

# Book Review: *Life as an Aesthetic Idea of Music*

## Resenha: A vida como ideia estética da música



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In these turbulent times, in which the world faces a terrible pandemic and an unprecedented human crisis, it's absolutely fitting to reflect on music as a metaphor for life. This is not the first historical moment in which our planet has experienced a major challenge. Wars and natural and humanitarian catastrophes are examples. During many of these moments, music has been a tool for coping and healing. The current situation is testing our collective ability to give meaning to a 'new normal', even while we continue to battle for the old one, which still feels close and current, though it will in fact never return. Musicians, in frank dialogue with other elements of society, have been working to reinvent

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themselves, demonstrating a remarkable resilience that has begun to translate into unexpected social cohesion. Reflecting on life as an aesthetic idea of music is an important part of the complex process we're currently engaged in, and this book is indispensable reading. The editor, Manos Perrakis, says in his preface that 'the most prominent example of the aesthetic idea of life in music is the Fourth Symphony by Carl Nielsen, famously titled 'The Inextinguishable'. While composing this work, from 1914 to 1916, at the beginning of the First World War, Nielsen was experiencing a major philosophical crisis. His faith in humanity had been shaken to the core, but rather than sinking into despair, he re-directed his belief particularly away from nationalism and towards life. He said, 'Music is life. Like life, it is inextinguishable.'

With a stable of contributors attached to some of the most prestigious academic institutions – Andreas Dorschel, Julian Johnson, Kathrin Kirsch, Maria João Neves, Nanette Nielsen, Michael Spitzer, Benedict Taylor, Markos Tsetsos, Laura Tunbridge – this collection is arresting in the diversity of its themes. These include musical subjectivity, heroism, virtual time in music, emotion, authenticity, relationships between art and life, between music and the visual arts, and between philosophy, anthropology, and music. The authors present bold and innovative perspectives. Composers discussed include Schubert, Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner, Nielsen, Sibelius, Debussy, Skalkottas and Sasseti. Such is the diversity of material that the collection could be viewed as disparate. However, it is precisely through the connections and the differences between the texts, with their various time frames, energetic oppositions, contrasting experiences and sensitive polarities, that a union is established. Like this book, life is so diverse and surprising that it can't be forced into predetermined structures. To borrow the words applied by N. Nielsen to the works of the composer-philosopher Carl Nielsen, the reader can go far beyond the aesthetic idea and dive into a world of aesthetic experience.

My principal area of study being musical iconography, I can't ignore the pertinence of the unnervingly simple image on the book's cover, entitled Ανεξίτηλο ('inextinguishable' in Greek), in an allusion to Nielsen's symphony. The image, designed by the book's editor Manos Perrakis, is a representation of a crotchet note drawn with a Japanese calligraphy pen or brush, inspired by the enso, the circular form in Zen. This minimalist symbol can stand for absolute stasis and absolute movement, life and death, light, unlimited power, the universe or *mu* (nothingness or void). Into its shape, each artist inserts their own internal 'I'. The editor has done just this in offering his readers the double gift of the image and the book.

This is a work full of topicality, extremely pertinent to our current situation, and a clear demonstration of the importance of interdisciplinary practice in 21st century academia. In the words of the editor, it is a 'highly experimental volume'. I will add that it is a work that is itself an expression of the desire to live. Obligatory reading.

## Publisher

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