

## Book Review

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Mine Doğantan-Dack (Ed.). *Rethinking the musical instrument*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2022, 465 pp., £67.99 ISBN: 1527577899

Mine Doğantan-Dack is a concert pianist and musicologist/music theorist whose main research area is music performance studies. The chapters in *Rethinking the Musical Instrument* were originally presented at the “Music and Sonic Art: Theories and Practices” conference, which Professor Doğantan-Dack co-founded and co-organizes. The conference is held annually at the Institute of Musicology and Music Informatics in Karlsruhe, Germany. Contributions to this volume were selected from presentations given between 2015 and 2019 at a recurrent session within the conference also titled “Rethinking the Musical Instrument.”

The chapters in this collection pose a range of questions about the musical instrument: its ontology (What constitutes a musical instrument?); its phenomenology (How does a musical instrument emerge in performance? What are its gestural and expressive/artistic affordances?); and its epistemology (How do musical instruments structure our knowledge and understanding of music?). These questions speak to an increasing awareness of a knowledge gap in scholarly studies concerning the nature and role of the musical instrument, in addition to a growing interest in the development of new paradigms to understand them since instruments are in Doğantan-Dack’s (2022) view “crucial and indispensable actors in the majority of musical cultures” (p. xvi). *Rethinking the Musical Instrument* thus positions itself within a flourishing area of research that I have described as marking an “instrumental turn” (Palermo, 2020, p. 18), alongside previous publications such as *Musical Instruments in the 21st Century: Identities, Configurations, Practices* (Bovermann et al., 2016), the aim of which is to expand the remit of traditional and positivistic organological studies of the musical instrument. This is an aim that John Tresch and Emily Dolan (2013) have identified as signaling a “new” or “critical” organology (p. 278).

The underlying argument of the book is that interrogating the musical instrument as a category is a crucial task because, as Marc Estibeiro and David Cotter argue in their chapter on the reimagination of the guitar, “there are implicit assumptions regarding instruments that are embedded in every stage of the musical process, which influence the various creative process” (Estibeiro & Cotter, 2022, p. 285). Each chapter is extremely persuasive in supporting such a proposition by in turn challenging and illuminating different aspects of the musical instrument: its performances and materialities, its perceptions and functions, its makings and (un)doings.

The writing style is engaging and the book is extremely well structured, with a sense of coherence and cogency developed across chapters. For instance, one of the main arguments in

the book, the agency of the musical instrument, is developed by the authors of the first four chapters in an extremely compelling and pertinent manner. In the first chapter, Doğantan-Dack conceptualizes the relationship between the performer and the piano in terms of an equal partnership and collaboration (Doğantan-Dack, 2022, p. 3), a stance first adopted by Eliot Bates (2012, p. 263). The issue of skill, technique, and embodied expertise thus emerges as particularly challenging, as “the pianist needs to ensure that the instrument *does not* disappear from her consciousness and become *completely* transparent” (Doğantan-Dack, 2022, p. 9, italics in the original). Margarethe Maierhofer-Lischka further develops such assertions in the next chapter by mobilizing notions of effort-typology in performance as a way to interpellate other symbolic dimensions beyond the music concert performance. In such a turn, the musical instrument becomes a “choreosonic tool” (Maierhofer-Lischka, 2022, p.39) with its own persona, “as a separate entity that has its own agency” (p. 35). In the third chapter, Ellen Fallowfield directly addresses technique, linking it more explicitly to sound-production by aiming to “map ‘actions a cellist can make’ onto ‘sounds a cello can produce’” (Fallowfield, 2022, p. 55) as a way to overcome the problematic distinction between standard and extended techniques, and does so by conceptualizing the cello as a sort of sound library. This approach is developed in Chapter 4 by Scott McLaughlin, who theorizes clarinet sound production as a “phase-space” (McLaughlin, 2022, p.70) and speaks of “treating the player and the instrument as a single assemblage, working together in co-productive performance where the clarinet has its own material agency commensurate with that of the player (p. 71). This sense of conceptual flow is maintained throughout the book and certainly represents one of the strengths of this publication.

The chosen case studies offer a great variety of types of instrument—discussing acoustic instruments as well as analogue and digital; of genre—addressing popular, classical, and experimental works; and of time period—selecting instruments from the 19th to 21st centuries. The richness of the case studies is matched by the complexities in the theoretical (re)formulations of the musical instrument. With regard to the latter, Katharina Schmidt’s chapter on rethinking musical expertise is a real *tour de force* of intellectual elaboration and discussion. Because previous theories on musical instruments are integrated, challenged, and developed, the volume could be an excellent choice of textbook for a course on the topic, as well as an essential reading for those who are interested in raising their awareness on the importance of the musical instrument in musicking.

The book also represents an integration of studies of the musical instrument as an essential component of the broader domain of musicology. The authors of the chapters are composers, performers, and music scholars who combine social, political, and economic issues with detailed music and sound analysis. For instance, Sébastien Lebray’s chapter on the instruments of the genre known as French house touches on the significance of social background in the adoption of certain vintage instruments by French house artists, before engaging in a sonic analysis of the kinds of filter they used.

Furthermore, this volume points to possible developments in the field, especially with regard to the voice, which is not included among the case studies, but, as Marc Estibeiro and David Cotter (2022) mention, is “an obvious example” in the conceptualization between the performer and the instrument (p. 285). Indeed, some of the theories discussed in the book may have a significant impact on the rethinking of the voice as a musical instrument.

In conclusion, this volume makes a timely and valuable contribution to the literature in the discipline and confirms this field of study as an important and flourishing area of research.

## References

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