" sounds, or sound devoid of human intentionality. Most jarring in this respect was her insertion of spoken text that, more often than not, drew attention to the female body: she would read out loud about "menstruation, underwear, abortion, contraception, murder, and rape" (152).

Trying to sort out this impasse, Piekut turns to Michel Foucault, whose work "suggests a way to rethink agency beyond one-dimensional reductions to resistance or 'transgression' and to conceive of experimentalism as a technique of inventing both a self and a culture" (143). In particular, it is Foucault's discussions of the "care of the self," advanced in his 1981–1982 lectures at the Collège de France and published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, as well as in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*. "The care of the self," writes Piekut, "is always entangled in relations of power and conditioned by the norms through which one achieves subjectivity" (143). In a fascinating passage, he explains how Moorman's traditional education as a cellist made it physically awkward for her to perform Cage's piece. The discipline involved in this education led to a certain type of subjectivization: "The cellist attains subjectivity by taking on norms that are external to the self, demonstrating the difficult truth that subjectivity is never self-contained" (148). Piekut regards Cage's piece as an opportunity for Moorman to become yet a different kind of subject; an experimental subject, as it were. *26' 1.1499"* "provided the opportunity to separate from the mode of subjectivization of her traditional cello training and to reapproach her corporeal relationship to the instrument without the histories sedimented in the actions of her body" (149). With this intervention, Piekut casts identity as a malleable construct, but one that nevertheless intersects with culture; perhaps it would have been possible to follow this line of argument with the Philharmonic musicians of the first chapter. Were there really *no* performers at the Lincoln Center who were transformed (positively) by performing *Atlas*?

Piekut returns to Foucault in his conclusion: "What links Foucauldian ethics to experimentalism is an engagement with the everyday, where testing the limits and capacities of what is given, what is there, becomes the condition for a 'possible crossing-over,' and elsewhere" (173). This leads back, then, to the maximal definition of experimentalism: the desire that life be otherwise. But desire alone does not make the experimentalist—as mentioned above, to be considered in that light one must be plugged into

the network of "actually existing experimentalism." Piekut maintains his adherence to Latour's network theory until the end, refusing concrete definitions. In places where he seems to intimate certain essential features of experimentalism—the turn to Foucault being one example—one should remember that Piekut understands these features as results, and not as explanations, of experimentalism's beginnings. This methodological insistence has major implications for further studies in experimental music, some of which are explored in the epilogue, "Experimentalism Meets (Iggy) Pop."

After locating Iggy (having interviewed the singer on the telephone, Piekut perhaps earned the privilege of first-name address; I will follow suit only to avoid confusion with the other kind of pop) within the peripheries of the experimental scene in Ann Arbor—where he encountered Robert and Mary Ashley, Robert Sheff, and Anne Wehrer, to name just a few—Piekut makes a bold claim: although there are many connections between the singer and the experimental world, Iggy and The Stooges should not be rewritten into the history of experimentalism. Including popular music (or any other genre) in *this* story of American Experimentalism would be a misrepresentation of historical fact. Such misrepresentation is a negative aspect of the general methodological shift from "canonical experimentalism" towards a "heterogeneous experimental supercategory," a move that Piekut thinks "fundamentally misunderstands what experimentalism has been" (197). As hooked up to the network as Iggy and his band were, their ability to translate from one side of the pop/art divide to the other was weak. Cage, on the other hand, managed to translate rock music into his own terms: both aurally, through the use of extreme volume, and intellectually, through his writing and discursive alignments. The problem for Iggy was a faulty network connection: "Ultimately, Iggy's translations of experimentalist tropes and techniques were discursively aligned with Rock, not experimentation" (180).

But it wasn't, or isn't, really a problem. Piekut's concern is that experimental pop be addressed on its own terms, as part of a different network; lumping all types of experimentalism together, simply because they are huddled under an umbrella term, makes little sense. Even a subcategory of "popular experimentalism" would repeat the mistake; rather, histories of experimentalism should be atomized across the perceived divide between popular and high art music. In his notes, Piekut points to a collection of studies of localized experimentalism. The list is worth repeating: Michael Dessen's doctoral dissertation, submitted at the University of California, San Diego in 2003, "Decolonizing Art Music: Scenes from the Late Twentieth-Century United States"; Bernard Gendron's 2002 *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*; Tim Lawrence's 2009 *Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973–1992* (245).

Experimentalism Otherwise occupies a peripheral position within this burgeoning field, which is possibly the ideal perspective from which to file a status report. Piekut's epilogue points towards possible future histories of experimentalism and pop, but it is also a powerful statement of intent, the quintessential "I refill my pen" sign-off. It is exciting to imagine what Piekut will come up with next, especially if (given his disciplinary musings) he takes the epilogue of this book as his point of departure. If his (now award-winning) co-authored essay with Jason Stanyek on "deadness" is any indication, it is perhaps unwise to guess the next move.