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BOOKS

How a young autistic genius has inspired a new perspective on the way we perceive musical structure; plus the prodigious pianist Evgeny Kissin offers memoirs and reflections including insights into his repertoire

MUSIC BOOKS CHOICE

Theory inspired by genius

Nick Shave reads an illuminating book about how we understand music



EVGENY KISSIN: *Memoirs and Reflections*

Evgeny Kissin ed. Marina Arshinova; trans. Arnold McMillin Weidenfeld & Nicolson ISBN 978-1-4746-0310-2 290pp £20

There's something miraculous about the Israeli-Russian-British pianist Evgeny Kissin. A sickly child whose phenomenal musical gift declared itself when he was 11 months old, he grew up in a small Soviet apartment; other children mocked his Jewishness, but he was cocooned by his family (plus his live-in tutor) who gladly sacrificed their lives on the altar of his genius. That genius was hailed unanimously when, aged 12, he made his debut at the Moscow Conservatory. And throughout the ensuing 33 years, with a dip in his thirties when his performances became driven and didactic, he's played Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, and Rachmaninov like a god.

And indeed this book opens with a fulsome description of a god: 'a fantastic Being, living beyond the bounds of any words...' Thus reminisces a dazzled Russian admirer, without irony, of his encounter with the teenage Kissin. After this, it is unblushingly assumed by the author that the reader will bow the knee as well. Kissin describes his book as an attempt to answer all the questions put to him in interviews; it also serves as a thank you letter to all who have helped him in his career.

But it requires prior knowledge: you'd never guess from Kissin's flowery encomium that the caring and munificent Tikhon Khrennikov was also the Stalinist secretary of the Union of Composers who tormented Prokofiev and Shostakovich. As a piece of literature, it's as eccentric – and also as honest – as those of us who know him would expect, tossing out pensées which range from revelatory to clonkily banal.

But the significant leitmotif is that his pianism and his Judaism are passionately intertwined, and there are two sections which his followers will find riveting. He names the pianists he admires, and he describes his fantasies on playing specific works by Schubert, Brahms, Musorgsky, and Rachmaninov. This part of the book is gold dust. *Michael Church* ★★



HANDS-ON THEORY:
Adam Ockelford with
his blind pupil Derek



COMPARING NOTES: *How we make music*

Adam Ockelford
Profile Books ISBN 978-1781256039
344pp (hbk) £20

In his *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, first published posthumously in 1967, Schoenberg contends that repetition makes musical structure coherent and intelligible. What he doesn't explain is how we perceive that structure, or why it can take on such powerful meanings. Fifty years on, music professor Adam Ockelford, picks up this line of inquiry in an audacious and thorough examination of music and meaning that draws on psychology, philosophy, musicology,

Ockelford was inspired by a blind, autistic and musically gifted pupil

linguistic theory and his personal experiences as a teacher working with children who are blind and on the autism spectrum. Why, he asks, when we listen to a piece of music, does one note seem to exert an influence over another?

The answer is arrived at through his teaching at Linden Lodge, a school in London for children who are visually impaired and have learning disabilities. Specifically, he is inspired by a blind, autistic and extraordinarily musically gifted pupil called Derek. Ockelford recalls how, in a game at the end of their

lessons, Derek would imitate with astonishing accuracy the notes that Ockelford played at the piano. From this, the author concludes that it is through imitation – a notion that one note cues another, the second note following and therefore forming a relationship with the first – that musical structure is born.

After succinctly summarising the strengths and limitations of theorists from Heinrich Schenker to Susan

McClary, he presents his own theory of how music's constituent sounds cause emotional responses, and how imitation – between pitches, rhythms, sonorities, dynamics, and so on – yokes them together to create a coherent musical narrative. His thesis has its practical applications, offering insights into how we develop musically, but it is the depth and breadth of Ockelford's investigation that makes it so compelling. ★★