

Book Review

Title: *The Truth of Music: Empire, Law, and Secrecy*

Author: Henry Kingsbury

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Reviewer: Sarah Schmalenberger

This short monograph may not be suitable reading material for those who envision Academe as a utopian “community of scholars.” Then again, perhaps it is precisely what they should read. Henry Kingsbury has written a scathing critique of the scholarship and pedagogy of current ethnomusicology, based on his agonizing struggles with an ill-fated faculty appointment at a prestigious university. His account of the events leading to the demise of his career at this institution, as narrated through the Prelude and first two chapters of the book and then interspersed throughout the third and fourth chapters, indicts many individuals for their unscrupulous behavior. Separating these chapters at midpoint is an intriguing Interlude about “musical gift-giving” that seems at first wholly at odds with the surrounding material.

Much of what Kingsbury describes reads like a nightmare of everything that could possibly go wrong in an academic career. This is the kind of stuff that keeps junior faculty and graduate students awake at night with worry that something they said or did will become misconstrued and haunt them at their tenure hearing or dissertation defense. That this book not only describes at length the manifestation of these fears but also identifies multiple perpetrators in two federal lawsuits against a university’s music department makes the scenario all the more terrifying to those most vulnerable to the pitfalls of institutional life.

Beyond the simple question of whether Kingsbury is justified or wholly accurate in his account of what happened to him, he has nevertheless articulated the issues of trust and integrity as crucial to the well-being of any academic community. In his case, he despairs that a self-appointed cohort of scholars (and their administrative “enablers”) are so entrenched in the business of marketing “world music” studies as a commercial enterprise that they conspire to suppress voices of dissent (like his) that question the ethics of their agendas. Insisting that his only crime was that of muckraking within the protocols of scholarly discourse that he believed (erroneously) all academics embrace, Kingsbury ultimately arrives at the bitter revelation of “the truth,” the pain of which echoes the strains of Heine’s poem of betrayal, *Ich grolle nicht*, that Schumann immortalized in music.

This book could be easily dismissed as nothing more than a personal vendetta, were it not for the Interlude section subtitled, “The Gift (pp. 44-59),” wherein Kingsbury shifts his attention to the social context of repertoire composed for disabled musicians. Specifically, he expounds

upon the different career trajectories of two one-handed pianists based on the anthropological analysis of Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (1954 first English version). The disability itself, Kingsbury argues, is not the sole determining factor of the musician's career, but rather the construction of personal and community responses to physical disability. He illustrates his point by comparing Geza Zichy and Paul Wittgenstein, both one-handed pianists. (A different version of "The Gift" appears in this *RDS* forum.)

Whereas Zichy took it upon himself to learn the piano after his amputation, Paul Wittgenstein was an established concert pianist who lost his arm in the First World War. His former teacher Josef Labor was compelled to write several compositions for Wittgenstein, as a gift that would encourage and nurture him back to musical health. In accepting Labor's gift, Wittgenstein was challenged to think beyond the confines of his disability, to envision himself as the "whole" musician he once had been. What ensued were multiple resonances of the gift, as Wittgenstein continued Labor's initiative to construct a diverse repertoire of works for one-handed pianists. His disability was in effect transformed into opportunity for renewal and change. The gift's implicit obligation to reciprocate was the catalyst.

Kingsbury, in describing the career of Wittgenstein after his amputation, notes marked discrepancies in audience reception of his concertizing. Many spoke of their amazement at his ability to play with one hand, but far fewer commented on his musical artistry or the compositional integrity of the repertoire he performed. Thus, despite Wittgenstein's intent to present himself as a musician above all else, his critics remained rooted in their fascination with the novelty of seeing a one-handed pianist perform.

It would seem to many that Wittgenstein failed to achieve success when Ravel, who had written the now famous *Concerto for Left Hand* for Wittgenstein, later re-wrote it for a "normal" two-handed pianist. Kingsbury disagrees with this popular notion on several levels. His most convincing argument to the contrary is his interpretation of the work's formal trajectory of musical ideas, wherein the soloist ultimately dominates the orchestra completely by the end of the piece. Far from submitting to the conventions of symmetrical balance and concerto formal structures that characteristically privilege the orchestral majority over the solo minority, Ravel's concerto thwarts several expectations of musical expression through normative gestures, toward a new rhetoric that valorizes the singular voice. As such, Kingsbury reads either version of the concerto as Wittgenstein's triumph of resolve, first by being encouraged personally to persevere but also in presenting the musical community with a work that would challenge listeners and composers alike to think beyond the constructs of conventional musical rhetoric.

That Kingsbury positions his contextualization of one-handed piano repertoire in the middle of a book that seems otherwise obsessed with describing a litany of grievances against others suggests that *The Truth of Music* is much more than a public purging of his outrage. More Wittgenstein than Zichy, Kingsbury seems on a quest to transcend the bounds of his identity beyond what was circumscribed for him by his once-esteemed peers. At the same time, it would appear that Kingsbury perceives Academe as a disabling force. It has clearly been so for him, but he is also deeply concerned for the unsuspecting students who would put their trust in a system corrupt with the "obscure machinations in the 'world-beat' music industry" (back cover) that has amassed considerable power to determine the fate of performing and scholarly careers.

However awkward its presentation may seem for its angry tone, *The Truth of Music* can be read as Kingsbury's gift to what he perceives as a disabled body that needs to be challenged toward a renaissance of intellectual and professional health. He seems to offer up his pariah status toward illustrating the extent to which a small minority of powerfully-connected scholars have constructed façade of hegemony in order to protect their own interests (commercial and otherwise). In refusing to engage with dissent in productive ways, this community of peers to which he once aspired to belong has, from his perspective, amputated itself. And yet, the possibility of Kingsbury ever being re-joined to this body seems doubtful, given the numerous bridges burned in his unsuccessful attempts to defend himself. He may not desire a reconnection, anyway. To be sure, though, he has been left to his own devices of developing his scholarly voice outside of community, and it is too soon to predict whether this or any future work will be reviewed on its own merits or through the filter of his reception as an outcast.