



Review of Jürgen Hocker, *Encounters With Conlon Nancarrow*, translated by Steven Lindberg (Lexington Books, 2012)

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[1] *Encounters With Nancarrow* (the English translation of *Begegnungen mit Conlon Nancarrow*, 2002), describes the author's experiences with Conlon Nancarrow while presenting his player piano Studies in concerts across Europe in the late 1980s. While it is intended for a general audience and is neither a biography nor a musicological study, it does include information from eyewitnesses that help fill in some of the gaps in what was known of Nancarrow's life and the contemporary music scene. Hocker approached Nancarrow's music as a layperson and made it clear from the outset that he was not a musical theorist. The characterizations of the Studies in the Catalog of Works are just thumbnail sketches and do not rely on the reader having an academic background or access to scores and recordings. Music theorists will find more in-depth analysis in Kyle Gann's *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (1995).

[2] Instead of dividing the book into two parts, one with information on Nancarrow and his music, and a second documenting their work together, the author chose to interleave the account of their "encounters" with a series of *intermezzi*—digressions in which he inserted information on a wide range of topics, such as how a player piano works; Nancarrow's hardening of his pianos' hammers to intensify their attacks; Peter Garland and Soundings Press; James Tenney's analysis; Igor Stravinsky and the Pianola; Nancarrow's friendship with John Cage; and his percussion orchestra. The *intermezzi*, despite having the character of "added" material, actually occupy approximately 75% of the book's pages and contain most of the material of historical value. They are printed in a smaller font, presumably to help the reader switch from the author's personal frame of reference to the background information collected from his research. The German version of the book included an index of the *intermezzi* which was omitted in the English edition. I have compiled an expanded table of contents with a list of subheadings and a description of figures to make it easier to locate topics of interest.⁽¹⁾ The book's appendices contain a chronology of Nancarrow's life and work, catalogue of works, list of over 100 concerts Hocker presented with his

piano, discography, and bibliography.

[3] The 25% of the book covering Hocker's "encounters" consists of reports of the European tours they went on together with his piano to Amsterdam (1987), Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg and Hannover (1988), Vienna (1988), and Paris (1991), meetings with many of the people who were instrumental in bringing Nancarrow's music to the public's attention (including Monika Fürst-Heidtmann, Charles Amirkharian, and György Ligeti), and the author's visits to Nancarrow in his studio in Mexico. While Nancarrow himself is not always the focus, we learn about his reactions to presenting his music in public, and of its reception by European audiences and press.

[4] Despite the book's largely anecdotal nature, there is a great deal of information of interest to the scholarly community. For example, Ligeti was one of Nancarrow's most committed supporters, and the *Intermezzi* chronicling their friendship details Ligeti's reaction to Nancarrow's music: "The music was of incredible beauty and freshness, contemporary but not indebted to any school, American but with no echoes of Ives or Cages, written rather in the tradition of Bach, Stravinsky and jazz" (43). Ligeti was surprised how similar Nancarrow's Study No. 20 was to his own Monument for two pianos written in 1976. For his part, Nancarrow found Ligeti's 2nd String Quartet to be one of the high points of the twentieth century (45). Ligeti helped Nancarrow find a publisher, and proposed Nancarrow for the MacArthur Fellowship, providing the composer with welcome financial support in his later years. (Ligeti also wrote the Foreword to *EWN*, which I will discuss below.)

[5] In another section, Hocker outlines the parts of Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* (1930) that particularly caught Nancarrow's attention, beginning with the tracing of all musical parameters—including duration of notes, meter, and tempo—to the harmonic series and frequency ratios of the chromatic scale. Cowell knew that the complex tempo relationships that his theory implied would be difficult for performers to play and suggested that it would be interesting to cut them on a player piano roll. "This would give a real reason for writing music specially for player piano" (58). The book was a great influence on Nancarrow, who seems to have been the only composer to take up the challenges Cowell proposed. Nancarrow kept a copy of Cowell's chromatic scale of tempos on his wall, and used them in Study No. 37—a 12-voice canon with each voice in a different tempo (150, $160\frac{5}{7}$, $168\frac{1}{2}$, 180, $187\frac{1}{2}$, 200, 210, 225, 240, 250, $262\frac{1}{2}$, and $281\frac{1}{4}$ BPM). Cowell also proposed experimenting with moving the tempo of voices in opposite directions, something that Nancarrow did in Study No. 21 (Canon X), his most famous work.

[6] Many of the details found in the *intermezzi* about Nancarrow's life were obtained from interviews made with people close to him, and include episodes from his childhood, youth, participation in the Spanish civil war, and marriages. These snapshots provide welcome anecdotes about the composer's personality, drinking, smoking, friends, and food preferences, such as the colorful description of him by his second wife, Annette Margolis: "He was very handsome and I helped him to dress beautifully. He had a wine colored cashmere suit and wore it with a pink shirt and a pink tie, with black monkeys on it" (102). The previously unpublished reports included in the *intermezzi* paint a multi-dimensional picture of Nancarrow as a man apart from his music, something that is not available from the few black and white photographs of him circulating on the Internet.

[7] Jürgen Hocker was born in 1937 in Trier, Germany. After studying chemistry he made his career in Bayer's research department. While he was neither a musician nor performer, he was devoted to classical music and music history and enjoyed playing the piano and its repertoire. His passion for player pianos led to his serving as president of the International Society for Self-playing Instruments. Hocker first became aware of Nancarrow's music in 1982, when he attended a concert in Cologne organized by Ligeti that featured recordings of Nancarrow's *Studies for Player Piano*. He was intrigued by the music and set out to have a suitable instrument restored in order to perform it "live." Hocker's expertise was not in restoring or maintaining player pianos—that role was played by Jörg Borchardt (16). What he had was a vision, the resources to develop a suitable instrument on which to perform Nancarrow's music "live," and the energy to move it to many of Europe's important cultural centers. Hocker was not only a collector of player pianos, he was also the first to catalog the contents of Nancarrow's studio in Mexico City and make photocopies of the rolls and papers for archival purposes, before it was known that the Sacher Stiftung would purchase and archive Nancarrow's effects.⁽²⁾

[8] Hocker's description of Nancarrow's compositional technique (130–37) provides some useful details about the technical

and musical possibilities of the player piano, an area in which he was an expert. He explains why the original punching machine used for the first 20 Studies made staccato notes easier to punch, and prevented the use of complex tempo relationships. After Study No. 20 Nancarrow had the machine modified to make it easier to sustain notes, and to allow the roll to be advanced to any spot, making it possible to have different voices move at different tempos. While others have reported that Nancarrow made cardboard templates which were used to mark tempo subdivisions on the rolls before starting to choose pitches, Hocker is more specific, relating that the small cabinet that Nancarrow kept next to his drafting table had 600 compartments containing thousands of templates, and that in addition to those with fixed tempos there were also ones with rates of acceleration, such as “1% accel”, “1.5% accel.”, and “prog. rit. 5% → 50%” (132).⁽³⁾ We also learn that prior to Study No. 27 Nancarrow never removed the rolls from the punching machine before a piece was finished, and why he began to check his progress after a disaster he experienced with that piece. After finishing it he found that even at the player piano’s fastest possible speed it still played too slowly, which required him to spend nearly a year punching a new version (135–37). According to Trimpin (2012), later in his career Nancarrow began to change his work directly on the roll as he went along in response to what he was hearing.

[9] In the Foreword of the book, Ligeti repeats his assertion that Nancarrow is “the most significant composer of the twentieth century . . . [and] created astonishing music, thoroughly original, highly constructed and at the same time emotional” (ix). He goes on to recognize Hocker’s competence as an advocate who “worked like no one else to disseminate his music,” and who was “one of Nancarrow’s most trusted friends . . . and most intimate connoisseurs of Nancarrow and his music.” While many would agree with Ligeti that Nancarrow’s music is important, its rigorously methodical construction may obscure its highly emotional nature. Some listeners may be surprised by Nancarrow’s statement that his “essential concern, whether you can analyze it or not, is emotional; there’s an impact that I try to achieve by these means” (Reynolds 1984, 23). Whether Hocker “worked like no others” to disseminate Nancarrow’s music and was one of Nancarrow’s most trusted friends (as he claims) is not clear. Hocker described Nancarrow as being hesitant when they first met, “probably in part because he could not immediately assess me and my activities. Possibly he thought of me as a manager or a ‘businessman’ who was primarily pursuing financial goals” (24). Those who knew Hocker described him as being gentle, kind, having a good sense of humor, and being generous and helpful with those interested in Nancarrow’s music, but according to some closest to Nancarrow, the composer may not have completely trusted him (Estrada 2012 and Sugiura-Nancarrow 2012).

[10] The English version does not come with the CD, included with the German edition, with recordings of Hocker’s piano playing Studies Nos. 12, 20, 21, 27, 31, 37, 40a, and 40b, the *Toccata for Violin and Player Piano*, as well as works by Herbert Henck, James Tenney, Edvard Grieg, Igor Stravinsky, Ernst Toch, and Hans Haass. It is unfortunate that the CD was dropped for the English version, because it provides a context for Nancarrow’s work, and shows how Hocker’s grand piano sounded. This is significant because its timbre is not as bright as Nancarrow’s uprights as demonstrated on the 1750 Arch Recordings (Nancarrow 1977) and subsequent Wergo disks. Hocker’s piano can be heard playing music from Nancarrow and other composers on his YouTube channel.⁽⁴⁾ These video versions have additional value in showing the punched rolls in synchronization with the music.

[11] Even though *Encounters With Nancarrow* was not written for experts, it remains an important resource for scholarship, delivering much information that is not available elsewhere. Hocker and his piano’s appearances at “live” performances helped bring Nancarrow’s music to a wider European audience, and the highlights from his collecting and archiving preserved in this book are a useful source of information for musicologists, and an enjoyable introduction for those unfamiliar with the man and his music.

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Footnotes

1. The subheadings contained in this table of contents give an overview of the subjects covered in the book.
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 2. The Paul Sacher Foundation is an international research center specializing in twentieth and twenty-first century composers and performers. They moved all of Nancarrow's papers and instruments from Mexico City to their facility in Switzerland in 1997.
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 3. A picture of Nancarrow at his drafting table can be seen on Hocker's website.
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 4. Hocker, Jürgen. "Player Piano Music" YouTube channel, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/user/playerpianoJH>.
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