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MYLES W. JACKSON

***BROADCASTING FIDELITY:
GERMAN RADIO AND THE
RISE OF EARLY ELECTRONIC
MUSIC***

Princeton University Press, 2024.

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BOOK REVIEW

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Myles W. Jackson's *Broadcasting Fidelity: German Radio and the Rise of Early Electronic Music* is an informed tour de force tracing the historical vicissitudes of the development of radio in early twentieth century Germany. The book charts the emergence and growth of electric musical instruments – most prominently the Trautonium – as well as the advent of early electronic music in postwar Germany and France.

Through a precise chronology, Jackson leads us on a voyage through the technological advancements of German radio broadcasting, beginning with the 1920s and extending to the two decades following the Second World War. Alongside the rise of German radio, we follow the invention of the Trautonium, an instrument whose conception and elaboration were tied directly to the history of radio waves, at least until 1945.

The book details the parallel evolution of radio and the Trautonium, as well as their entanglement with political, social, and cultural shifts between the wars, and their exploitation under National Socialism and Nazism. In Hitler's Germany, both the radio and the Trautonium became important tools of government propaganda and education. In the post-war years, the swift transformations of music technology provoked urgent questions about electric and emerging electronic instruments: what role they might play, how musically relevant they were, and whether they risked immediate obsolescence.



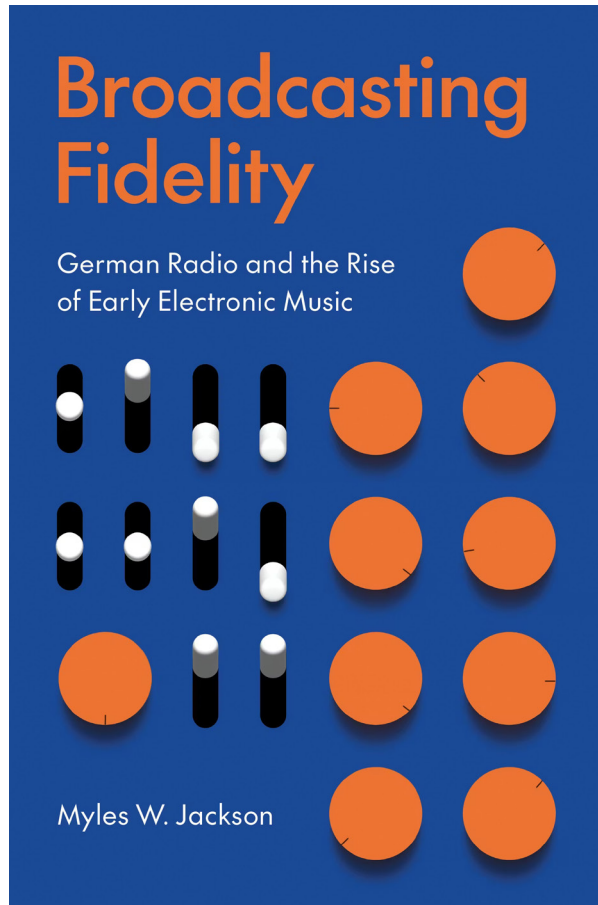
Jackson traces the struggles, compromises, and debates of composers, performers, and acoustic engineers regarding both the radio and the Trautonium from their earliest days. Their pursuit of broadcast fidelity – and the parallel emergence of instruments such as the Coupleux-Givelet organ, the Hammond Novachord, the Ondes Martenot, the Theremin, and the Trautonium – provoked larger questions about the very nature, purpose, and aesthetic of music.

The final section places these detailed historical reconstructions in perspective, asking how and where early electronic music began, who its principal actors were – sound engineers, composers, performers, and philosophers – and what their goals were. It also looks at the contrasts between the work of Vladimir

Ussachevsky and Otto Luening in New York, the Cologne Studio for Electronic Music of Meyer Eppler, the German Darmstadt School of Wolfgang Steinecke, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Bruno Maderna; Pierre Schaeffer's Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète (GRMC) in France, and the work of Friedrich Trautwein and Oskar Sala, who brought the Trautonium to prominence in Germany. In closing, Jackson establishes a concise but timely connection with contemporary issues in music, technology, and, inevitably, the rise of so-called artificial intelligence (AI).

With meticulous documentation, the author guides us on an exhilarating journey through the intertwined destinies of radio, early electronic instruments and the birth of electronic music with its new modes of creation and performance. Occasionally, the book opens onto philosophy, drawing on Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Theodor Adorno, and José Ortega y Gasset to highlight the socio-political and aesthetic dimensions of radio, music, and early electric instruments, but rather than pursuing these avenues at length, the author merely hints at them, leaving the reader the choice – or even the responsibility – for further exploration.

The book is unmistakably the product of a thorough investigation into technical, socio-cultural, and biographical aspects of early radio history in Germany. Particularly



remarkable is the ingenious use of the Trautonium as the book's *trait d'union*: the instrument's birth, rise, and popularization are traced in detail, intersecting with early explorations of radio waves; and culminating in the postwar development of what came to be called electronic music.

By the end of the book, the reader is left with the impression that the author has condensed, with impressive mastery, a vast array of information, historical facts, resources, and particulars. While the wealth of detail in the book's first half occasionally slows our grasp of the larger picture, the full portrait of this fascinating voyage – through radio, the Trautonium, and electronic music – comes into focus in the later chapters.

At times, I wished the book returned to the philosophers invoked earlier, expanding on the conceptual debates they raised. I also hoped for deeper discussion of the musical and compositional decisions of the composers, performers, and engineers, ideally with examples from the Trautonium's repertoire. Even if this meant sacrificing some of the technical details of early radio and electric instruments, such a shift might have further enriched the story.

At one point, the author cites the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, whom I also wish to invoke here with a favorite line: 'we know so many things that we do not understand!' (*Meditations on Quixote* 1963, p. 38). Perhaps the book's ambitious attempt to gather so much knowledge sacrifices opportunities to probe more deeply into the meaning of that very knowledge.

Of course, every perspective requires choices about what to prioritize, what to focus on, and what to set aside. Jackson's selection of sources and his command of the material are both authoritative and compelling, and the way his narrative threads converge in the final chapters is particularly effective. This book will appeal to a wide readership: from academic researchers in musicology, history, media theory, and media archaeology, to musicians and composers, and to general readers intrigued by the historical evolution of radio and electric musical instruments.