
BOOK REVIEW

Petsche, Johanna J. M. 2015. *Gurdjieff and Music: The Gurdjieff/de Hartmann Piano Music and its Esoteric Significance*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill. xvi + 279pp. Ebook. US\$130. E-ISBN: 9789004284449. Hbk. US\$142.00. ISBN-13: 96789004284425.

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Johanna Petsche graduated with a doctorate on the musical collaboration between George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949) and Thomas de Hartmann (1885–1956) from the University of Sydney in 2013. It should be noted that I was her doctoral supervisor and as such this review may be viewed as partial. The book, however, differs substantially from the thesis, in that Brill has created a multi-media experience to support the academic contribution Petsche makes to the study of a controversial figure, Gurdjieff, and also to advertise the value of the book to potential readers. Brill's YouTube channel features nine pieces of music by Gurdjieff and de Hartmann, and three pieces by de Hartmann, played by the distinguished concert pianist Elan Sicroff, who is a renowned interpreter of this music. Further, the ethno-musicological content of the book is far greater than that of the thesis, due to expert advice received by Petsche during the process of rewriting the thesis for publication. *Gurdjieff and Music* is a major achievement, in that prior to its publication the only treatments were a handful of articles by insiders who valorized Gurdjieff as a genius and Renaissance man, and most "outsider" books on Gurdjieff that discussed the Movements or "sacred dances" either mentioned the music *en passant* or passed over it entirely.

Petsche's thorough treatment of this neglected topic commences with three chapters that set up chronology, biographical details, and Gurdjieff's esoteric teaching. Chapter 1, "Gurdjieff, His Music and Teaching," discusses Gurdjieff's cosmology and theology, situates music in the context of his legacy, and disentangles the music from the "bubble" of the insider-oriented Gurdjieff circles. She demonstrates that Gurdjieff/de Hartmann's music is related to currents in twentieth century music, and is this not *sui generis*. Chapters 2 and 3, "Music in the Biography of Gurdjieff" and "Music in the Biography of de Hartmann," are a significant achievement in that they bring together known facts into a new configuration, solidifying certain dates in Gurdjieff's life and giving credit to de Hartmann's skills as a composer in his own right. This foundation leads to Chapter 4, "The Collaboration," which offers a realistic account of the compositional process, identifying the earliest composition as "Essentuki Prayer" (1918) and the latest as "Sayyid Chant and Dance" (1927). Petsche documents the extensive body of work produced, and compares Gurdjieff and de Hartmann's musical partnership to other known composing partnerships, particularly that of Gurdjieff's near-contemporary Frederick Delius (1862–1934) and Eric Fenby (1906–1997).

Chapter 5, “Sources and Styles,” tackles the purported exotic Central Asian provenance of Gurdjieff’s music, and convincingly argues that it is not possible to identify precise originals for the melodies, though the music can be divided into three broad groups—Asian and Eastern folk music, sayyid and dervish music, and hymns, which are influenced by “Russian Orthodox hymnody” (p. 126). Chapter 6, “Sheet Music and Recordings,” is interesting in terms of the secrecy that has surrounded the official Gurdjieff lineage via the Foundation, established in the early 1950s by Jeanne de Salzmann, Gurdjieff’s nominated successor. Petsche demonstrates that the printed editions (the Janus, that of Olga de Hartmann, and the Schott) are none of them perfectly accurate, with different lists of compositions and different titles, among other inconsistencies. The recorded music remained within Gurdjieffian circles until 1980, when famed improvisatory pianist Keith Jarrett (b. 1945) released *G. I. Gurdjieff Sacred Hymns* in 1980. This recording was unpopular within the Foundation, but became a best-seller, and introduced Gurdjieff/de Hartmann’s music to a wider audience. The impact of the insider view that Gurdjieff’s cultural products are “objective art” is discussed in Chapter 7, “The Piano Music, Gurdjieff’s Cosmology and Views on Art.” This complex chapter covers Gurdjieff’s Laws of Three and Seven, his intricate cosmology, the piano music and “inner octaves” (p. 168), and concludes that as objective art is supposed to affect all people identically and the impact of the piano music is varied, that it is not objective art.

Chapter 8, “Three Purposes of the Piano Music in Light of Gurdjieff’s Life Circumstances and Esoteric Teaching,” is speculative but in this reviewer’s opinion is a real insight that transforms the state of current academic work on Gurdjieff. Petsche interrogates *why* Gurdjieff wanted to start composing again after a hiatus in July 1925; and proposes that some of the piano music was employed as an accompaniment to reading aloud from *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff’s magnum opus, published posthumously in 1950. She integrates this activity with the way that Gurdjieff’s three teaching methods (books, Movements, music) connect to the “three centres” (intellectual, physical and emotional) of the fragmented individual. She concludes that Gurdjieff believed “age-old wisdom ... communicated through the exotic strains and pungent flavours of the music, touched and taught his highly receptive students in their quest to restore the dysfunctional machine and bring about spiritual transformation” (p. 219). This book is indispensable reading to anyone interested in the intersection of music and esotericism, as well as those more broadly interested in Gurdjieff, the Movements, the Work in its official and unofficial forms, and how new religions, spiritualities and esoteric teachings might amalgamate Eastern and Western ideas.