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Louis Brouillette

Glenn Watkins. 2010. *The Gesualdo Hex: Music, Myth, and Memory*. New York: Norton. xviii + 384 pp. ISBN 978-0-393-07102-3 (hardcover).

The notoriety of Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa (ca. 1561–1613) rests upon two distinct factors: his unusually chromatic polyphonic vocal music and his role in the brutal murder of his wife, Maria d'Avalos, and her lover, the Duke of Andria, in 1590. The lurid details of the murder have been more than enough to provoke the imaginations of poets, authors, and filmmakers, and Gesualdo the composer usually fades into the wings in favour of Gesualdo the "brutal psychopath," as though he were a sort of Hannibal Lecter of the Renaissance. In the past, the attention lavished on Gesualdo's life has not reflected a commensurate love of his difficult music. Charles Burney thought his music

"forced, affected, and disgusting," while Carl Dahlhaus considered it "virtually without consequence."

Glenn Watkins's *The Gesualdo Hex: Music, Myth, and Memory* is not a corrective to this viewpoint as much as it is a meditation upon the ways in which Gesualdo's legacy disproves it on its own. Watkins has already assumed the role of doyen of Gesualdo studies and has, as such, provided the definitive work on Gesualdo with his 1973 *Gesualdo: The Man and His Music*. This is a very different book. A combination of music history, personal reflection, and mystery novel, *The Gesualdo Hex* is a remarkable tour de force of the ways in which Gesualdo's music suffered through the ebbs and flows of music history before finding a home among the most supposedly radical musical personalities of the twentieth century.

Part 1—"Gesualdo and the Crisis of the Renaissance"—is primarily biographical material about Gesualdo, though it is far from a simple rehashing of the material Watkins presents in his earlier book. A great number of documents have been unearthed in the years since Watkins provided his definitive account of Gesualdo, and the inclusion of that material here means that this first section could probably stand on its own as a slim little volume in a Great Composers series. There is no small amount of retroactive psychoanalysis here, and though this is rarely a successful venture when undertaken by other scholars, it is certainly warranted in this case. Scholars are rarely shy about throwing around the terms *psychopath* and *madman* when referring to Gesualdo, the former of which even occurs in the entry on Gesualdo in *Grove Music Online* by Lorenzo Bianconi, despite the fact that one need not necessarily be either of these things to commit a double murder. Watkins proposes instead that Gesualdo was a complex synthesis of morbid religiosity, Robert Burton–style melancholy, Neoplatonist mysticism, and musically obsessed depressive. He also suggests that Gesualdo, far from being a psychopath whose murderous tendencies are reflected in his music, might in fact have felt the considerable pressure of tradition and noble expectations concerning his wife's adulterous adventures, and that he might therefore have simply been following the code of the nobility that dictated that adultery was to be punished in the most severe manner possible. Those who might be concerned that Watkins is too willing to throw cold water on the more salacious aspects of Gesualdo's biography ought not fear, for one of the many details that have been unearthed by recent research concerns a witchcraft trial involving Gesualdo and one of his lovers. Watkins provides the historical transcript of the trial in full, which ought to be enough to make all of the opportunistic filmmakers and authors who have dealt with Gesualdo bemoan the fact that such graphic and horrible details of his life were not available earlier, for they would certainly make for some memorable scenes.

Apart from the more sensational aspects of Gesualdo's life, this first section contains the seeds of Watkins's argument. Using Gesualdo's final works—the last two books of madrigals and the *Tenebrae responsoria*—as examples of "late works," Watkins takes aim at Adorno's famous maxim concerning Beethoven's late style: "In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes." Gesualdo's

chromaticism, posing as it does questions of modality and counterpoint that will subsequently be answered only by the emergence of tonality, does not, in this scenario, represent the ruins of modality and traditional forms but the convergence of the radical and the conservative, the new and the old. This is music that explores the chromatic saturation of the octave while still remaining wedded to the traditional liturgical forms of the *Tenebrae* service and the cadential formulae of modal counterpoint. Further, by placing Gesualdo firmly within the experimental musical traditions of Ferrara (a location Robert Craft once referred to as the Darmstadt of the Renaissance), Watkins makes a strong case for Gesualdo being both of his time and of considerable consequence for the future.

Parts 2 and 3 of the book—"Schoenberg: Backward Glances, 1940–1950" and "Stravinsky: The Pastness of the Present, 1956–1966"—pursue the re-emergence of Gesualdo in the twentieth century. The two main stars on the stage here are Schoenberg and Stravinsky, both of whom engaged the world of early music to a certain degree, although supporting players such as Pierre Boulez, Egon Wellesz, René Leibowitz, and Nadia Boulanger play important roles throughout. Schoenberg had no direct contact with the music of Gesualdo, and as a result this brief section seems to draw us away from the idea of Gesualdo as a unifying figure among the modernists. Stravinsky gets far more screen time here, and rightfully so, for his engagement with the music of Gesualdo was far more intimate and personal, facilitated as it was by his assistant and fellow Gesualdo-enthusiast Robert Craft. This is an incredibly rich section of the book and one that sheds light on Stravinsky that only Watkins, as a Gesualdo scholar and close friend of both Stravinsky and Craft, could provide. Gesualdo is revealed as a figure of considerable influence for Stravinsky, the extent of which might come as a surprise to even the most learned Stravinsky scholars. Watkins's reflections on his conversations with Stravinsky and Craft are the most memoir-like passages in the book, but they are also the most powerful and compelling. This is a unique and personal brand of musicology, one that transcends simple scholarly insight, and we end up with a much broader and more compelling picture of both Stravinsky and Craft as a result.

The fourth section—"The Prince in a Postmodern World"—follows the reputation of Gesualdo past his resurrection by the serialists and modernists to the infatuation of contemporary composers, writers, and filmmakers. Reading more like a list than a book, this section provides an overview of the many creative personalities who have engaged Gesualdo, from composers who have been influenced by his music to authors who have written historical novels recounting his life. This section drags a bit, as there is hardly enough space to do most of them any justice. As a result, some of Watkins's judgments come off sounding a bit terse, and his summary dismissal of Alfred Schnittke's opera *Gesualdo* seems somewhat unfair, considering the complex nature of that work within Schnittke's own biography. Nevertheless, as a resource for scholars looking for Gesualdo-themed artistic creations, this is an extremely valuable chapter.

Watkins brings it all together in the final section: "Gesualdo and the Challenge to History." Here we see that it is not the direct influence of Gesualdo on Schoenberg and Stravinsky that makes him an important figure, but rather the sympathetic natures of these three seemingly iconoclastic figures that illuminate his importance for later generations. Each of them is often seen as a revolutionary who destroyed all that came before him in order to forge something new, a break from the past that pointed towards a future no longer tethered to the strictures of tradition. Watkins posits instead a group of visionary composers who recognized the historical crisis involved in refuting the past, and the necessity of finding a balance between the revolutionary and the traditional that helps to affirm the identity of each by maintaining the tension and antagonism between them. In their late works, Gesualdo, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky all realized the importance of this delicate balance and thus sought a synthesis between their respective innovations and traditions: modality and proto-tonality for Gesualdo; serialism, atonality, and tonality for Schoenberg and Stravinsky. For Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Gesualdo was not only an influential visionary who explored chromaticism, but was, in fact, an earlier version of themselves.

Watkins's account of Gesualdo as a subject struggling with his creative nature and artistic legacy resonates closely with Susan McClary's recent work on subjectivity in the Renaissance, and as such complements it nicely. *The Gesualdo Hex* is a remarkable book that every scholar, Gesualdo specialist or not, ought to read. It should be said, however, that this is not the kind of book every scholar should try to write. Watkins's reputation as the pre-eminent Gesualdo scholar, and his considerable list of academic publications, alleviates him from the necessity of jumping through hoops or showing his work before solving the equation. Instead, Watkins writes with a novelist's feeling for narrative about a group of musicians who struggled against their own natures and that of the world around them before producing the sort of late works that would protect their artistic legacies. Most scholars need a lifetime of work before they can accomplish the creation of such a book as this, and very few can hope to do so in such an exemplary and admirable manner.

Graham Freeman

Mary S. Woodside and Neal Johnson, ed. and trans. 2008. *The Russian Life of R.-Aloys Mooser, Music Critic to the Tsars: Memoirs and Selected Writings*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0-7734-5215-2.

As music critic for the *Journal de St Pétersbourg*, the Geneva-born R.-Aloys Mooser (1876–1969) attended the city's major performances and formed close personal ties with its important musical figures. He describes these events, interactions, and personalities in his writings for the *Journal* and in his memoirs, a selection of which are published here for the first time in English (translated from the French by Neal Johnson). Mooser writes with the fine