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Review: *Pynchon's Sound of Music*

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A book review of Christian Hänggi's *Pynchon's Sound of Music* (Diaphanes, 2020).

Christian Hänggi's *Pynchon's Sound of Music* was published in softcover and open access by Diaphanes in June 2020, the headliner act in a festival of sorts of musical Pynchon projects, including a fine album of Pynchon lyrics set to music by Hänggi and musician Tyler Burba titled "Now Everybody—" (an Elvis-at-his-most-commercial-inspired "Wacky Coconuts" from *Vineland* being a standout track), as well as an updated list of bands inspired by Pynchon (Hänggi 2017). Chapter 4 of *Pynchon's Sound of Music* revises and expands a 2018 article published here in *Orbit*, "The Pynchon Playlist: A Catalog and Its Analysis" and its accompanying table of 925+ musical references in the Pynchon oeuvre (Hänggi 2018).

Author biographies can be superfluous in monographs on much-studied authors, but the brief musically-focused biography of Pynchon that opens *Pynchon's Sound of Music* convincingly supports a justification for exploring Pynchon and the topic of music at book-length. Hänggi's description of Pynchon's extensive and varied biographical links with music — his aborted college musical *Minstrel Island*, his application to the Ford Foundation to pen science fiction opera libretti, his love of modern jazz at a zenith of jazz's creativity, his liner notes for various musical recordings — appropriately set the stage for Hänggi's exploration of music and Pynchon via a book that contains reference guides, formal analysis, digital experiments, and close reading.

Hänggi argues that "music is the most consistent and most central cultural reference point throughout the author's career of more than fifty years" (10), which is one response to the essential conundrum of Pynchon scholarship: suggesting threads of unity in a heterogenous corpus that itself thematically argues against unifying acts of interpretation. Many strong papers on music in Pynchon have already been written, by William Vesterman, David Cowart, John Joseph Hess, Justin St. Clair, Samuel Thomas, and others, and while Hänggi justifies his project as a comprehensive expansion of these studies and successfully confirms and challenges *some* of these scholars' claims, especially via digital experiments, he could have gone much further in using this monograph as an occasion for confirming or contesting previous claims at greater length. But as it stands, *Pynchon's Sound of Music* is a thoroughly researched and often entertaining journey through the staggering amount of musical lexis and allusions in Pynchon's texts, including through broader, bird's-eye analyses of the treatment of specific musical instruments and, most broadly, the political implications of music in Pynchon's texts.

Hänggi introduces his chapters via an "Inventory of Pynchon's Musical Techniques and Strategies," including musical forms as structuring devices (fugue, minuet, etc.) and plot devices, musical terms as tropes (e.g. metonymy, metaphor, allegory, simile), the decoding of musical references in character names (thus updating Patrick Hurley's

2008 *Pynchon Character Names: A Dictionary*), and diegetic musicological discussions, such as Säure and Gustav's debate on Rossini vs. Beethoven in *Gravity's Rainbow*, which Hänggi aptly summarizes thus: "If there is one thing that unites these diverse discussions, granting the odd exception, it is that the aesthetic judgment is never purely aesthetic," but "always in some way political," as well (39).

Chapter 2, "Lessons in Organology," is a thematic close reading focused on three instruments — harmonica, kazoo, and saxophone — in the Pynchon oeuvre, with an eye ever toward readings of freedom vs. control. This follows extensive scholarship which reads many thematics and stylistics in Pynchon's texts as political (Thomas, Herman & Weisenburger, Freer). But Hänggi's readings of Pynchon's depictions of the harmonica, kazoo, and saxophone as variously communal, comic, democratic, banned, and anti-authoritarian are generally well-written and well-supported. While close reading should certainly benefit from the freedom to explore loosely related ideas and readings, Hänggi's interpretations do, however, occasionally veer into unconvincing free association, e.g. "The name Zhlubb cannot be placed in any one natural language but it rhymes with Krupp—visually, but also when pronounced in German—the German steel production dynasty, which manufactured tanks, guns, submarines, and other war technology" (66). The problem with this loose style of close reading is that, for instance here, it could just as equally be mentioned that Zhlubb resembles *schlub*, a Yiddish word for "a clumsy, stupid, or unattractive person," invoking totally different associations. While Hänggi writes that his approach in this chapter is "the detective's (or paranoid's) work of speculating on origins and derivations" (12), nonetheless, some of these more tenuous readings could have been placed into footnotes or cut.

Chapter 3 is an extended close reading of music's ability to effect or predict social change, a concept dating back to Plato, in passages in *Mason & Dixon* (which quotes Plato directly), *Against the Day*, and *Inherent Vice.* Pynchon and his characters have thought about the political implications of music deeply, and the fact that Hänggi is able to read so much into so few pages of Pynchon's texts serves as another implicit justification for the importance of Hänggi's project. While Hänggi frames his analyses with such critical touchstones as the German philosopher Friedrich Kittler, I would have liked to have seen more comparisons with extant Pynchon studies (again, e.g. Thomas, Herman & Weisenburger, Freer, and St. Clair). I do not perceive that, in this chapter, Hänggi expands our dominant understanding of politics in Pynchon generally, but his explications do reveal the impressive density and depth of Pynchon's engagement with music as politics.

Chapter 4 employs graphs, tables, and simple quantitative analysis in presenting and interpreting the hundreds of musical references in Pynchon's texts, a fine contribution

to the recent trend in digital Pynchon scholarship (Letzler, Eve, Muth 2019a,b, Ketzan). Hänggi's analysis reveals, *inter alia*: that the density of musical allusions varies greatly in Pynchon's texts, with *AtD* and *M&D* low, and *Vineland*, *IV*, and *BE* high; divided by genre, references to pop music are highest (55%), followed by classical music (22%); and the most frequently referenced musicians/composers are Wagner, Rossini, Elvis Presley, and Puccini. Hänggi performed a tremendous amount of manual labor in cataloguing these references, and while much of the chapter is descriptive, his new data allows him to contest a bit of previous research, for instance Hess's assertion that "Pynchon's self-composed lyrics appear […] with roughly the same frequency [in *Mason & Dixon*] as they do in his other works," which is corrected by data which show that frequency of lyrics in *M&D* is far less than Pynchon's first three novels (184, 219). Here and in Chapter 3, Hänggi also adds greater specificity to claims by St. Clair (2015, 2019) regarding the *Inherent Vice* soundtrack: St. Clair "stated that the majority of songs in *Inherent Vice* are not associated with a particular subculture or counterculture but are mainstream tunes, a nostalgic soundtrack with most songs from the 1950s and early 1960s. While this is true to a certain extent, my playlist reveals that, firstly, a good number of tracks in *Inherent Vice* are clearly not nostalgic, and, secondly, Pynchon always tends towards something like a musical mainstream" (184). Hänggi's digital work might also support or spark a significant amount of future research; if anyone needs a PhD topic, "Elvis in Pynchon" might be promising!

Hänggi's analyses of the hundreds of musical references would be improved by statistics commonly used by computational linguists and computational literary scholars. For instance, Hänggi reports that the density of musical references is slightly higher in *IV* and *BE* than *Vineland*, and Hänggi hazards some tentative explanations as to why this may be so ("because the central medium of [*Vineland*] is TV" (190), etc.). However, in corpus linguistics, there are widely-used metrics for whether word frequencies in different texts are actually statistically significant, for instance log likelihood (Rayson). As there will naturally be variance of any words/phrases in multiple texts, in this case, it is unclear whether *IV* and *BE* are statistically significantly higher in musical references than *Vineland*, thus calling into question any interpretation of the difference in frequencies. Hänggi also groups the novels into three buckets based on density of musical references, but such a grouping would be far more convincing if it were based on some statistical classification of distinction.

In *Pynchon's Sound of Music*, overall, Hänggi impressively explores music in Pynchon at various macro- and microlevels. One question I have that Hänggi does not address: for all of Pynchon's knowledge of musical forms and frequent creative play on music subject matter, how many of the 935 musical references which Hänggi identifies

are *not* creative but rather superficial bits of historical stage-dressing? David Letzler referred to "cruft" in fiction, a term borrowed from computer programming meaning unnecessarily complicated, useless, or superfluous elements of software, which Letzler adapts as "text that is, basically, pointless" (3). For as many musical references which can sustain pages of interpretation, how many of Pynchon's musical references are "cruft" which sustain little or no analysis? Can any of these musical references be written off as the detritus of encyclopedic fiction, or does the scholar ignore even the most seemingly insignificant musical reference in Pynchon at their peril?

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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