



1-1-2015

Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*

Reviewed by Peter McMurray

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

McMurray, Reviewed by Peter (2015) "Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol2/iss1/22>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu.

sexuality as primary identity marker in Mormon fundamentalist families.⁴ *Polygamy in Primetime* offers a rich and careful history and ethnography of marginalized, frequently misunderstood religious minority communities, and as such will be of interest to scholars of gender and sexuality, American religions, American cultural studies, minority religions, new religious movements, and Mormonism.⁵

Megan Goodwin is the 2014–2016 Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow for Innovative Pedagogy with the Department of Religious Studies at Bates College. Her current project explores the role of normative sexuality in shaping contemporary American mainstream understandings of and responses to controversial minority religions.

Jeremy Grimshaw. *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Peter McMurray

IN REFLECTING ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF NIETZSCHE, Jacques Derrida writes: “The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keen-enough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place.”¹ Our stories of self are bound

4. Compare Carrie A. Miles, “‘What’s Love Got to Do with It?’: Earthly Experience of Celestial Marriage, Past and Present,” in *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues*, ed. Cardell K. Jacobson and Lara Burton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

5. The positioning of Mormonism relative to the study of new religious movements is, of course, a larger issue and one worth exploring at greater length.

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 51.

up in the way they are heard by other ears, a challenge for any creator of music or musicology. In his 2011 book, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*, Jeremy Grimshaw embraces this challenge, crafting a richly contoured narrative of the musical life—or lives—of Young, a major figure in American experimental music of the past half century. Famously enigmatic, Young and Marian Zazeela, his artistic partner and wife, granted Grimshaw unprecedented access to them but eventually withdrew their support for the project as it neared publication, among other reasons because of its characterizations of Young's relationship to Mormonism. The resulting book thus becomes multifaceted (a metaphor Young uses for divine experience), shedding light not only on experimental music but also on questions of Mormon culture, hippie-era fixations with the East, and the ethics of listening to and writing the lives of others who are simultaneously creating their own (sometimes contradictory) narratives. Given the existence of other reviews of this book, I focus my remarks here on the significant implications this book holds for a nascent Mormon studies.²

While the span and complexity of La Monte Young's career and persona might daunt most musicologists, Grimshaw seems to relish his task, handling a multitude of musics and methodologies with grace and nuance. Young seriously engaged with jazz, twelve-tone serialism, minimalism, experimental improvisation, and Hindustani classical music. But in telling the story of his own life, Young highlights humbler roots: sounds he grew up with as a small child in Bern, Idaho, like wind, crickets, and the electrical hum of a transformer near his grandfather's gas station (pp. 8, 21). He would then shuttle back and forth between Los Angeles and American Fork, Utah, all before he entered high school.

2. Cecilia Sun, review of *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*, by Jeremy Grimshaw, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66/1 (2013): 318–22; Sandy McCroskey, "Mormonomania: Grimshaw's Fairy Tales," accessed May 24, 2014, avantcritic.blogspot.com (this blog appears to have been established solely to respond to Grimshaw's book, with no subsequent posts since); and La Monte Young et al., "On the Oxford University Press Publication *Draw a Straight Line and Follow it: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*," accessed January 11, 2014, www.drawastraightlineandfollowit.com.

I first heard of Young because he had beat out legendary saxophonist/multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy in a jazz audition; Grimshaw confirms this story, placing Young in bands and sessions with a veritable Who's Who in (more experimental) jazz in the years to follow: Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, and Billy Higgins (p. 23). (Sandy McCroskey suggests that an important impetus for Young's abandonment of Mormonism was the racist reaction by his grandparents/caretakers to the company he was keeping.) Young's life path would lead to similar encounters with the leading figures in European high modernism (including a Darmstadt summer course with Karlheinz Stockhausen), ultimately landing him in New York, where his work brought him into close contact with composer John Cage, pianist David Tudor, and many visual artists of equal stature (Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, and Marian Zazeela, whom he would marry).

Grimshaw works mostly chronologically, drawing on an eclectic mix of archival documents, personal interviews, recordings, and scores to produce an equally eclectic text that moves from biography to cultural history to musical analysis. If his methods are somewhat heterogeneous—though perhaps not enough to warrant a term like “gonzo musicology,” as Grimshaw describes his methodology—they allow him the flexibility to pivot quickly to draw unexpected conclusions. For example, Grimshaw finds in jazz and in serial music significant precursors to the kinds of preoccupations of Young's later, more static compositions. By focusing, in most chapters, on a single “work”—though Young's compositions typically defy such fixed terminology—Grimshaw is able to give some substantive analysis while also anchoring Young's musical trajectories. The prose is lucid throughout, even in some of the more technical descriptions of tuning systems, and Grimshaw has forged an ethnographic historiography that allows his vivid descriptions (e.g., of learning the protocols for monitoring Young's sound/light installation known as “Dream House,” pp. 122–24) to do maximal work.

And what of Mormonism? Here the book becomes simultaneously more ambitious and perhaps less clear. Grimshaw identifies himself as a Utah native and practicing Mormon (now a faculty member at Brigham Young University, p. 12) and makes explicit from the outset his aim to

offer a “‘Mormon reading’ of Young’s life and work” (p. 12). He fine-tunes this position in his extended chapter on Mormon cosmology and Young’s composition *The Well-Tuned Piano*, highlighting how he hopes to undercut the fairly simplistic, exoticist reading of Young’s connection to Eastern music: “Although the spiritual and transcendent qualities attributed to Young’s music are frequently described (by the composer and others) using exotic terminology, the beginning of Young’s heavenly quest far predates and dovetails with his exposure to Eastern religious ideas and ’60s counterculture” (p. 146). He elaborates further that “one can read Young’s works and his (frequently Eastern-oriented) rhetoric as tropes on Mormon theology and cosmology” (p. 152). This Mormonization of Young’s decades-long, intensive study of Hindustani music with Pandit Pran Nath troubles a prevailing narrative of Young and many of his contemporaries. On the one hand, it mitigates charges of exoticizing appropriation, which seems to be the author’s aim: Unlike so many artists of the period (e.g., John Cage or Terry Riley) for whom the Orient seems to be a vast, timeless unknown, Young was simply finding resonances with his own Mormon cosmology. On the other hand, as Young and Riley have charged since the publication of the book, it also minimizes the impact of Nath’s role in Young’s music, a role that continues to shape much of Young and Zazeela’s creative life today (pp. 108–10).

Readers familiar with Mormonism and Mormon studies, however, may find a slightly different objection: What kind of Mormonism is Grimshaw speaking of? Chapter 5, “Space Exploration, Part 2,” leads off with a remarkable epigraph in which John Cage recounts a conversation with Hugh Nibley about life on other planets (p. 142). Shortly thereafter, Grimshaw suggests that he is speaking of a “Mormon culture” that “differs in many important ways from what one might associate with the faith today,” focusing instead on “certain aspects of Mormon cosmology that once enjoyed more conspicuous circulation than they do today” (p. 143). He constructs his Mormon cosmology primarily from the Book of Abraham with nods to Joseph Smith’s first vision, Orson Pratt, LDS hymns, and a smattering of contemporary authors on Mormonism

(e.g., Erich Robert Paul and James Faulconer). This sampling of Mormon theology accomplishes considerable work in minimal space but would have benefited from some more limited historical parameters. For example, he gives little evidence to show the details of how Young would have encountered these doctrines—of premortal existence, Kolob, or a universal astronomical first cause. Following Grimshaw’s generous reading of Kyle Gann’s East-West dichotomy (pp. 165–66), I am inclined to say that Grimshaw, too, knows he is playing fast and loose with Mormonism and does so for “expository efficiency” (pp. 165–66). Again, such efficiency allows him to discuss culture, musical analysis, and Young’s persona and also to confine the bulk of his comments on Mormonism to a single chapter. But at times it also leads him to some tenuous conclusions. For example, he reflects on Young’s understanding of the first vision as follows: “Young, in an act of grand misprision, sees himself just as he had been taught as a child to see Joseph Smith: as a prophet chosen by God to restore eternal truths that had been hidden during a long period of apostasy—truths with the potential to transform the mortal into the divine” (p. 154). Such a strong reading is fascinating and provocative but also seems to misconstrue Young’s own thinking. Indeed, Grimshaw regularly refers to Young as a prophet—usually self-appointed—but he never cites Young making this claim himself.

I am hardly the first to notice the emphatic use of *prophet* here. Writing to Grimshaw before the book’s release, Young’s student Jung Hee Choi makes a similar argument, highlighting two points—language and power: “I believe the term prophet has been used loosely here where it could be interchangeable with mystic, visionary, yogi or even creative thinker. . . . In addition, your use of the word prophet, strikes us with an excess of religious baggage that is highly reflective of power and politics.”³ As regards the latter point on prophets and power, ironically enough, Young *does* have something of a reputation for asserting control in a way that might well align with a more authoritarian (i.e., “power and politics”) view of a prophet, as seen in accounts of the dispute over

3. Jung Hee Choi, “Thoughts about Your Book,” February 13, 2010, <http://www.drawastraightlineandfollowit.com/jung-hee-choi-thoughts-about-your-book.html>.

recordings made with other musicians in the group formed by Young called the Theatre of Eternal Music (p. 98ff.). But Grimshaw goes out of his way to deemphasize this more authoritarian side of his prophet; he is clearly preoccupied with the more visionary, oracular roles of a prophet.

Choi's first point about terminology highlights yet another complexity in pinning down Young: if not "prophet," then what? Like any scholar's diction, Grimshaw's is influenced by his own background, occasionally to a fault, as when he describes *shishya-guru* relations as "a musical priesthood" (pp. 112–13). No metaphor seems necessary here to highlight the ritual chain of transmission; calling it "priesthood" (or "a mantle" with "a lineage of ancient authority") veers toward a dog-whistle version of Mormon studies where insiders will recognize a coded cultural language that goes largely unnoticed by outsiders. Other instances might include the Cage-Nibley encounter, which surely means much more for Mormons than for Cage acolytes (p. 142); terms like *synergy* (pp. 115, 178) or phrases like the anthropomorphic definite plural "the scriptures say" (p. 115); and even interpretations like seeing in a figure eight a symbol of traditional family relations (p. 124).

And yet Choi's list of possible substitutes for *prophet* seems unsatisfying in its own right. Indeed, the term *mystic* is used extensively, calling attention again to the kind of "cultivated exoticist attitudes" (p. 103) that pervaded American arts in this period. (Grimshaw also falls into this trap on occasion, as when he writes of "the atemporal imagination of a guru," p. 115.) The strength of Grimshaw's narrative, as so often happens, is also its weakness: some kind of mysticism does seem to bring these various threads of Young's life together, yet it is not entirely clear what Grimshaw (or Choi, on behalf of Young) means by "mysticism." As described above, this problem runs rampant in certain Euro-American discourses about the East. But what exactly constitutes Mormon mysticism? These terms warrant further exploration by Grimshaw. But in an academic context where other authors have already addressed large swaths of musical analysis and cultural critique of Young's Indian influences, Grimshaw's approach seems not only plausible but much needed for corrective context.

More broadly, I wonder whether this book is really a “Mormon reading” of La Monte Young’s life and music or simply a reading of *the entirety* of La Monte Young’s life and music (or as close as one could actually come). Both Grimshaw’s assertion that the book is a “Mormon reading” and the response from Young and his colleagues seem misplaced. Mormonism plays an important role, but it is always complementary—to jazz and serialism, to drones and Indian music, and even in Grimshaw’s humorous descriptions of the “lapsed-Mormon-microtonalist phenomenon” (p. 161). Maybe certain tuning systems do resonate and redirect “certain latent Mormon cultural tendencies” (p. 161). But if anything is essentially Mormon here, it would seem to be Grimshaw’s attempt to generate an “all-encompassing model” (p. 146) out of the metaphors and methods of Young’s creative practice. (Such omnivorous consuming and repurposing of its environment plays a decisive role in Mormonism from its founding revelations to the cultural politics of the Mountain West today.) Grimshaw repeatedly notes that in Young’s work these metaphors go beyond simply “evoking,” materializing instead as embodiments of real phenomena (e.g., sound and place, pp. 158–59). I wonder how Grimshaw thinks of his analytical models as evoking or embodying Young’s work: has he made literal ideas that were never intended to be, or has he simply realized that these metaphors were hardly metaphorical at all? Returning to Derrida, we have probably not heard La Monte Young’s autobiography in Jeremy Grimshaw’s book. But listening alongside Grimshaw, with or without Young’s blessing, we can hear his music and understand the context it comes from much more clearly.

As a final and related note, the question of Mormon studies lurks as well: how (if at all) does the book fit into this nascent field? That this review is being published in a Mormon studies review rather than in a musicological one suggests some kind of interface. Again, the answer is not simple: Grimshaw’s own account meanders in and out of Mormonism, perhaps more so than Young’s own life. And as a quick online search will confirm, Mormons love to lay claim to their celebrities, despite (or perhaps precisely because of) the distance between their

celebrity life and officially sanctioned Mormonism: think of Brandon Flowers, lead singer of the rock band The Killers, or pop singer/Tabernacle Choir member Alex Boyé, or, from a generation earlier, the Jets and the Osmonds. As recent controversies over proxy baptisms for Holocaust victims and others have shown, the act of pronouncing another person to be Mormon—whether avant-garde composer, celebrity musician, or a deceased stranger—entails a certain exercise of power over that individual that may not always be welcome. Although never stated outright as such, this question of the power to narrate one's own life seems to lie at the heart of Young's concerns with Grimshaw's account. But beyond this question of authorized narratives, the book offers an intriguing model for a kind of orthogonal Mormon studies, one steeped in a particular discipline (musicology) with a subject like Young, whose life history certainly entails meaningful encounters with Mormonism but whose work demands a certain disciplinary toolkit to understand. In this regard, Grimshaw's book suggests a fruitful direction for interrogating precisely these kinds of liminal spaces within and just beyond Mormonism.

Peter McMurray received his PhD in ethnomusicology and critical media practice from Harvard University. His research focuses on Islam and sound technologies, especially in the context of diasporic communities from Turkey in Berlin. He is currently working on a book project on that topic entitled *Pathways to God: The Islamic Acoustics of Turkish Berlin*. He is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is beginning a project on sound archives and/as media, and is also a Fellow at Harvard's Film Study Center. He also has long-standing interests in oral poetry and is the assistant curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard.