

Norma Beecroft. 2015. *Conversations with Post World War II Pioneers of Electronic Music*. Self-published with assistance from the Canadian Music Centre. E-book

Alexa Woloshyn

Volume 36, Number 1, 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1043873ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043873ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Woloshyn, A. (2016). Review of [Norma Beecroft. 2015. *Conversations with Post World War II Pioneers of Electronic Music*. Self-published with assistance from the Canadian Music Centre. E-book]. *Intersections*, 36(1), 103–105.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1043873ar>

Norma Beecroft. 2015. *Conversations with Post World War II Pioneers of Electronic Music*. Self-published with assistance from the Canadian Music Centre. E-book.

By the late 1970s, electronic music had established itself as a viable and varied path to the future of music—beyond the initial opposition by proponents of *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik*—with composers around the world embracing sound recording and synthesis technologies for diverse musical ends. Following the most well known experiments in Paris and Cologne, the USA and Canada were also becoming leaders in tape works and live electronic music. Computer technology was still relatively new to the electronic music world, and many composers viewed the computer equally with skepticism and optimism. A time now long since consigned to twentieth-century music textbooks, the late 1970s comes to life anew with the stories and personalities of the giants of electronic music in Norma Beecroft's *Conversations with Post World War II Pioneers of Electronic Music* (published as an e-book in 2015 by the Canadian Music Centre).

This book has been almost 40 years in the making: it features twenty-three interviews conducted in 1977, now available as both audio podcasts and transcribed in the e-book. These interviews were previously unavailable, but through careful transcriptions and digital transfer and editing of the original audio recordings (by William Van Ree), readers and listeners can join Beecroft in first hearing about and then reflecting on the “explosion of creativity” (p. 5) and relationship between art and technology witnessed in the decades following World War II.

Most impressive about this book is the list of electronic/electroacoustic giants and the international reach of Beecroft's interviews, including France's Pierre Schaeffer, Germany's Karlheinz Stockhausen and Gottfried Michael Koenig, Italy's Luciano Berio, and USA's John Cage and Vladimir Ussachevsky. Given Canada's frequent absence in electronic music historiography, Canadian music scholars will rejoice that this publication includes five interviews with Canadian composers and leaders in electronic music: Gustav Ciamaga, Barry Truax, Bill Buxton, James Montgomery, and Bengt Hambraeus.

The persistent gender gap in electronic music history is clearly evident in *Conversations*, with no women composers included in the interviews. This is hardly surprising given the project's provenance in the late 1970s, as women electronic/electroacoustic composers still continue to fight against the gender bias in the twice male-dominated space of electronic music (composition + technology). However, it is Beecroft's voice in text and more powerfully in the audio files, juxtaposed against the voices of over twenty men, that highlights

this divide. Women are mentioned in some interviews, including Nadia Boulanger (Iannis Xenakis), Pauline Oliveros (John Cage), Roslyn Brogue Henning (Earle Brown), and Daphne Oram (Hugh Davies, Desmond Briscoe). Beecroft herself has an impressive biography as composer and radio broadcaster, with a focus on contemporary music and electronic music. Her knowledge of and passion for this music pervades *Conversations* and enabled her to have extensive and insightful conversations with the famous pioneers of electronic music, people who, for so many of us, can only be names we read about in books.

Beecroft's task as interviewer was sometimes easy; for example, John Cage's gentle demeanour and propensity for storytelling resulted in a wonderful and warm conversation. Other interviews required Beecroft to reword questions and keep the interviewees on topic. She handled this with ease, including conducting interviews with Schaeffer and François Bayle in French. These two interviews are published in both French and English.

The greatest offering of *Conversations* is the personal perspectives on aesthetics, technologies, and personalities within electronic music history. It draws the reader back to a time when IRCAM was in its development and James Montgomery and Barry Truax were in the early stages of their careers, having only completed their studies a few years prior.

Each composer in turn uses his interview to reinforce the ideas and approaches we continue to associate with them, such as Schaeffer, *musique concrète* and the classification of sound objects, Xenakis and stochastic music, and Cage and chance operations. What comes through equally as often, though, is harsh judgment, even disdain, for other composers, approaches, and institutions. For example, Schaeffer holds nothing back when he exclaims: "I hate dodecaphonic music ... and I often say that the Austrians shot music with twelve bullets ... they'd practically killed it for the next fifty years, in my opinion" (pp. 26–7). Schaeffer's criticism of dodecaphony emerges during his discussion of Boulez, a contentious recurring figure in *Conversations*. Schaeffer states: "... Boulez presumed to know a bit more about acoustics than I did, while I was, after all, a specialist on the matter ..." (p. 27). Boulez is not interviewed for *Conversations*, but his presence is strong, particularly in the interviews with European composers.

The large number of interviews with American and Canadian composers prevents the book from being too Eurocentric, a balance which is greatly appreciated when compared to the historical dominance of the European tradition in compositional and musicological circles.

The audio recordings might be a better place to start with *Conversations*. The transcribed audio interviews accentuate the gap between acceptable syntax for oral versus written communication, as run-on sentences, dangling modifiers, lack of number agreement, and so on, abound in the transcriptions. This appropriate honouring of the original interviews can make reading a challenge. The syntactical issues of the interviews are less obvious when listening to the audio recordings, as our ears are more used to this style. What's more, the audio recordings provide us with a vivid sense of the personalities of these individuals.

Acquiring new publications can be an expensive enterprise, but the e-book *Conversations* costs only \$15, with podcasts of the interviews available for free download. Thus, *Conversations* is an accessible resource for students, teachers, and electronic music scholars. Though the book does not come with an index, PDF text searches achieve the same goals of easy cross-referencing. *Conversations* would also have benefitted from an editor in the introductions to each composer, in addition to catching mistakes scattered throughout.

Overall, *Conversations* is best used as a supplement to more traditional textbooks on electronic music history, as knowledge of the many names, musical works, places, and events referenced throughout will help the reader contextualize and evaluate the compelling exchanges. The interviews demonstrate the frequent gaps in human memory that we all experience—forgetfulness about dates, names, and titles is scattered throughout the interviews. Without any footnotes to clarify or correct, *Conversations* requires the reader to consult other resources to fill in the gaps. Nonetheless, *Conversations* is an invaluable resource for scholars of electronic music history, and we owe much gratitude to Norma Beecroft for capturing these stories before they were lost forever.

ALEXA WOLOSHYN

BIOGRAPHY

Alexa Woloshyn is Assistant Professor of Musicology at Carnegie Mellon University. Her research focuses on how electronic, physiological, and socio-cultural technologies mediate the creation and consumption of musical practices in both art and popular musics. Current research projects examine performance practice in live electronic music and Indigenous musicians' use of mediating technologies to construct and interrogate notions of 'modern' Indigeneity. Her work has been published in *Circuits: musiques contemporains*, *eContact!*, *The Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *The American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *TEMPO*.