

## BOOK REVIEW

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### **David Grubbs, *Now That the Audience Is Assembled***

Durham: Duke University Press, 2018

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**Reviewed by Maurice Windleburn**

A 127-page prose poem, David Grubbs's *Now That the Audience Is Assembled* narrates an all-night concert featuring—as the subtitle and first page of the book explains—a 'musician's bruited first contact with an instrument we can't yet visualize and cannot imagine what it could be made to sound like' (p. 1). A composer and musician, as well as an academic and writer, Grubbs originally used material from this book for a performance in 2014, in which he was accompanied by percussionist Eli Keszler and electronic musician C. Spencer Yeh, as well as for the basis of a collaborative sound installation at the MIT List Visual Arts Centre in the same year. The book is a follow up to his previous, more academically orthodox publication, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*, which addressed the peculiarities around recording experimental music seemingly ill-suited to recording.

Grubbs's new book recounts a performance in which a musician—only ever called 'the musician'—gives an all-night concert on an instrument she is yet to encounter to an audience, many of whom gradually fall asleep. This instrument needs to first be assembled from a pile of miscellaneous rubble, whose objects range from menthol candy to car batteries, shoes to divination tools, and this construction constitutes a great deal of the musician's performance. An eventful night proceeds, that includes: shared breathing exercises between performer and audience; the intrusion of sounds external to the concert hall (including of subway trains—the hall being built over a subway line—and the wind, who enters the hall as a personification); and the dreams of sleeping audience members, which construct alternatives to the musician's actual performance.

The instrument the musician eventually assembles is reminiscent of those found throughout Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*: complex, intricate, and made of unexpected, interlocking parts—in this case, a picnic table, mud, stoneware, earthenware, rubber tubing, pipette, syringe, and a speaker cone placed up against the roof of the ceiling. As with Roussel and his fictional instruments, Grubbs also describes the sounds of this strange construction: a 'trr', or 'trilling hum', which the reader can imagine, but only partially and vaguely, since no such instrument or sound has ever really existed.

There is also a score for the performance; although, the musician ignores it at first, and it contains the simple instruction to play a repeatable gesture. Very early in the night, two audience members volunteer as music stand and page turner for the musician, and they continuously try to coax her back to the score—away from her improvisatory fumbling through the debris pile that is her instrument. Eventually, the composer himself steps out of the instrument case lying in the corner of stage: 'a diminutive older gentleman clutching a pristine copy of the score, blinking in the dazzling gloom' (p. 55). He enters into both a discussion and a duet with the musician; however, he speaks only gibberish and is understood by no one except the page turner, who dutifully translates. Here, Grubbs's book touches on a series of topics commonly considered in performance studies, including the tensions and interactions between audience and performer and between composer and performer, as well as the conflict between repetition (which Grubbs tends to place on the side of composer and audience) and improvisation (primarily in the performer's domain).

These tensions are overcome, however, and the night culminates in a grand collaboration where the composer conducts an ensemble made up of audience and performer, which plays through a minimalist work, partly improvised, on a group of gongs. This part of the performance runs for an extended period of time and ends in applause; the musician then exits to the foyer. In a moment of existential, post-concert *tristesse*, she spots a piano and begins to play, so that the audience 'will exhaust themselves clamouring for an encore, pack up and leave, and on their way out they'll discover her seated at the piano. An encore already begun' (p. 106). Grubbs does something quite interesting here: by gradually switching into the musician's first-person perspective, he merges his narrator (presumably himself) with the musician. As a result, Grubbs's description of the musician's inner monologue, which follows, has a somewhat confessional character, as she (he?) contemplates the idea of returning to her (his?) first instrument, and the notion of deskilling and reskilling—again, a topic commonly touched on in experimental music and improvisation studies.

The unorthodox format of Grubbs's book allows it to be critiqued on two fronts: as a work of academic writing and as literature. As a work of literature, it is incredibly enjoyable, interesting, and well written; yet, its status as a poem (even if a prose poem) seems dubious. While many phrases are indeed 'poetic', the stanza layout of the book rarely seems necessary, and a sceptic may wonder whether it was used to stretch out an incredibly short piece of writing into a book more suitable for academic press. As a piece of academic writing, Grubbs's book certainly contributes to musicological discourse; however, its points are made like a novel: they need a certain amount of decoding and leave space for multiple interpretations—something that may displease those who prize clarity or argumentative logic in their academic reading. Yet, the way Grubbs straddles genres is perhaps itself

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one of the more interesting musicological points his book makes—a point made through form rather than content. Wishing to write about music in a more ‘musical’ way, Grubbs importantly shows that writing on music—even when academic—need not be in a standard ‘introduction-chapters-conclusion’ format, and that like music itself, it may be written in a more expressive, personalised, and equivocal manner.

**About the Author**

Maurice Windleburn is a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of Melbourne, researching the file-card compositions of John Zorn.