

Violin Music in the Age of Shopping

Jon Rose and Rainer Linz

Burnley, Vic.: NMA Publications, 1994. \$25.00, pp.239.

If their earlier book, *The Pink Violin* (NMA Publications, 1992), hasn't already convinced everyone that we are living in a violin-centred universe, Jon Rose and Rainer Linz's *Violin Music in the Age of Shopping* surely will. I'm sold!

Violin Music's main thesis is the dualistic universal centrality and hegemony of both violins and shopping. The book upholds and celebrates this centrality and hegemony, while simultaneously attacking it at its base (or should that be bass?). However, the mythology of violinism—probably only really understandable to and appreciable by violinists themselves—survives intact, while western capitalist consumerism suffers stinging body blows.

The book draws on the fictional 'Rosenberg Foundation Archive' in Melbourne, even bearing its 'official' stamp in the editorial Introduction, and comprises a very loose collection of articles 'from the Archive' mixed with contributions from a range of 'Rosenberg researchers and activists'. For those who have never before encountered the Rosenbergs, a biographical sketch of and interview with the most prominent member of the clan, the great Johannes (aka Jon Rose), can be found in *New Music Articles* No 7 (1989). Then, the boy from Wagga was still remembered by the populace of his adopted fatherland of East Germany for his Nobel Prize-winning 'dialectical masterwork' *Yehudi Menuhin Serves Capitalism*. Now, in *Violin Music in the Age of Shopping*, Johannes' mythical text seems to have found its realisation, although sadly with very little chance of actually taking out the Nobel Prize, but then, it's a good deal funnier than a Patrick White novel.

Strangely, *Violin Music* begins with Johannes Rosenberg's lengthy suicide note to 'Fred Nooks' (a thinly disguised *Sydney Morning Herald* music critic). His death, however, only opens the way for other members of his family, who feature intermittently throughout the next 19 chapters. There's his sister Judy, the extracts from whose diary, describing what she and Johannes got up to with dismembered violins (for salacious details see chapter 17), serve as a good reminder of why one sometimes should not delve too deeply into the personal life and activities of famous musicians and composers (if indeed one needs further

reminders after Wagner).

Jo 'Doc' Rosenberg was the musical black sheep of the family, ending up a visionary bebop violinist at the semi-fictional 'Miranda Fair' (the largest shopping mall in the southern hemisphere, with 370 shops, 16 levels of car-parking etc. located in the outer suburbs of western Sydney), from which he had been ejected for playing notes outside the key (see chapter 18); what a come-down from his early days as the café violinist at Les Violines in Sydney during World War II, when he was wined and dined by the proprietor, Oswaldo, and entertained his mysterious friend, Percy G. (see chapter 14, which was 'contributed' by a distant relative, Jasper, son of Jemima and Joseph Rosenberg).

A brief mention is made of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, sentenced to death for alleged espionage against the USA in 1951 (chapter 23). Then there's young Alexander, the Russian-born illegitimate son of Jimmy Rosenberg, who writes with touching tales of his student days in Moscow, his involvement in the airborne violinists' performance and so on (see chapter 20). A serious question remains, though: even with all his bizarre violinistic activities, can we really accept him as a genuine Rosenberg when his name does not begin with a J?

Violin Music is, however, not completely obsessed with this family and the chapters which are, to my mind, the most successful are those *not* directly connected with the Rosenbergs, but those of a broader philosophical nature; fortunately, these are in the majority. Throughout, 'shopping', which serves as the buzzword for consumerism, is seen to embody a great many facets of life in modern western society. Most important amongst these are the eradication of content, creativity and originality, with a corresponding increase in materialism and acquisitiveness; the triumph of appearance over substance; the manipulation of the general populace by marketing strategists; the objectification of cultural products as commercial commodities; and the ensuing degradation of the human mind and the spirit. A pessimistic picture, perhaps, but one that is faced with stubborn humour and irony by the writers of *Violin Music*.

For example, in Chapter 12: 'Religion—a Buyer's Guide', D. Nile (a 'relative' of a well known NSW senator and morals activist?) offers to 'remake the tired you into a new person more appropriate for today, more in tune [sic!] with the needs of tomorrow'. With an entry for every major world religion, simple annotated star ratings cover the four main areas of performance: Ritual, Afterlife, Schisms and (most importantly) Music. Take a religion for a test-drive today!

The modern music industry—and make no bones about it, music is a commercial industry like real estate development or advertising—is personified in the sometimes grotesque characters and caricatures cavorting through the pages of *Violin Music*: Mao The Great Improviser (apparently a terrible violinist); 'Riccardo Tagliatelli' of the 'Australian Chamber Players'; Indian violinist 'Prof. Dr. Ravi Supramaniac'; the venomous violinist/chef/dishwasher Francesco Verdi; Anne-Sophie 'I find the violin is the exact *objet trouve* for someone with such superb clothes sense as me' Mutter; and a host of others. The authors are not afraid to cast aspersions on virtually anybody and anything connected with the music 'industry'.

While always engaging, the prose style predictably varies enormously from chapter to chapter, at its best glib and witty, at its worst somewhat clumsy and Germanic, and lacking in idiomatic qualities. As is probably always the case with projects of this nature and scope, there could have been more careful proof-reading in the final stages. However, if you are overcome with mental fatigue while reading the first 20 chapters, there's always the two pictorial supplements at the end (chapters 21 and 22), and 'Rosenberg's Revised Timetables showing the rise of Shopping in recent world history' (the final chapter—literally and

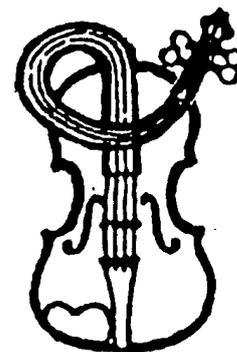
metaphorically), which begins with the opening of Macy's in New York in 1893 and ends in 1992 with the statement: 'the shops have never been more full!'.

Chapter 22 is actually a collection of advertisements employing violins in a variety of guises, both plausible and distinctly implausible; the safe sex message, for heaven's sake?! In a similar vein, the editors have enlivened many articles throughout *Violin Music* with photographs of all the violin memorabilia one could imagine: biros, snow-domes, cupids, key-rings, clocks, pencil-sharpeners and so on, no doubt all available in 'Mozartstadt Salzburg', which is advertised with a picture of a young violin-playing Wolfie with the worst bow-grip a teacher of beginners could ever dread to see.

Violin Music is a culturally apposite buy, from its visual and tangible sensuousness (sleek black covers, seductive glossy paper, copious illustrations, satisfyingly heavy yet pocket-sized, and with page layouts and a range of typefaces which are a distinct improvement on those used in *The Pink Violin*) to the (deliberate?) irony of the two-page advertisement for *Violin Music*'s predecessor, complete with glowing reviews in no less than three languages (must be good!).

Whatever you do this summer, get *Violin Music* and read it! This review has only scratched the varnished surface (varnish recipe can be found in chapter 4) of this amazingly inventive book which will amuse, challenge, enlighten and delight even those who are not musical cognoscenti. It will jab the pointy end of the bow up the nostrils of anyone who dares to take themselves seriously.

The logo says it all:



Patricia Shaw