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# *Music Criticism in Practice: Preparation, Performance, Publishing*

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with additional content from

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## Outline of Presentation

- Quick introductions
- Music Criticism vs. Music Reviews; What's the difference?
- General remarks on: how to prepare for an event, what to do during the event, and what to write after the event
- Key Concepts: context is everything, subjectivity vs. objectivity; positive vs. negative; advocacy; length, turnaround, other
- Case studies



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## Kyle Gann



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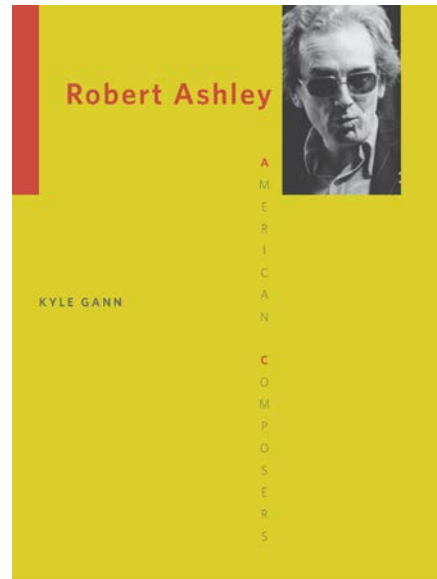
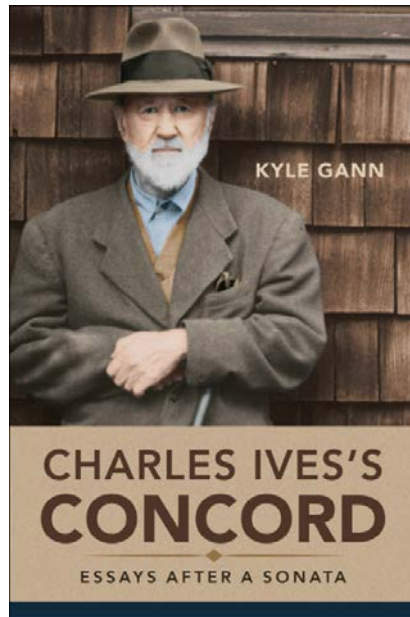


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## About Kyle Gann

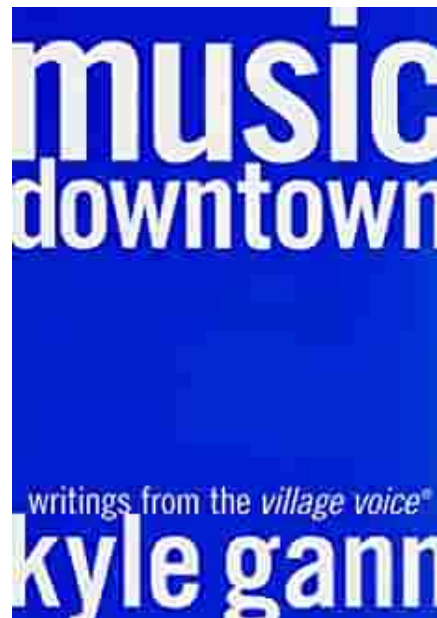
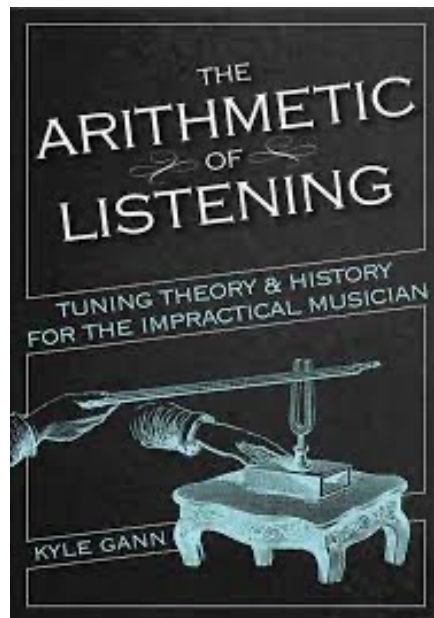
- Composer of both microtonal and conventionally-tuned music
- Author of seven books on American music, including: *The Arithmetic of Listening: Tuning Theory and History for the Impractical Musician* (University of Illinois Press, 2019); *Charles Ives's Concord: Essays After a Sonata* (University of Illinois Press, 2017); *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press, 2010); *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (University of California Press, 2006); *American Music in the 20th Century* (Schirmer Books, 1997)
- Professor of Music, Bard College
- Journalist at the *Chicago Reader*, *Tribune*, *Sun-Times*; *New York Times*; new-music critic for the *Village Voice* (1986-2005)
- B.Mus., Oberlin Conservatory of Music; M.Mus. and D.Mus., Northwestern University

# Kyle Gann – Books



THE MUSIC OF  
**CONLON NANCARROW**

Kyle Gann





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## Anthony Paul De Ritis (芮笛詩)



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## About Anthony Paul De Ritis (芮笛诗)

- Composer, specializing in symphonic music, electroacoustic music, and music for Chinese traditional instruments
- Professor, former Chair (2003-2015), and founder of the Music Technology program, Music Department, Northeastern University
- Specially Appointed Professor, Beijing Advanced Innovation Center, China Conservatory of Music (October, 2016)
- Senior Fulbright Research Scholar, Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing (Fall 2011)
- Co-Editor, (with Si Si), “Media and Entertainment Industry: The World and China,” *Journal of Global Media and China*
- Ph.D. in Music Composition with an emphasis in computer applications, University of California, Berkeley (1997)



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## About Robert Kirzinger



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## About Robert Kirzinger

- Director of Program Publications at Boston Symphony Orchestra
- Writer, editor, educator, program administrator, lecturer, and composer, with a 2-plus decade history of working in the performing arts with multiple organizations; internationally published, widely recognized, passionate authority on new and old Western European and American (mostly) classical music with a deep commitment to equitable education and advocacy in arts and culture
- B.M., Carnegie Mellon University; M.M., New England Conservatory of Music



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## Music Criticism vs. Music Review

- They are not the same; music review is a subset of music criticism
- Gann: music criticism consists of “philosophical articles on the nature of music,” instead of just “how did it [the performance] go?”
- Kirzinger: Music critics place music in a larger cultural context; talk about the bigger world, rather than “what is right in front of them”



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## Music Criticism – Definition

The *Oxford Companion to Music* defines music criticism as "the intellectual activity of formulating judgments on the value and degree of excellence of individual works of music, or whole groups or genres" – In this sense it is a branch of musical aesthetics

**Musical Aesthetics** – a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of art, beauty and taste in music, and with the creation or appreciation of beauty in music

Virgil Thomson (1896–1989); American composer and critic:  
"Adjectives are the meat of music criticism"



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# What Are You Trying to Communicate in a Review?



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## Music Review – Three Levels

What are you trying to communicate in a **review**? (Kirzinger)

1. Quality of the performance – what is unique to that performance, that night; Orchestra? Conductor? Hall? Soloist? How do they work together?
2. Review the piece itself – standard repertoire? (e.g., You don't review the Beethoven Violin Concerto, posterity has already determined it is great); how does the piece fit in with the rest of concert?
3. A good reviewer will give some sense of the historical context (or contemporary context) of a given piece – Why is it important? What is it being played?



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## Preparation

- What is the repertoire? (Is it new music or old music?)
- Acquaint yourself with the composer
- Is there a score available? (if so, look at before the concert); Gann, “look at the score again after the concert, but never during”
- Have perspective and context to frame what you are experiencing (e.g., If you are reviewing classical music -- you have a sense of what it is you are going to hear – you can't just "walk in" – know what you are getting into
- Have you heard the pieces before? Do you have some judgement of what a "good performance" might be re: tempos, balance, shape; e.g., the Beethoven Violin Concerto, have you heard other recordings? other performances?



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## Performance

- What are you going to listen for during the performance?
- Seek stylistic things
- You need discipline – DO NOT decide too soon! (Although you make up a lot of your mind in the first 10 seconds)
- What is the composer trying to do? And what is its value? What can the listener get out of it?
- Does it relate to minimalism, serialism -- if its tech, is it new or old tech? Carefully composed or "being allowed to happen"?
- Kirzinger: “as a veteran concertgoer, I don’t take notes; or perhaps just a few items, ‘I need to remember that’” – though some do – “there is no one way to do it”



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## Publishing (i.e., The Writing)

- Try to write asap afterward the event; Kirzinger, “I think its best to get the first impression down; it stays true” – use sketching
- What did the music do? Is the repertoire somewhat familiar or is it new music; if it is a premiere, the quality of the piece itself takes center stage...
- Is the complexity of the music too great to get into? Or, is the simplicity not enough to share?
- Offer something mysterious enough to wonder about, and try to isolate that; e.g., write about the “little boy on the moon” vs. “the monster on the moon” – say something your reader can relate to
- So much music criticism is not for people to enjoy, rather it's for people to show how smart they are... “Nobody cares if you're smart”
- Establishes yourself as someone who has expertise; but do it subtly





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## Publishing (i.e., The Writing) 2

- The amount of space doesn't lend itself to great detail; seek the overall affect, the overall mood...
- "bring out details that illustrate the larger effect of the performance," e.g., "we heard the oboe particularly well in this passage"
- If you are reviewing recordings, you might listen several times to fortify your feelings; reviewing a live performance is trickier



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## It's All About the Context

Music Criticism is all about the context – context is everything – give as much as you could

- Talk about the ideas
- How it relates to other music
- Where it comes in history
- Why do this kind of thing?
- Why do you think the composer did that?
- Why is it different or like what others were doing?
- Gann: "As a critic, you sit in the audience – and you are on their side"



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## Subjectivity vs. Objectivity

- Nobody cares what your opinion is... However, how do you keep your opinions out of it? It's not possible...
- Objectivity is a quality of writing – can you describe your point of view so clinically, nobody can disagree with what you said about it; express with “surgical precision”
- Gann: “I just want to be blown away by the piece – just thinking of my own enjoyment of it – this is the subjectivity”



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## Positive vs. Negative – and Advocacy

- Gann, “You can't always be positive – the audience will quit trusting you.”
- Do the negative view so precisely, it can be a positive for the composer – provide insight; you should always be constructive (or instructive) in some way
- Gann: “I prefer accuracy to praise... What made you think anybody would enjoy hearing that?”
- Kirzinger, “to be snarky or dismissive of a work is poor judgement.”
- Classical music does not need constant negative criticism; rather, it needs advocacy [support]... even if your response to the concert is not entirely positive; “advocacy is an important factor about why we write about music in the first place...”
- State: “I rather regret that...” or “I wonder why?” -- the Socratic approach... ask a question that brings into consideration that a composer might have done something differently...



## Length

- Word count – you don't have room to do criticism if they give you too few words
- 1700 words is luxurious // 2300 words in the *New York Times* [history, context, blow-by-blow description of the piece]
- *The Village Voice* once insisted upon only 550 words... "I can't say anything!" You barely could put in the facts of the piece and the concert, the year the composer was born, where the concert was...
- 1000 words is common



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## Turnaround

How much time do you have to finish your article? What time pressures are there?

- “It used to be the concert starts at 8pm, finishes at 10pm; and the write-up is due at 11pm; and at 6am it was in the paper on your front lawn”

*Q: If you write quickly, are the ideas fresher? Or do you lose an opportunity for reflection?*

- Gann: "I never cared for reflection – that was for grad school – you want a certain immediacy – you write it quickly, you read it out loud, your ear catches things your eyes don't – if you can, **sleep on it** and read it the next day.”
- Music reviews might end up in the printed paper a few days later – but the online version might come first
- Recordings have a set deadline (which is more variable)...



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## Other

- New music, contemporary classical music, is a really big field... just listen to a ton of stuff, read other people's reviews, read the composer's words, listen to interviews – this is how you develop an approach to how to hear this music
- Kirzinger, “develop a set of skills, assessment techniques... helped me drill down into individual pieces...”
- Program notes (liner notes for CDs) is "pure advocacy"
- Kirzinger, "writing about music is a way of thinking about music."



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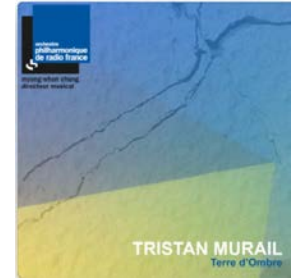


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## Case Studies

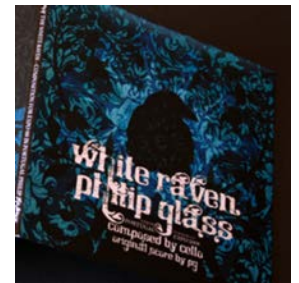
Tristan Murail, *Terre d'Ombre*

Gann, Kyle. (2004, April 27). "Call It Spectral." *Village Voice*.

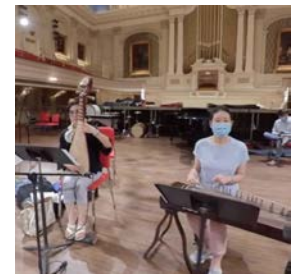


Philip Glass, *White Raven*

Gann, Kyle. (2001, August 7). "Departing From Recipe: Philip Glass Writes the Best of Music and the Worst of Music." *Village Voice*.



Anthony Paul De Ritis, *Zhongguo Pop* (time permitting)







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# Questions? 问题吗?

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谢谢!  
Thank you!

WeChat: aderitis

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