

contact

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I confess I find this book tiresome. From the lack of thought and care in its presentation, I suspect that it also became so for its compiler and that what began as a 'special topics course in Music at the University of Illinois' became little more than a chore in preparing it for publication.

NEW MUSIC VOCABULARY: A GUIDE TO NOTATIONAL SIGNS FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, by Howard Risatti
University of Illinois Press, 1975 (£2.75)

Obtainable from American University Publishers Group Ltd.,
70 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3BY

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'It has been the intent of the author to make readily available a considerable body of contemporary notational material in order to show the logical growth of present-day musical ideas, as well as to offer a source list of symbols and ideas for student and composer alike.' So states the author's preface. A source list of symbols — yes, though by no means comprehensive enough on the one hand, nor selective enough on the other, to be very useful. As to the rest, no. I do not believe that it would be possible to make available musical *ideas* through fragments of notational systems, however well they are presented.

At first sight the book would seem to have a logical enough format — a chapter on 'General Notational Material' followed by chapters on individual classes of instrument — strings, percussion and harp, woodwind, brass and a final chapter on voice — and finally a 'List of Composers Cited', a bibliography and an index. In the last five chapters and in much of the first the presentation is such that the symbol appears on the left-hand side of the page with a brief explanation on the right, this being followed by a code referring to the 'List of Composers Cited' which gives the composer and title of the work, with date, that the symbol is taken from. So far so good — apart from the errors that have crept in during transcription and often inadequate or elliptical explanations. But musical ideas can surely only be expressed through groups of symbols, and, best of all, through the whole notation. Far better, then, to turn to real scores — or, dare one say it, to real listening — than to Howard Risatti's book.

Perhaps the volume could be useful for a composer who wanted to find a way of notating a particular movement in piano pedalling or of a vocalist's cupping the hand over the mouth. Well, yes, it would, if our composer were really so uninventive as not to be able to find a solution of his own. The difficulty with trying to regard Risatti's book as a reference work is that not enough scores are represented. Though 'more than six hundred scores were examined', less than half of this number are cited. (It would be interesting to know what the others were and why they are not included.) The 'List of Composers Cited' reveals some strange anomalies. The *only* scores dating from the 70s are eight by Howard Risatti. Forgive me, Mr. Risatti — I do not know your compositions — but I cannot believe that your notational innovations are that much more important than those of John Cage, who is represented by only one score.

For sloppy thinking and inadequate presentation one need look no further than the first few pages. Here an example of what is described as 'traditional notation without bar lines or meter' written on a single staff each for 'pft' and 'vib' is followed by 13 'transcriptions' into 'various notational systems' — often amalgams of the work of several composers. The 'traditional notation' gets no commentary at all beyond the remark that 'the spacing of the noteheads always approximates the desired rhythm; this is so even in the traditionally notated phrase'. Really? And if it were, it is certainly not apparent from the example, which seems deliberately perverse in *not* approximating 'the desired rhythm'. The 'transcriptions' which follow contain countless anomalies — what one can only presume are straightforward errors, together with changes unexplained by the symbols-key above the examples.