

Alexa Woloshyn. An Orchestra at My Fingertips: A History of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble. McGill-Queen's University Press. 266 pp. ISBN: 978-0-2280-1734-9 (paperback)

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[See table of contents](#)

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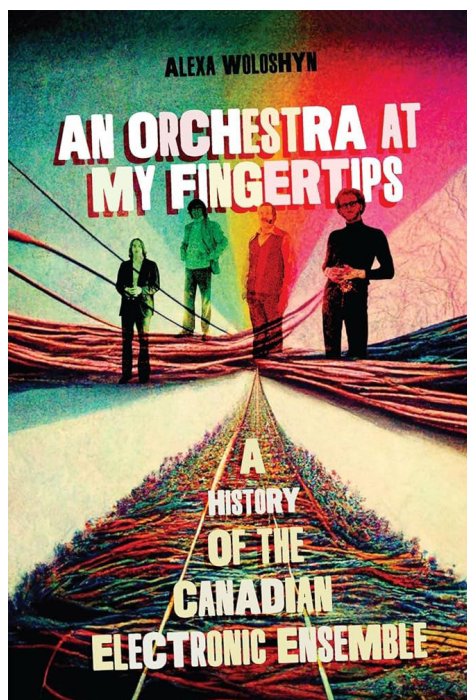
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Alexa Woloshyn. *An Orchestra at My Fingertips: A History of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble*. McGill-Queen's University Press. 266 pp. ISBN: 978-0-2280-1734-9 (paperback).



Readers might be forgiven if they feel as though perhaps they know very little about the Canadian Electronic Ensemble (CEE), particularly if they are not already connected to electronic music and/or new music circles. This is not because the CEE had a short career, a limited range of impact or influence, or existed only within a remote and isolated bubble. In fact, the ensemble has been active, continuously, since the early 1970s (founding members David Grimes, David Jaeger, Larry Lake, and James Montgomery first performed together under the name Canadian Electronic Ensemble in 1972), has performed on multiple continents, has featured an evolving membership of ten different musicians (ranging from three to six musicians at any one time), and

has been fully integrated in many important ways into the fabric of Canada's (and especially Toronto's) new music scene nearly since their inception. The reason for their somewhat obscure status, in fact, has much more to do with the niche status afforded within our academic musical ecosystem (our learning institutions, curricula, concert series, etc.) to music after WWII in general—much of which has to do with a paucity of widespread pedagogical approaches to most of this music—and to the even more limited attention usually paid to anyone or anything not closely associated with the names Boulez, Cage, or Stockhausen. *An Orchestra at My Fingertips: A History of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble*, by Alexa Woloshyn, promises to contribute valuably to a rectification of these issues, not only by providing a long overdue and fascinating biography of this important group of musicians, but also by intertwining

this story with timely discussions about approaching and understanding new music through a variety of musical and broader socio-cultural perspectives.

This last element is crucial to gaining a full understanding of the goals and potential value of this book. Woloshyn's ambitious program is laid out somewhat unassumingly in the book's prologue, where she writes: "This book is a collection of stories, a pedagogical aid for teaching the history of electronic composition and performance, and a critical study of collective creativity and agency within a live electronic ensemble. Though the stories are about the CEE, they prompt examination and analysis that can enrich our understanding of all live electronic music making" (xii–xiii). In telling the CEE's story (which primarily occupies the book's first three chapters), Woloshyn relies heavily on first-hand accounts from the members of the group themselves, archival research (thanks largely to care taken by founding member James Montgomery in preserving records of the group's history), and her own observations, as a privileged close observer, of their more recent working practices. Further context is provided to this section of the book through critical consideration of the CEE's place within the burgeoning post-war electronic music scene (Chapter 1, "Electrifying Musical Life in Toronto"), their emergence at a serendipitous time in the development and evolution of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto (Chapter 2, "A CEE Origin Story: Don't Mistake Us for a Pop Band"), and their evolving musical aesthetics through changes in both personnel and technologies over the course of a five-decade career (Chapter 3, "Sounds like the CEE: A Technological and Aesthetic Community"). Important themes—several of which are further developed in the book's second half—are introduced here to help the reader gain a more thorough understanding of the group's core musical values and aesthetics, including especially the nature of collective creativity and the nature and importance of *listening* within the group's working practice.

This first half of the book functions rather conventionally and quite successfully (if not in completely linear fashion, which certainly didn't bother this reader) to tell us a fascinating history of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble. As the reader progresses to the second half of the book, however (or if they decide to start there), they should be prepared for a different, and theoretically more rigorous, approach to the material. Here Woloshyn engages with a wide range of perspectives and scholarly discourses in addressing, in her words, "issues related to electronic music, as illuminated by the CEE's specific practice" (xiv). To be sure, these three chapters are as much, and at times even more, about these "issues" than they are about the CEE; I would also argue that many of them are not limited to being "related to electronic music" but draw our thoughts and attention to even broader contexts. And while these chapters, especially for these reasons, can actually function quite well as independent inquiries into the topics and issues found therein, they will also reward readers who engage with the full book by building upon themes that weave in and out of multiple chapters.

In Chapter 4, "The CEE Live: Virtuosity, Perceptibility, and Improvisation," Woloshyn draws on the CEE's live practice (including their recorded legacy in

the form of their live albums) in presenting a critical discussion of the concept of liveness in the performance of electronic music. She engages quite thoroughly with the growing discourse on liveness, but also interrogates issues of improvisation, virtuosity, and audience engagement within this framework. Chapter 5, “CEE Listening Spaces: Embodied, Embedded, and Virtual Contexts,” brings the reader into what, in her keynote address at 2024 Annual Conference of the Canadian University Music Society (Brandon, MB, May 13–15), Carleton University’s Ellen Waterman referred to as the emerging discipline of Listening Studies. Through a consideration of the spaces within which the CEE has performed and rehearsed—thus foregrounding the act of listening both for themselves and for their audiences—Woloshyn engages with a wide range of critical approaches to, and philosophies of, listening, including those of John Cage, Dylan Robinson, R.M. Schafer, and others. In her closing chapter (Chapter 6, “A CEE Musical Network: Supporting Musical Life in Canada and Beyond”), Woloshyn provides an incredibly successful critique of the role of cultural institutions (specifically, in this case, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Music Centre’s *Centrediscs* recording label, and Toronto’s The Music Gallery) in supporting the work of creative artists. Particularly significant within this discussion is the critical lens through which Woloshyn identifies the gendered, racialized, and classist characteristics of such institutions, even as these qualities have largely benefitted the ongoing career of the CEE. Current CEE member Rose Bolton’s *EQ: Women in Electronic Music* program is presented as an example of ways in which greater equity might be established within our artistic communities.

After these six chapters, the book concludes with two more sections, the second of which represents a particularly valuable potential resource for readers. First, Woloshyn presents an edited transcript of a lecture (in the form of a question-and-answer/panel discussion) given by current members of the ensemble at Carnegie Mellon University in February 2020. The personal reflections offered by the CEE’s members are in some cases different in tone and focus from the ideas that have directed the book’s narrative, which serves to round out the book’s perspective nicely. Next, somewhat disguised as an “Appendix,” Woloshyn offers rigorous listening guides to nine of the ensemble’s recorded works, ranging chronologically from 1972 to 2008. These guides engage in a variety of ways with the recorded material (including detailed descriptions of sonic events, structural explanations, discussion of interactions between electronic and acoustic sounds, and analyses of scores and spectrograms) to help the reader/listener navigate through what might otherwise, especially for the uninitiated, be difficult music to approach. The section begins with a thoughtful reflection on the nature of listening, the role of the listener, and various listening strategies (once again informed by thorough engagement with a range of relevant scholarship). I urge the reader not to allow placement of this material as an appendix (which is, structurally, the most sensible place to put it) lure them into considering it any less vital or useful than anything in the rest of the book. As a window into the music of the CEE and as a guide to the development of listening strategies for electronic music (not to mention

as a useful continuation of the themes explored in Chapter 5), this appendix makes for incredibly valuable reading.

This book's ambitious structure, along with the richness of the ideas and topics it explores, offer plenty of potential reward for students and specialists alike. In addition to a long overdue telling of the CEE's story, readers of *An Orchestra at My Fingertips* will come away having engaged with some of the important issues in current music scholarship (such as liveness, listening subjectivities and perspectives, and the search for equity within cultural institutions). In addition, the thorough extent to which the CEE has long been ingrained into Toronto's artistic life has created within this study a revealing glimpse into that scene, which should be valuable to anyone with an interest in Toronto's cultural history. Finally, Woloshyn's focus on strategies for listening to electronic music makes a valuable contribution to electronic music study more broadly, and I would argue that these lessons can also be applied more broadly to enrich all listening practices.

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