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Citation

Rehding, Alexander. 2016. Collector, Critic, Fancier: In Memoriam Daniel Albright.

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Collector, Critic, Fancier: In Memoriam Daniel Albright

Daniel Albright had remarkable hands. One does not have to believe in the pseudo-science of physiognomy to be fascinated by the expressivity of these hands. Anyone who had experienced him in person will remember them: with his long, slender fingers he could easily have been a hand model. His fingernails were always immaculately manicured. These exquisite—and exquisitely maintained—hands stood out because they oddly contrasted with the rest of his appearance, about which he did not seem to care a great deal. His hair was rarely cut. His glasses were perfunctory. His dress sense was best described as academic shabby chic, consisting usually of a blue blazer over a t-shirt paired with blue jeans. But it seems that he rarely missed a session with a manicurist.

His meticulously filed and polished fingernails were nothing short of mesmerizing. In conversation he made excellent use of them to underscore his points. He would use his fingers to punctuate a well-made argument with great dramatic flourish. In seminars he would place his elbows on the table, hands at a 90 degree angle, and point the fingers of both hands toward the person or persons whose points he was picking up, often rotating his wrists from one person to the other in the process. No one would have been the least bit surprised if laser beams had shot out of those fingers.

Small wonder, then, that a rhetoric of deixis features strongly in Albright's arguments. He did not live to hold this printed book in his hands, but his unique brand of deixis, the art of showing and of pointing out, is the hallmark of *Music's Monisms*. Ostensibly, this book is about nothing: namelessness, non-action, nobody, non-representation, non-expressiveness. We are, of course, talking about

the Great Nothing here, the favored topic of modernism. But Albright's arguments never deal with big philosophical issues in the abstract. Instead, he beckons us to think about them in the most concrete terms, by pointing us from artwork to artwork, referring us from author to author, indicating poem after poem, until he finally puts his finger – or rather, guides us to put our finger – on exactly what these nothings are about.

Albright cites Claude Lévy-Strauss's observation that abstract art is never truly abstract, and concurs: "I know what he means." Of course he does. There is never an abstract thought in Albright's work. Even when dealing with the most cerebral issues, he constantly pointed us back to the boundless ground of concreteness.

Albright could do this because he had an encyclopedic knowledge of literature and music. I mean this almost literally. I first met Daniel Albright around 2004, shortly after we both joined the faculty at Harvard University. I first had the opportunity to talk to him during an interdisciplinary seminar on Music and Experience, and it was impossible not to be fascinated by what he had to say. Over the years it became clear to me that Albright had read everything and he had listened to everything. In fact, I only remember a single occasion when I mentioned a literary work that he had not read, and it was a fairly obscure title, an easily forgivable omission: Hans Henny Jahnn's *Fluß ohne Ufer* (1949/50)—this two-thousand-page sprawling monster of a novel, only translated in excerpts, is probably the best among the B-list of German modernist novels. With its abrupt scene changes, with its focus on music, in fact, with its specially composed music examples firmly embedded in the text, I am sure Albright would have

found much in it to enjoy. But in a sense, this single gap in his knowledge only served to highlight the comprehensiveness of his grasp of literature, in the same way that advertisers sometimes admit to minor flaws in their product, only to underscore how impeccable everything else is.

Testing the limits of Albright's knowledge became something of a parlor game. I never managed to come up with a piece of music that Albright did not know. He would lovingly speak about the widest range of music, effortlessly moving from Josquin's *Missa Pange Lingua* to Percy Grainger's *Free Music for theremins* and to Schoenberg's *Dance of the Butchers*. In this book, too, he gives us a little flavor of his catholic musical tastes. We flit between Mozart's little-known early opera *Betulia liberata* (1771) and Pauline Oliveros' sonic meditations, between Giacomo Carissimi's mid-seventeenth-century oratorio *Vanitas vanitatum* and Poulenc's opera *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (1947), between Georg Benda's melodrama *Pygmalion* (1779) and Benjamin Britten's big band number *The Spider and the Fly* (1939), between Emmanuel Chabrier's opera *L'Étoile* (1877) and György Ligeti's orchestral work *Clocks and Clouds* (1972). This selection, a dazzling array of compositions by anyone's standards, conveys a good sense of what a conversation with him would be like. Many more examples could be cited here, and this list is paralleled by a similarly improbable list of literary titles. There was never a moment in which he would not find the perfect example from music or literature to elegantly sum up a given situation.

It would be easy to be pretentious about this impressive range of references at his fingertips, but Albright never was. He was driven by the love and the passion—in a word, by the obsession—that is at the core of the psychological

make-up of the collector. The collector, not unlike the character of the cross-dressing Baba from *The Rake's Progress*, about whom Albright writes eloquently in his Stravinsky chapter, likes to talk about the things he has gathered, hold them up, admire them. But he is never a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. As Susan Stewart reminds us, what is characteristic about the collector is the act of curation, in which objects are not amassed *ad infinitum* but deliberately filled out with the view to achieving completion of a finite collection, such as is necessary to document a particular narrative and to tell a particular story. In this sense, Albright deploys his collection of literature and music lovingly in front of us, to weave a dense web of references that he can point to. Armed with these techniques, which he learned from T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, he takes us by the hand to guide us confidently from one object to the next, following uncharted paths that the rest of us would have never found on our own.

The references often come fast and furious. Within a few sentences we traverse the space from Brecht to Rossini, to Nietzsche and Socrates, to Smetana. Or from Villier de l'Isle Adam to Piranesi, to Borges, to Perrault, to Nabokov, to Beckett and Auden. Albright loved these fast-paced connections, which can almost appear like an endless, goalless, shapeless web of Renaissance correspondences. But they are never without purpose. Just as the bumbling hero of Joseph von Eichendorff's novella *From the Life of a Good-for-Nothing* (1826) realizes upon returning from Italy that nothing that happened to him on his meandering trip south was ever an accident or a coincidence, so everything in Albright's casual and chatty prose is in fact scrupulously planned and laid out. For instance, when he heaps lavish but seemingly unnecessary praise on

Ashbery's translation of Rimbaud, this is in fact a carefully calculated legerdemain, which allows him to transition to the next section. Nothing is ever arbitrary in Albright's deictic web of references. Is it a surprise, though, that he is deeply attracted to Maeterlinck's "random inevitable"? To W. H. Auden's celebration of the arbitrary?

Oftentimes Albright encourages us to imagine what might have been. Had *The Rake's Progress* been written ten years later, in the 1960s, Albright conjectures, Baba's part might have been written in aleatoric music. In a similar vein, he will offer some suggestions as to how the works he describes for us came about in the first place, by reminding us what their poets and composers remembered. Stravinsky may indeed have "remembered" Monteverdi's *Possente spirito* while composing parts of *The Rake's Progress*. In his *Serres chaudes* Maeterlinck may indeed have had a line in mind from Tristan l'Hermit's poem *La Grotte*. Debussy's *Sirènes* may well have remembered a line from Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and Auden may be remembering an allusion to Goddeck's *Das Buch vom Es*. We will never know for sure. But these remembrances, connections, allusions that make up Albright's amicable and less angst-ridden version of the Anxiety of Influence are always razor-sharp and convincing. They have to be, because they exist in Albright's own vivid imagination, they form an inextricable part of his web of correspondences.

Sometimes, in these imaginary games, it seems that Albright enters into friendly competition with the authors he is discussing. Are the adjectives he uses when he describes Wagner's music—viscid, gloppy—a little more extravagant because they occur in the direct vicinity of Baudelaire? Is he not gently arm-

wrestling with Rimbaud when he tops the poet's "Chinese, Hottentots, Gypsies, nincompoops, hyenas," with his own list: "cheerleaders, tax accountants, werewolves, hermaphrodites"? Who can find terms that are more outlandish, more absurd, more freakish?

It is perhaps in his witty summaries where this urge toward one-upmanship comes to the fore most clearly, a desire to pile up descriptions that become ever more drastic, ever more pithy, ever more polished—until he can hold them up and they beam with the shiny succinctness of the aphorism. Not only are Wagnerian leitmotifs a name-tag that reads "Enforced anonymity," but he feels compelled to take this *bon mot* one step further and act it out: "Hi, I'm—don't ask, no matter what."

Albright had an unflinching sense of the grotesque, and he never took himself too seriously. It seems safe to say that only in Albright's work would we encounter Moses at the Burning Bush as slapstick. Only here would Mr. Potato Head be placed right next to Greek tragedy. Albright's magically funny world is full of bearded Aphrodites, smashed Kabuki, and Zeppelins lifting knights up to empyrion. Here we learn about the world beginning and ending in clucks and farts, and about Gilbert and Sullivan in Hell. Albright clearly relished the absurdity of such irreverent juxtapositions. He liked, in his more drastic moments, to raise a manicured middle finger to academic decorum.

He was a master of the metaphor. The literal meaning of this word—transfer, carrying-across—describes precisely the definition of criticism that he offers in this book: the effort, or rather the struggle, to remove an object of art from the context in which it takes place and deposit it in another. This can be the transfer

from the concert hall to a set of theoretical principles. But the transfer can also indicate its placement within his carefully curated collection of related art objects, which allows us to follow his indications along the path he has chosen for us.

His pronounced love of the drastic, in every sense, means that he does not think of musical works as silent scores but as sounding objects. Whenever he talks about a piece of music he considers aspects of its imaginary performance. He conjures up the acoustics of the newly built Coventry Cathedral during the premiere of Britten's *War Requiem* in 1962. He reads Méliande's lines in contrasting interpretations (and he would doubtless have acted them out in a spoken version of this chapter). He mentally dresses and outfits a scintillating Kundry in his ideal staging of *Parsifal*. He considers Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* from the perspective of its breath marks. Music is never an abstract pattern of notes; it is always something that we hear at least with our inner ear.

While I greatly admire Albright's hands, it is really his ears that are the most fascinating part of his anatomy. So many of his fresh observations are so to the point that it is hard to ever disentangle us from his hearings. Yes, I believe he is spot-on in his speculation that the initial chords of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* spell out the opening incantation of all fairy tales: "Es war einmal." I will probably never listen to this beautifully scored plagal cadence with the same ears again. Similarly, I find it entirely plausible that Albright really got his understanding of the song of a nightingale from the iconic field recording that forms part of Ottorino Respighi's symphonic poem *Pini di Roma*. (I doubt, however, that many other people did, as he politely surmises.) And I will at least

try to hear water, certainly French water, as speaking a language of irregular rhythms across major seconds, as he wittily concludes from his analyses of Debussy's and Dukas' watery musics.

What Albright demonstrates so effortlessly and expertly is nothing other than what Coleridge's *Biographia literaria* called Fancy, a term that Albright invokes in his Britten chapter. Coleridge is conflicted about this quality: dealing with fixities and definites, Fancy is a much more basic faculty than the Imagination—it is tied more closely to the external world; it does not spread its wings to lift off but must observe the law of associations. It is, however, emancipated from time and space, and as such it is capable of reorganizing the elements of experience. We can see where this is going: the Modernists begin to value Fancy over Imagination, and it quickly advanced to become the major aesthetic mode of Modernism.

The collector, the critic, the fancier: these are probably not the worst ways to describe Daniel Albright's physiognomy as a writer. In each instance, invisible hands place—or rearrange—objects within a new imaginary space, to let them tell their story. We merely need to be shown the starting point and be pointed in the right direction. Is it a coincidence that deixis has recently been highlighted as a model of good writing style? Albright's colleague, the psychologist Steven Pinker, makes a recommendation to writers that can be summarized as follows: point to objects and don't stand in the way. It is hard to imagine a more expert pair of hands doing just that.