

Review

Duncan Heining, *George Russell: The Story of an American Composer*. London: Scarecrow Press, 2010. 400 pp. ISBN 978-0810869977 (hbk). £37.95.

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Duncan Heining's excellent and exhaustive book on the music, philosophies and teachings of George Russell reaches clearly beyond that of a biography. Russell's profound influence on twentieth-century jazz composition and performance is extremely well documented and discussed here. The copious amount of research, interviews and observations that Heining presents result in a heroic account of this great innovator's output. A key attribute of an effective biography is enabling the reader to actually get to know the subject—his personality and nature as well as accomplishments and contributions to his discipline. Heining's book fully realizes this ambition.

George Russell was a unique and innovative figure in jazz, largely due to his composing and arranging as well as his bandleading style. His writing included the utilization of improvisation to a great extent, even amongst complex scoring. The reconciliation of these often disparate elements poses a major challenge for many composers and performers, a challenge that Russell clearly rose to. This was largely due to the inspired and commanding players in his ensembles, all of whom were distinguished soloists and hand-picked by Russell to deliver their voice amongst the needs of his music.

A telltale sign of an important composer's influence is the frequency of performances of their tunes and pieces by others. Pieces such as 'Stratusphunk', 'All About Rosie', 'Blues in Orbit' and 'Ezzthetic' were all taken up by the likes of Gil Evans, J. J. Johnson, Max Roach and Gerry Mulligan, among others. Russell's collaborations with pianist Bill Evans were also legendary beginning with 'Concerto for Billy the Kid' (1956), a sextet work, then 'New York, New York' (1959) featuring Evans to great effect, amongst big band settings of 'Autumn in New York' and 'How About You'. Their final collaboration was 'Living Time' (1972), commissioned by Evans and written for a 25-piece ensemble. But this was perhaps a less successful work,

compromised due to 'an appalling mix', according to George's wife, Alice Norbury-Russell (235). According to Keith Shadwick, one of Evans's biographers, the piece was written in 'a terse and extreme harmonic idiom, especially in the jazz world. Perhaps this was the biggest reason for the piece's general failure to make a popular mark' (235–36). These views would suggest that 'Living Time' did not begin to equal or surpass the work the two had achieved in previous collaborations.

The influence of the late nineteenth and twentieth-century Western European canon on Russell's output was quite significant, as can be seen not only from his studies with Stefan Wolpe, the eminent German socialist composer during the late 1940s, but from the serial techniques and chromaticism of Alexander Scriabin's music evident in Russell's scores. This aspect is covered thoroughly in the book with frequent references and comparisons from Russell's contemporaries Gunther Schuller, Jack Reilly and British pianist/composer Howard Riley.

Russell's seminal volume, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept for Tonal Organisation (LCCTO)* was published in 1953 (apparently selling only one copy that year) and is discussed frequently throughout the biography, almost like a recurring theme in a long symphonic work. Heining presents a multitude of views of this book both for and against. Guitarist Paul Meyers, who studied with Russell at the New England Conservatory in Boston in the late 1970s, had the following to say of *LCCTO*:

I personally found the nomenclature he came up with for his scales and theory he devised to be quite complex and, in my case anyway, it prevented me from being able to find ways to apply it at the time.

However, Meyers continues,

about George, what I enjoyed most was the challenge of just playing his music. I also learned and performed a piece entitled *2 Guitars* that was very tricky, a lot of contrapuntal sort of atonal lines and figures that were repeated groupings of 6, 7, 8 or more notes but then one note would change here or there. I performed that with guitarist Mark White at NEC and George dug it.¹

This view is shared by others, including trumpeter Randy Brecker: 'The book is hard to get through. I had to take it very slowly, I remember at the time, because a lot of it was over my head. But I still go back and refer to it' (297). Pianist Darius Brubeck takes a different view on the book, questioning its 'justifications, precedents and far reaching claims; which complicate

1. Personal correspondence, 27 August 2013.

rather than clarify' but also states 'this is original, brilliant, even self evident, but no one had quite said it before. The practical implications are indeed far-reaching and amount to a theory that works for playing and teaching jazz' (302). While the book's style is possibly a bit portentous or fanciful at times, it carved an important and necessary niche, made a valuable addition to the canon, applicable to many styles of music, and remains unsurpassed in many ways to this day.

In addition to his classical music influences, Russell was a follower of the influential Armenian mystic, poet and composer George Gurdjieff. There are several references in the *LCCTO* to Gurdjieff's spiritual beliefs and ideas about nature, gravity, harmony and unity, such as, 'I hope this knowledge will light your way, inspiring and empowering your essence to express its truest, most unique self...connecting it—and you—to the stars' (308). While this statement may seem rather magisterial, it is clearly connected to the ideologies of Gurdjieff. Similarly, Russell's 1956 sextet composition 'Ye Hypocrite, Ye Beelzebub' is no doubt a nod to Gurdjieff's 1930 book *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. The author's connecting and drawing out of Russell's varied influences from disparate disciplines impart to the reader the composer's eclecticism and openness to other art forms throughout his career.

The celebrated composer/bandleader Mike Gibbs is quoted talking about his studies with Russell in 1960 at the Lenox School of Jazz led by Gunther Schuller and John Lewis. Russell's classes included portions from his *LCCTO* book that offered Gibbs the freedom to exercise all 12 notes of the scale, the results being a far cry from all the rules at the Berklee School of Music where Gibbs studied in the late 1950s. He also adds that 'I was in awe of him [Russell] because he was a name even then' (128). Gibbs would later acknowledge that this was a turning point in his education that would guide and affect his approach to writing from that point on.

Heining's painstaking research is fully evident in the first three chapters (70 pages' worth) that chronicle Russell's upbringing in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was adopted at birth and faced a substantial amount of racism in a city not known for its liberal views during pre-war America. Originally a competent drummer, Russell pursued piano as a teenager and ended up recording formidably on it with his sextet in the early 1960s, which included the likes of Don Ellis, David Baker, Steve Swallow and vocalist Sheila Jordan, who was Russell's girlfriend for a short while. Her rendition of his treatment of 'You Are My Sunshine' (1962) remains a hallmark part of Russell's *American Trilogy* that also included 'Ballad of Hix Blewitt' and 'The Day John Brown Was Hanged'.

Russell's move to New York City in 1945 did not bode well; he was hospitalized in Harlem that year for several months for tuberculosis, a not uncommon condition in those days. It was during this period of convalescence that he was able to start to cultivate and develop the theoretical backbone and structure for what would become *LCCTO*. After being discharged he was welcomed into the home of drummer Max Roach, and the book chronicles his continued recovery there as well as his gratitude and indebtedness to this master innovator of bebop. Shortly after this experience he composed his first major work, 'Cubana Be, Cubana Bop', which was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1947 by the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band, featuring Chano Pozo. This piece would merit repeated playings throughout his career including on his many UK tours from 1986–2003.

Finally, Russell's career as an educator is explored in great depth mostly from his long stint at the New England Conservatory from 1969–2005 (retiring at 82!). He had been appointed to a teaching post there in 1969 by Gunther Schuller during a particularly low point for the conservatory, which that year had an enrolment of 75 rather than for the normal 250. Russell, no doubt, played a pivotal role in regenerating the NEC's fortunes with the introduction of a jazz curriculum—certainly a controversial addition to a traditional music conservatory in those days. He was also the only black teacher there for some time. Heinings's interviews with former Russell students, including Fred Hersch, Marty Erlich, Don Byron, Bill Urmson and musicologist Ingrid Monson, reveal a lot about Russell's teaching style and how it had a lasting influence on their careers. It becomes clear that Russell was there primarily to teach 'The Concept' (*LCCTO*) and, according to bassist, Urmson (who later toured with Russell), 'the New York standard was a very high ideal at the time. He definitely instilled that into us' (225), demonstrating Russell's desire for professionalism and creativity from his students.

Russell's regular visits to the UK from 1986–2003 are also well covered with interviews with saxophonists Pete Hurt and Chris Biscoe, both longstanding members of his UK band, as well as John Cumming of Serious Productions who booked and organized the tours. Biscoe stressed that Russell made no demands for special treatment and commented, 'I thought he would certainly have been justified in saying "I want a limo" or "Put me on a plane" instead of going on the coach with the other people or something like that. He wants to travel with the band' (257).

In all, Heinings's book is a valuable document, providing the reader with a full and varied account of a great jazz composer's life and work.