



## CAMERON CARPENTER'S QUEER ART OF THE ORGAN, CAMP, AND NEOLIBERALISM

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### **Abstract: Cameron Carpenter's Queer Art of the Organ, Camp, and Neoliberalism**

Organ virtuoso Cameron Carpenter, who tours the world with his custom-built digital instrument, is known for his camp image and controversial performances, and for his mission to revolutionise the art of the organ. In the light of camp and queer theories, this article explores how Carpenter challenges the practices of organ playing and the classical recital, queering normative embodiments of gender and sexuality. Even though, in contemporary society, gender fluidity and virtuosic flexibility are easily harnessed to serve the goals of capitalism and neoliberalism, Carpenter's camp virtuosity can be interpreted as creating a space of resistance, a performance space of queer utopian potential.

## Cameron Carpenter's Queer Art of the Organ, Camp, and Neoliberalism



*Cameron Carpenter, photograph by Dovile Sermokas*

It is known to be the case that queer organists have a long, more or less hidden, history of camp culture within the confines of churches and cathedrals. Organ virtuoso Cameron Carpenter, however, performs camp and queerness flamboyantly on stage. The Mohawk-haired musician with his skin-tight outfits and glitzy jewels is probably the most famous organist today, especially outside the circle of organists and organ aficionados. Born in the USA in 1981, Carpenter received a classical training at the Juilliard School, where he was recognised as ‘a talent of Mozartean proportions’, and today he tours the world with a digital instrument built to his own design.<sup>1</sup> The sounds of this International Touring Organ have been sampled from various pipe organs ‘from the cathedral to the Wurlitzer’, many of them Carpenter’s favourite instruments. Carpenter’s motivation behind designing an updated version of the organ was to ‘innovate the relationship between organ and organist’.<sup>2</sup> Besides requiring a consistent and versatile instrument, which would make it possible for the organist to play the same music regardless of the venue, Carpenter wanted to promote the audience’s sense of connection with the organist through liberating the organ from its enclosure.

Carpenter's mission to move organ music into the future also includes shaking up the conventions of classical music with a boldly experimental performance style, permeated with the aesthetic of camp. Indeed, as Philip Rice notes, Carpenter has come to be known as 'the very embodiment of camp in the classical music world'.<sup>3</sup> He calls himself bisexual, or 'omnisexual', and admits to experiencing confusion with his gender identity. His public image is overtly and excessively sexualised, theatrically flaunting his style and his trained body. Not only does he identify as his role models famous queer camp figures (such as David Bowie, Rudolf Nureyev, Karl Lagerfeld, and Laura Nyro), he also explicitly refers in a CD sleeve text to Susan Sontag's famous essay 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), picking up on her characterisation of camp as 'one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon'. The way of camp, Sontag suggests, 'is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization'. For Carpenter, putting this into musical practice 'requires departing from the idea that classical music can somehow be damaged by experimentation, by camping'.<sup>4</sup> 'Each jewel I am putting on equates another blow struck for artistic freedom with the organ', he declares.<sup>5</sup>

How exactly, then, does the camp aesthetic manifest itself in Cameron Carpenter's performances, and how does he employ strategies of camp to challenge the conventions of gender and sexuality in classical music performance? This article will probe these questions in the framework of queer theory, queer musicology, and theories of camp. In current discussions, it has been questioned whether camp is any longer relevant as a form of cultural critique. Also, since it has been noted how easily both virtuosity and queer flexibility are commodified and made to serve dominant interests in contemporary neoliberal society, it is essential to interrogate how, and to what extent, Carpenter's camp virtuosity can still operate politically. The potential for revolt in Carpenter's performances, I will argue, is not only in their disruption of identity through camp and queer performativity; it is also, and even more interestingly, in how he revisits the traditional notion of camp performance as a vehicle for individual identity formation. Through a reconfiguration of the organ–organist relationship, he carves out a performance space which is both intimate and inviting, and which can be seen, and heard, as a queer utopian space of potentiality.

## Performing Camp in the Field of Western Classical Music

Since Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp"', there has been a lively and on-going discussion around the notion and definition of camp, its relationship with homosexuality and queerness and its potential for cultural critique. To give a quick definition, camp is a style of performance characterised by incongruity, aestheticism, humour, and theatrical excess. Camp can be understood to function as a queer practice of signification that subverts the dominant gender norms and heteronormative practices and institutions, revealing them as artificial.<sup>6</sup>

Cameron Carpenter's excessively theatrical style of performance (in terms of both visual appearance and musical gestures) is quite obviously camp in character, and the same can be said about his playful questioning of norms and canons through incongruous contrasts and juxtapositions. Incongruity, as a strategy of camp, derives its humour from being parallel to the 'moral deviation' of homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> Apart from masculinity and femininity, Carpenter mixes the classical and the popular, the sacred and the profane in his recordings and concert programmes – for instance by performing Bach's church music works alternately with tunes from musicals, or by enriching a Bach invention with the intro of 'All you need is love' by the Beatles.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is camp an aesthetic or style, it is also a manner of cultural expression which – as a 'secret language' of gay subcultures – has served as a strategy for coping with a hostile dominant culture.<sup>9</sup> As Esther Newton remarks, camp humour is 'a system of laughing at one's

incongruous position instead of crying'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, camp has its roots in pre-Stonewall survivalist culture and can be understood as a product of the 'closet structure'. The concept of the closet refers to an unexpressed space of sexual otherness, to the denial, concealment or erasure of lesbians and gay men. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'the epistemology of the closet' has given an overarching consistency to gay culture and identity throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

The question has therefore been posed as to whether camp has lost its meaning and power of resistance in our era of relative queer conspicuousness. Yet, as John M. Wolf notes, gay liberation was not by any means the end of camp. Although some scholars have lamented the death of camp (especially as a distinctively gay culture) studies abound which show the relevance of camp as an aesthetic and as a queer reading strategy.<sup>12</sup> Also, the interpretation and the effect of camp have always depended on context and, in the culture of western classical music, the closet is still fundamentally at work.

Carpenter performs in the famed concert venues of classical music, and his core repertoire consists of canonised works from both the organ repertoire and that of classical music more broadly. In the classical recital scene – not to mention the special milieu of church music – the norms and role expectations for performers are narrow and conservative, which makes many musicians cut their non-heteronormative sexuality out of their public image.<sup>13</sup> The expected image of performers in classical music recitals is not only formal but also defined by heteronormative gender roles and thus seemingly neutral. According to the nineteenth-century ideology which mystified music as abstract and sublime, and whose influence is still effectively in play, the gender or sexuality of the performer should not draw individualised attention to itself, for such 'extra-musical' elements were not only irrelevant but also potentially destructive for the art.<sup>14</sup> Romantic virtuosity might indeed carry a sexualised charge but, in general, rather than being specifically located in the corporeality of the performer, it was to be sublimated into the intense emotional fabric of the music. And the scope for personalised self-expression by the performer narrowed even more severely in the twentieth century with high modernism's utter condemnation of the (romantic) non-subservient virtuoso performer.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, because music, with its perceived emphasis on the emotional rather than the rational, represents that part of our culture which has been constructed as feminine, musicians are always at risk of being perceived – and frequently disparaged – as effeminate; as a consequence, there is traditionally a strong association between classical music and gay identities. In his seminal article 'Music, Essentialism, and the Closet' (1990), Philip Brett famously remarks: 'All musicians, we must remember, are faggots in the parlance of male locker room'. 'For the musician in general, and particularly for the gay or lesbian musician', he writes, 'there is an involvement in a social contract that allows comforting deviance only at the sometimes bitter price of sacrificing self-determination'. That is, musicians enjoy a position that confers a certain respectable marginality, but the deviant role must be played in such a way that the norms are tacitly reinforced. Homosexuality must remain an 'open secret', and musicians are caught in the double-binding effect of the closet, in a process in which desire is simultaneously stimulated and repressed.<sup>16</sup> This situation is not without advantages, which is one reason why the scene of classical music, despite being strongly populated by lesbians and gays, has been so slow to challenge the existing heteronormative order. As Brett and Wood put it:

In the words of gay author Wayne Koestenbaum, 'Historically, music has been defined as mystery and miasma, as implicitness rather than explicitness, and so we have hid inside music: in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word'. The privilege of freely expressing desire and other feelings in music, a

lifeline to those whose basic emotions are invalidated, appears also to have led to a concomitant and unspoken agreement to preserve the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, as noted above, queer organists have a long history of embracing the ‘open secret’ of the closet and of cultivating a highly discreet culture of camp in the hidden chambers of organ lofts. Churches, as male-dominated institutions in which elaborate and often theatrical rituals are played out in costumes of varying sumptuousness, are traditionally environments inviting of camp, and the uniquely sequestered aspect of organists’ special domains within these buildings adds a paradoxical and poignant dimension to their relationship with this aspect of the wider ecclesiastical community. Pointing out the prevalence of gay men in the organ world, Philip Rice argues that ‘the allure of the organ as the preferred expressive musical device of gay men in the twentieth century’ lies, above all, ‘in its enclosed design’. Rice analyses the cultural meanings attached to the enclosure of the organ, which has provided ‘safety and sanctuary’ for ‘campy misfits’.<sup>18</sup> As David Yearsley remarks in an appreciative tone: ‘In a modern world obsessed by the moving image, not to mention the visual appeal of a star performer, the hidden organist plays as if from another cultural world’.<sup>19</sup>

Organists who prefer to cherish the secrecy of this other world have not been enthusiastic about Cameron Carpenter’s flinging open of the closet door in his flamboyant queerness. It is important, however, to note that endorsing the closet is far from unproblematic. In Sedgwick’s words:

There are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet, in a historical narrative that does not have as a fulcrum a saving vision – whether located in past or future – of its apocalyptic rupture. A meditation that lacks that particular utopian organization will risk glamorizing the closet itself, if only by default; will risk presenting as inevitable or somehow valuable its exactions, its deformations, its disempowerment and sheer pain.<sup>20</sup>

Even though the ‘utopian organization’ that Sedgwick calls for could certainly mean something much more subtle than Carpenter’s overt revolution, I find it important to consider and throw light on any gestures or performances that challenge the closeted culture of classical music – not least because maintaining the ‘open secret’ has had such far-reaching ramifications in the field. Philip Brett, for instance, discusses the homosexual panic and castration anxiety in ‘our deviant profession’, which results in compensatory acts to hold up the façade of masculinity.<sup>21</sup> As Sedgwick stresses, the distinction homo-/heterosexual is a structural issue, a source of many other binary oppositions, such as those of normal/deviant or proper/improper.<sup>22</sup> Seizing upon this point in his study on accusations of ‘mannerisms’ in reviews published in the *Gramophone* magazine, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson shows how the imagery of music criticism reproduces the themes of structural prejudices, most obviously misogyny and homophobia, and how narrowly the boundaries of a ‘proper’ performance are thus policed. Hence, as he phrases it, ‘alternative performance still closets itself’.<sup>23</sup>

### **Cameron Carpenter’s Queer Challenge**

In this context, Cameron Carpenter’s camp performances indeed stand out as exceptional – both in their visual display of queerness and in the distinctive nature of their musical interpretations, which challenge the aesthetic norms of classical music performance and demonstrate the potential of music as a vehicle for gender nomadism and queer sexuality. In both respects, Carpenter particularly exaggerates femininity and carnality, attributes which share a long history as the ‘othered’, threatening and therefore suppressed sides of western classical music.<sup>24</sup> With its pedal-board activity, organ playing is closely related to dance, but

this dance-like element, along with the other physical elements of the organist's performance regime, has traditionally been hidden from view.<sup>25</sup> Carpenter draws specific attention to his virtuosic pedal technique, showing it off with his Swarovski-encrusted organ shoes.<sup>26</sup> This is illustrated, for instance, by the performance of his arrangement of Chopin's Waltz op. 64 no. 1. Whilst the 'four-limbed performance' of playing the organ can bring dance to mind, the most typical idiom for pedal-playing is the masculine-connoted idea of the feet progressing as if they are walking.<sup>27</sup> As Carpenter plays Chopin's pirouetting melody on the pedals, his footwork is instead reminiscent of ballet at its most feminine, the dance of a ballerina *en pointe* (for a video of Frédéric Chopin: Waltz op. 64/1 transcribed for the organ and performed by Cameron Carpenter, please consult the online version of this article).<sup>28</sup>

Whereas ballet as a whole is a feminine-connoted art form and also closely associated with male homosexuality; the evocation of a ballerina's *pointe* work even more specifically refers to a highly objectified, even fetishized, femininity.<sup>29</sup> This objectification – and eroticisation – of the organist's body is already signalled by the exhibitionistic gesture of undressing that sets off the performance: Carpenter takes off his vest, revealing his androgynous dancer-like figure. His muscular upper torso oozes male power, whilst striptease and costume changes (which are a habitual part of Carpenter's concert performances) are distinctly coded as feminine.<sup>30</sup>

The changes of costumes and even persona, along with the exaggeration of gender representation, also – and above all – highlight the performativity of identity and the artificiality of gender norms in the spirit of camp. In this respect, Carpenter's performances closely resemble those of the great camp icon David Bowie.<sup>31</sup> Instead of performing an 'authentic' gay or bisexual identity, Carpenter performs queerness, which, rather, dramatises incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between sex, gender and desire.<sup>32</sup> Theatrically and hyperbolically exaggerated, this sort of camp/queer performance works as subversive repetition, in the process exposing the entirely constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. As Judith Butler explains, 'the parodic repetition of 'the original' [...] reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the original'.<sup>33</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens identifies this sort of subversive performativity in Liberace's piano-playing, suggesting that Liberace's musical gestures of camp exaggerate music's phallic tension–release mechanism, hyperbolising it to the point of parody.<sup>34</sup>

Cameron Carpenter sometimes exhibits similar gestures, but his most characteristic musical strategy of camp, in terms of performing the discontinuity and artificiality of identity, manifests in his subversive approach to registration. Rarely following the composers' indications, instead, he has a habit of changing registrations constantly, searching for more and more miraculous timbres to be teased out of his digital instrument. This often produces comical and alienating effects, which have been disparaged by most critics. For instance, Carpenter's rendering of his arrangement of Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* op. 34 no. 14 was condemned in a review for its 'inappropriate colouring'.<sup>35</sup> In the course of this performance, Carpenter introduces various registrations and colourings, which, towards the end, evoke associations to the artifice of theatre and even circus (the sounds of the theatre organ, the barrel organ and the accordion).<sup>36</sup> For an audio excerpt of Sergei Rachmaninov: *Vocalise* op. 34/14 transcribed for the organ and performed by Cameron Carpenter, please consult the online version of this article.

What is also noteworthy is that the vocal melody, expressive of romantic subjectivity and deep feeling, suddenly acquires a nasal, slightly mechanistic tone. This is yet another example of camp incongruity. Like the use of falsetto as a typical gesture of camp, it can be interpreted as an ironic reference to an 'unnaturally' feminine voice that intimates sexual deviance.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, sounding inauthentic and artificial, it challenges and problematises the idea of music – and voice – as the genuine and sincere expression of the self.<sup>38</sup> Yet the affective intensity of

Rachmaninov's music is by no means lost here; it is as if it gains a new meaning, echoing the typical queer experience of alienation, of life itself as theatre, appearance and impersonation.<sup>39</sup>

Echoing this allusion to what some might see as a deceptive superficiality, Carpenter has been criticised for a slick and impersonal technique, for the 'disembodied' sound of his digital instrument, and for the fact that the low register of this 'computerised box of tricks' does not have the serious depth of the pipe organ.<sup>40</sup> His habit of changing register, volume and timbre, sometimes on a bar-to-bar basis, also confuses the hierarchies between parts in the score, often suddenly bringing to the fore some element that, from a music-analytical point of view, would be marginal. Yet another strategy of camp transgression, the privileging of the secondary and derivative aims at subverting the oppositions between 'primary' and 'secondary', 'original' and 'copy', 'true' and 'false'.<sup>41</sup> Carpenter's substitution of the pipe organ with a digital version, the sounds of which are copied from those of 'real' organs, is obviously an extreme form of this sort of camp subversion that undermines the aesthetic norms and hierarchies of classical music.

All in all, Carpenter's manner of manipulating music highlights the freedom to which he lays claim in his performances. He combines romantic virtuosity with the contemporary art of DJ-ing, transgressing the performance norms of musical styles and sometimes even modifying works of music to the point of pushing them into a whole new genre.<sup>42</sup> In a way, organ playing, which may be the only area of western art music where improvisation has never ceased to exist, gives greater freedom to the performer than does classical performance on other instruments. Carpenter, however, challenges the boundaries that define performance traditions in such a way that his performances expressly defy existing interpretive frameworks. It is no surprise in this context that the harshest criticism he has received has been for his interpretations of J. S. Bach's organ works. To Mark Rochester of the *Gramophone*, for instance, his performance of the Prelude in B minor (BWV 544) is a 'grotesque travesty of one of Bach's greatest organ creations'. Carpenter's challenging of the norms of Bachian performance with chameleon-like changes of registration and a peculiar dynamic dramaturgy comes across to Rochester as 'mockery'.<sup>43</sup> For an audio excerpt of J. S. Bach, Prelude BWV 544 performed by Cameron Carpenter, please consult the online version of this article.<sup>44</sup>

Because of its combination of humour and earnestness, camp does indeed run the risk of not being considered serious at all. Jack Babuscio, who points out this problem, stresses the serious basis of camp, quoting a character in an Isherwood novel: 'You can't camp about something you don't take seriously; you're not making fun *of* it; you're making fun *out* of it'.<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, Carpenter expresses in his CD booklet texts both reverence for the music he has chosen to play and a willingness to risk 'gilding the lily' in the spirit of camp.<sup>46</sup> This duality in his approach echoes a further definition of camp provided by Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay, referred to above, where she writes that:

The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious." One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.<sup>47</sup>

## Camp Virtuosity in Today's World – Towards a Queer Utopian Performance Space

In many respects Cameron Carpenter is exemplary as a camp artist and queer subject, but the question still remains whether he succeeds in his revolutionary intentions: do his camp strategies have the power to truly challenge the norms that govern the performance of classical music? As has been shown above, Carpenter certainly does elicit strong reactions. Whilst reviewers cannot but marvel at his exceptional virtuosity and musical skill, most of them

receive his interpretations and his performance style with great reservation, even condemnation. Although this is undoubtedly the kind of response most revolutionaries would wish to evoke, it is also a potential barrier to his innovations having a transformative effect on others. The problem seems to be that Carpenter is thought to deviate too far from the framework of the classical organ recital; he is therefore dismissed and relegated to a whole other category of his own. Marcus Strümpfe, for one, argues in *Musik und Kirche* that Carpenter neither benefits nor harms the organ scene because, with his special format and his special fandom, he ‘produces his own original niche’.<sup>48</sup> An essential reason for this back-handed compliment, which is therefore an implicit dismissal, may be his use of the digital instrument, which changes a crucial defining factor of the classical organ recital.<sup>49</sup> The change is further emphasised by his favouring of the concert hall instead of the most typical milieu for organ recitals, the church.

Considering camp’s political power to challenge institutions of gender and sexuality, another problem might lie in Carpenter’s ethos of flexibility and self-management, which aligns him with the hegemonic neoliberal values. His artistic project is intertwined with a somewhat grandiose ego project, a careful fashioning of his image. As he explains in a biographical documentary film, he has been driven by a wish ‘to take the best of everything, the most interesting things, and assemble them into a new character’. In a similar manner, the International Touring Organ was designed to encompass ‘the sounds of [his] life’.<sup>50</sup> This performative self-fashioning – along with his overt queerness – is obviously an exemplarily campy challenge to the depth model of identity.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is also in line with the neoliberal imperative of flexibility, with the idea of the individual not as a coherent self but as ‘a bundle of skills’ to be managed and marketed like a business.<sup>52</sup>

Although Carpenter is known as an advocate for lgbtq+ issues, his revolutionary agenda is not as much about politicising issues of gender and sexuality as it is, above all, about liberating individual expression. Stressing the importance of the performer as an individual, he links himself to the tradition of the entertaining virtuoso personalities active before the 1950s.<sup>53</sup> In the current field of classical music, where codes of refinement remain integral to its establishment nature, ‘it might be revolutionary not to be ashamed of your ego’, he remarks.<sup>54</sup> He also notes, in a pragmatic tone, that the digital instrument is an inevitable continuation of the organ tradition, and that the liberation of the organ and the organist is what needs to be done to make organ music ‘competitive in the global commerce of music making in the twenty-first century’.<sup>55</sup> One could ask, then, whether Carpenter the campy organist is anything more than a symptom of our time, ‘a new era of Camp – packaged, professionalized, and marketed’.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Carpenter could be classified as a representative of what Aymar Jean Christian calls post-queer individualism. Post-queer individualists ‘work within a tradition of challenging the boundaries of gender and sexuality but add [...] a neoliberal era spin of often-rigorous individualism’.<sup>57</sup>

Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, it is this spin of individualism that brings an interesting tension to Carpenter’s queer performativity and helps him remake camp performance through a queer reframing of virtuosity. In the contemporary world, virtuosity and flexible (queer) performativity are easily commodified and imprisoned in a competitive and instrumentalised context, thus detaching them from all possibility for political action. Pondering on the possibilities for social and political resistance in the performance of music, Suzanne Cusick writes:

Our embrace of performance as process, fluidity and flux seemed liberating only a few years ago, as a way of escaping the ever-more oppressive regulatory concept of the transcendental musical work, [...] as a way of acknowledging the musicalities (especially the reception practices) of people situated firmly (often queerly) aslant and



aside the transcendent subject position, and as a way of thinking productively about music as a practice that helped to construct our raced and gendered embodiments. Now it is easy to see that same embrace as also homologous to global capitalism's embrace of an infinitely contingent, impermanent, mobile work force [...].<sup>58</sup>

Because of similar concerns, scholars in the contemporary field of queer studies have called for a rethinking of identity and agency in relation to queer fluidity.<sup>59</sup> Whilst the focus on queer performativity instead of gay or lesbian performance has liberated discourse from the essentialised body that haunts identity-based politics, it has too often meant a move away not only from the body but also from the material and historical specificity of performances.<sup>60</sup> As Elizabeth Freeman notes, a focus on queerness as a purely deconstructive or disruptive move risks evacuating the agency of queer bodies, and 'the messiest thing about being queer: the actual meeting of bodies with other bodies and with objects'.<sup>61</sup>

What I find interesting about Cameron Carpenter's art of the organ in the light of these problems is how he brings into new focus the labouring virtuosic body and the performer as an individual who negotiates between fixity and fluidity, performativity and performance.<sup>62</sup> Carpenter exaggerates his display of technical bravado in so many ways that it starts to appear as a theatricalised performance of virtuosity, inviting us to reflect on the very idea of virtuosity. He conspicuously reaches for those extremes for which virtuosos have always been prone to criticism, sliding from art to entertainment, from holiness to vulgar sexuality, from phallic masculinity to volatile femininity, from sensibility to mechanicism. Virtuosity in classical music is often described as a fine balancing act between the ethos of the interpreter and the artificiality and excess of the performance.<sup>63</sup> Cameron Carpenter is not afraid to flaunt the Liberacean excessive physicality that flirts with the popular and the vulgar; but, alongside this camp frivolity, there is also an austere, intellectual side to his interpretive attitude. Unlike Liberace, he does also show the kind of extraordinary virtuosic agility that gives a thrilling impression of taking the body beyond the physically possible. Still, the occasional camp foregrounding of the labour of the performer brings the ambivalent tensions of virtuosity into the spotlight. Thus, instead of concealing from audiences the nature of his transcendent accomplishment, as virtuosos typically do, Carpenter demystifies virtuosity through making its mechanisms visible.<sup>64</sup>

A central role in this demystification is played by Carpenter's innovative instrument. Traditionally known as the King of Instruments, or even as the Voice of God, the pipe organ is strongly associated with patriarchal images. Characterising the organ as an emblem of early modern technological prowess and control, Gary C. Thomas remarks that '[a] more fitting superstructural analogue to the penetrating expansionist power of a new capitalist economy and its exploitative, colonizing reach can hardly be imagined'.<sup>65</sup> Conscious and critical of these images, Carpenter problematises the traditional pipe organ as an immobile, 'moribund' monument that has come to be regarded as an end in itself. The goal in developing the new digital instrument was, hence, to make of the organ a malleable means of expression, 'an intimate musical machine'.<sup>66</sup> The feminine-connoted intimacy that Carpenter associates with his portable organ can be perceived in the rounded, womb-like design of the instrument. Carpenter plays it hunched over in an embryonic posture, toying with its mechanics 'like a little boy in a candy store', as one critic phrased it.<sup>67</sup> One could infer, then, that, in Carpenter's camp reconfiguration of the organ-organist relationship, the patriarchal monument is replaced by a playful fusion of mother and son<sup>68</sup> – reminiscent, perhaps, of the Winnicottian potential space.<sup>69</sup>



*Cameron Carpenter at the console of the International Touring Organ, photograph by Dovile Sermokas*

The element of play, which Carpenter combines with an expansive control of the instrument and an unabashed flexing of his shiny muscles, thus demystifies in an interesting manner the masculinist power fantasies attached to the organ and to classical music. This was exactly my impression at the Bruckner festival in Linz, when I witnessed him perform a Wagner overture, with all its evocations of a massive orchestral texture, in his rainbow-coloured Lycra outfit, enjoying all the effects that the technology of his instrument made possible.<sup>70</sup> As Carpenter's creation, the International Touring Organ is also, metaphorically, his parental pride and joy; he has the habit of proudly introducing the audience to the instrument and arranges workshops in which he both demonstrates what it is capable of and encourages students and audience members to try it.

In the reviews of his performances and recordings, Carpenter has frequently been criticised for showing off the instrument rather than illuminating the music.<sup>71</sup> While it is true that his virtuoso performances place inevitable emphasis on the instrument's capabilities, what is brought even more sharply into the spotlight is the organ–organist relationship as a space for creative experimentation. Even though virtuosic action is easily commodified and instrumentalised in today's world, Marxist philosopher Paolo Virno argues that virtuosity also offers the potential for transformation, for a certain escape or exit, a going 'off script'.<sup>72</sup> In Cameron Carpenter's queer virtuosity, this sort of potential can be found in the element of frolicsome playfulness, which opens up the process of virtuosity and thereby interrupts the power structures attached to music and to the art of the organ, refusing to take them seriously.

Furthermore, and significantly, Carpenter's camp play space is also a locus of intimate resistance, a space in which to revisit camp as a vehicle for identity formation.<sup>73</sup> Let us return to Carpenter's rendering of the Chopin Waltz (Video Example 1). I read this performance as a revisiting of the past, which – through and alongside queer performativity – creates a

performance space of utopian potential. The 'Minute Waltz' in itself is already a camp object of a kind; it has been worn out in the hands of countless virtuosos, experimenters and embellishers. Far from simply constituting a charming recycling of the piece because of its kitsch value, Carpenter's ballet-like performance reminisces upon and celebrates the effeminate and gay qualities that have been variously despised or hidden in mystification throughout the reception history of Chopin's music.<sup>74</sup> The adding of parts and voices - and counter-voices - in Carpenter's arrangement could be construed as an aural metaphor of making space for multiple voices, embracing both the suppressed queer and feminine voices of the past and the liberating potential of as-yet undefined future voices.<sup>75</sup>

In this vocal multiplicity, it is as if Carpenter, theatrically embracing the stigma of past prejudice, dances the Chopin Waltz ecstatically out of the closet and towards the future of new performances. This is underlined by the musical gesture he adds to the end of the piece: an upwards-rising scale towards the utopian unknown, which has a surreal, virtual sound. Indeed, as queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz writes in reference to Virno, queer virtuosity can create 'utopian deployments of the past in the service of critiquing the present for the ultimate purpose of imagining a future that is unimaginable in a normative or straight time'.<sup>76</sup> Carpenter's camp virtuosity highlights not so much queer performativity and the discontinuity of identity, but rather what Thomas A. King and Moe Meyer call 'the continuity of performance space': the possibility for alternative performances of bodies, genders and sexualities, 'a space in which others might perform otherwise'.<sup>77</sup> For me, it is this possibility which raises his performativity beyond the production of 'his own original niche', and into the realms of a phenomenon with genuine potential to re-shape the paradigms of classical music performance.

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- 1 The citation about Carpenter's exceptional talent is from Dr John Weaver, Carpenter's teacher and former head of organ departments at Juilliard. See Edward Helmore, 'Cameron Carpenter: the rhinestone cowboy', *The Guardian*, 20 May 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/may/20/cameron-carpenter-classical-organ>
  - 2 CD booklet in Cameron Carpenter, *If You Could Read My Mind*. Sony Classical 88883796882, 2014. The International Touring Organ is built by Marshall & Ogletree. Comprising the console and its support and amplification equipment, the instrument is transportable in a single large truck. Carpenter was, of course, not the first to bring the organ to the stage; Virgil Fox famously did the same but with an analogue instrument.
  - 3 Philip Rice, 'The Excessive Machine: On the Queer Construction of the Organ', paper presented at the 2015 Music Graduate Symposium at SUNY Stony Brook University, p. 1. (Available at Academia.edu)
  - 4 Cameron Carpenter, *If You Could Read My Mind* (CD booklet), introductory essay written by Carpenter himself.
  - 5 Vivien Schweitzer, 'In Concert: Talent, Style and Sequins' (a pre-concert article about Cameron Carpenter), *New York Times*, 11 November 2009, p. 25.
  - 6 For definitions and debates around the concept of camp, see Jack Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility', in *Camp Grounds. Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 19–38; Fabio Cleto, 'Introduction: Queering the Camp' and Mark Booth, 'Campe-toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject. A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), pp. 1–42 and 66–79 respectively. On camp in music, see Freya Jarman-Ivens, 'Notes on Musical Camp', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, Derek B. Scott, ed., (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 189–203; Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis, eds, *Music & Camp* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018).
  - 7 Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 107; Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility', pp. 20–21.
  - 8 See e.g. Cameron Carpenter, *All you need is Bach*. Sony Classical CD 88875178262, 2016.
  - 9 Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility', pp. 19, 27; David Bergman, 'Camp', in *The Gay and Lesbian Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and their Works, from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Claude J. Summers (London: Routledge, 2002).
  - 10 Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*, p. 109.
  - 11 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008 [1990]), esp. p. 68. As Michael P. Brown phrases it, the closet 'describes their absence – and alludes to their presence nonetheless – in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be', see Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space. Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 1. The closet is thus situated between knowing and not knowing.
  - 12 John M. Wolf, 'Resurrecting Camp: Rethinking the Queer Sensibility', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6 (2013), pp. 284–86.
  - 13 Robert Schwartz, 'Cracking the Classical Closet', *The Advocate* 785 (May 11, 1999), pp. 48–9; Joey DiGuglielmo, 'Classical Closet?', *Washington Blade. America's LGBT News Source* (March 7, 2013). <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2013/03/07/classical-closet/>
  - 14 Schwartz, 'Cracking the Classical Closet', p. 49.
  - 15 Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, 'Lesbian and Gay Music', in *Queering the Pitch. The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas, eds, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 356.

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- <sup>16</sup> Philip Brett, 'Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet', in Brett & Wood, eds, *Queering the Pitch*, pp. 11, 17–19.
- <sup>17</sup> Brett & Wood, 'Lesbian and Gay Music', p. 353. The quotation is from Wayne Koestenbaum, *Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (London: GMP, 1993), pp. 189–90.
- <sup>18</sup> Rice, 'The Excessive Machine', pp. 3, 15.
- <sup>19</sup> David Yearsley, *Bach's Feet: The Organ Pedals in European Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 279.
- <sup>20</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 68.
- <sup>21</sup> Brett, 'Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet', pp. 18, 22.
- <sup>22</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, see esp. p. 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Moral Judgement in Response to Performances of Western Art Music', in *Remixing Music Studies. Essays in Honour of Nicholas Cook*, Ananay Aguilar, Eric Clarke, Ross Cole and Matthew Pritchard, eds, (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2020).
- <sup>24</sup> On the othering of femininity and carnality, see Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and the Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 45–57; Suzanne G. Cusick, 'Gender, Musicology, and Feminism', in *Rethinking Music*, Nicholas Cook, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 471–98.
- <sup>25</sup> Nowadays in organ recitals, though, a large screen will sometimes be set up to show a close-up of the pedal board.
- <sup>26</sup> Carpenter has designed the organ shoes himself; they are modelled after Latin dance shoes. Besides drawing attention to his feet with their glittery decoration, they are more flexible than regular organ shoes, enabling exceptionally agile footwork.
- <sup>27</sup> In his comprehensive account of the cultural history of organ pedals, Yearsley demonstrates the close link between pedal-playing and the German (masculine) activity of *Wandern*, which, in the context of J. S. Bach's and Buxtehude's times, denotes walking in search of personal and professional improvement. See Yearsley, *Bach's Feet*, esp. pp. 107–16.
- <sup>28</sup> Cameron Carpenter, *If You Could Read My Mind*. Sony Classical DVD 88883796882, 2014.
- <sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the conceptualisation of ballet as a feminine art and of the issue of homophobia in male dancing, see Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 2007 [1995]), pp. 11–13 & 22–29. About the ballerina as a fetish, see Susan Leigh Foster, 'The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe', in *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, Susan Leigh Foster, ed., (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1–24.
- <sup>30</sup> In fact, making a spectacle of virile display can, from a certain perspective, be interpreted as an act that appears feminine; see Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock. Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009 [2006]), pp. 143–45. As Ramsay Burt remarks in his discussion on why the display of male dancing became a source of homophobic anxiety, 'a man's appearance tells you what he can do to you or for you. If, however, his appearance is also desirable, he is, from the point of view of a male spectator, drawing attention to the always-already crossed line between homosocial bonding and homosexual activity'. Burt, *The Male Dancer*, p. 24.
- <sup>31</sup> On David Bowie's subversive performance of gender and sexuality, see Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, pp. 132–49.
- <sup>32</sup> About this difference between homosexual identities and queer disruption, see Jarman-Ivens, 'Notes on Musical Camp', pp. 193–94; Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, pp. 135–36.
- <sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 31, 141. Butler's performative model of gender identity as a series of repeated and stylised acts draws on Esther Newton's drag queen study *Mother Camp*.

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- <sup>34</sup> See Jarman-Ivens, 'Notes on Musical Camp'.
- <sup>35</sup> Jeremy Nicholas, review of Cameron Carpenter's *If You Could Read My Mind* in the *Gramophone*. <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/cameron-carpenter-if-you-could-read-my-mind>
- <sup>36</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Susanna Välimäki for originally drawing my attention to Carpenter's use of timbres reminiscent of theatre and circus, and for her inspiring work on music and queer utopia.
- <sup>37</sup> On the use of falsetto as suggestive of queer sexuality see Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, pp. 166–67.
- <sup>38</sup> As Jarman-Ivens notes, voice has the cultural status as 'revealing of the self'. See her discussion on vocal impersonation as a subversive queer structure, which reveals the sign-ness of voice and the tenuous relationship of voice to self. Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 44–57.
- <sup>39</sup> As Jack Babuscio remarks, the camp theatricalisation of experience derives from 'the art of passing' practised by homosexuals who have to reject their gay characteristics in order to impersonate heterosexual citizenry, and from the resulting 'sensitivity to aspects of a performance which others are likely to regard as routine or uncalculated'. Babuscio, who discusses camp as an essentially 'gay sensibility', thinks of the art of passing as an experience 'wherein, paradoxically, we learn the value of the self while at the same time rejecting it'. Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility', pp. 25–26.
- <sup>40</sup> See Rice, 'The Excessive Machine', p. 2; Marc Rochester, review of Cameron Carpenter's CD *All You Need Is Bach*, *Gramophone*, Aug 2016 <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/cameron-carpenter-all-you-need-is-bach>. ; Jed Distler, 'Cameron Carpenter's not-so-"Revolutionary" Bach Debut', *Classics Today* (2016) <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/cameron-carpenters-not-revolutionary-bach-debut/>
- <sup>41</sup> See Fabio Cleto, 'Introduction: Queering the Camp', in Cleto (ed.), *Camp*, pp. 8, 20.
- <sup>42</sup> About the DJ as artist, see Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (London: Headline, 1999), pp. 366–87.
- <sup>43</sup> Rochester, review of *All You Need Is Bach* [see note 37].
- <sup>44</sup> Cameron Carpenter, *All You Need Is Bach*. Sony Classical CD 88875178262, 2016.
- <sup>45</sup> Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility', pp. 28–29. The quote is from Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening* (London: Methuen, 1954).
- <sup>46</sup> Cameron Carpenter, *If You Could Read My Mind* (CD booklet text).
- <sup>47</sup> Susan Sontag, Notes on "Camp" (1964) in Cleto (ed.), *Camp*, pp. 62 (53–65).
- <sup>48</sup> Marcus Strümpfe, 'Das Gespenst und seine Nische. Zum Phänomen Cameron Carpenter' ['The Spook and his Niche. On the Phenomenon Cameron Carpenter'], *Music und Kirche* 2/2015, pp. 80–81.
- <sup>49</sup> Even though classical music has a tradition of transcriptions of various kinds, there are some prescriptive rules that absolutely cannot be changed. As Jarman-Ivens writes, 'Replace a piano with an acoustic guitar, by all means, when covering an Elton John song, for instance, but absolutely do not decide to put a Mozart oboe line on a harmonica!', Jarman-Ivens, 'Notes on Musical Camp', p. 196. Carpenter does sometimes perform on pipe organs, and in churches, but his typical format is a concert-hall recital on his International Touring Organ. I am grateful to Daniel Leech-Wilkinson for a thought-provoking comment concerning the effect of this choice of format on the revolutionary potential of Carpenter's performances.
- <sup>50</sup> Cameron Carpenter, *The Sound of My Life*. Sony Classical DVD 88843050289, 2014.
- <sup>51</sup> The depth model of identity refers to the bourgeois notion of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous. On camp and queerness as critique of the depth model, see Moe Meyer,

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- 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp', in Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, pp. 2–5.
- 52 See Ilana Gershon, 'Neoliberal Agency', *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (August 2011), pp. 537–55.
- 53 'Cameron Carpenter – not your typical organist'. Interview with the *q* magazine show, 2 June, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbVOikNwh6s>.
- 54 'Cameron Carpenter on Style and Sexuality', White Light Festival, Lincoln Center, NYC 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEg5YROLRu8>
- 55 'Cameron Carpenter – not your typical organist'. Carpenter could be identified as one of those contemporary musicians, discussed by Marianna Ritchey, who align familiar rhetoric concerning classical music's universality with almost identical rhetoric of technological innovation and entrepreneurialism. As Ritchey shows in her probing article, these rhetorical tactics deploy revolutionary language about freedom and individuality while actually serving capital, which is a major feature of neoliberal rationality. See Marianna Ritchey, "'Amazing Together": Mason Bates, Classical Music, and Neoliberal Values', *Music & Politics*, 11/2 (2017), pp. 2, 21–23.
- 56 The characterisation of a new era of camp is from Moe Meyer, *An Archaeology of Posing. Essays on Camp, Drag, and Sexuality* (Madison: Macater Press, 2010), p. 7.
- 57 See Aymar Jean Christian, 'Camp 2.0: A Queer Performance of the Personal', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 3 (2010), p. 367.
- 58 Suzanne G. Cusick, 'Performance as Research' in *Music Research: New Directions for a New Century*, Michael Ewans, Rosalind Halton and John A. Phillips, eds, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2004), pp. 152–53.
- 59 Judith Halberstam, for instance, stresses that 'it is not enough in this "time of flexibility" to celebrate gender flexibility as simply another sign of progress and liberation'. With a reference to Stuart Hall's and James Clifford's critique of the dismissal of identity politics, she remarks that what is called for is sustained analysis of the ways in which human beings become agents. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 18–20.
- 60 For a thorough discussion of the problematic domination of performance studies by linguistic theories of performativity and the resulting confusion of the two terms 'performance' and 'performativity', see Thomas A. King & Moe Meyer, 'In Defense of Gay/Performance', in Moe Meyer, *An Archaeology of Posing*, pp. 151–67.
- 61 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xxi.
- 62 c.f. Halberstam quoting Steve Pile: 'the subjects of resistance are neither fixed nor fluid, but both and more. And this 'more' involves a sense that resistance is resistance to both fixity and fluidity', Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 21.
- 63 On the ambivalence and balancing acts of virtuosity, see Antoine Hennion, "'As Fast as One Possibly Can...": Virtuosity, a Truth of Musical Performance?', in *Critical Musicological Reflections: Essays in Honour of Derek B. Scott*, Stan Hawkins, ed., (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 125–38; Ariel Osterweis, 'The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto', *Dance Research Journal*, 45/3 (2013), pp. 57, 64–65; Gabriele Brandstetter, 'The Virtuoso's Stage', *Theatre Research International* 32(2), 2007, pp. 178–95.
- 64 In Brandstetter's definition, the virtuoso is 'a magician whose actions appear to contravene the boundaries of the physically possible while at the same time concealing from delighted audiences the nature of his transgression', Brandstetter, 'The Virtuoso's Stage', p. 178. As Hennion remarks, '[t]he obvious use of artifice [...] has to be contained in order to be made endurable', "'As Fast as One Possibly Can...'", p. 130.

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- <sup>65</sup> Gary C. Thomas, 'Men at the Keyboard: Liminal Spaces and the Heterotopian Function of Music', in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 278.
- <sup>66</sup> 'US organ player Cameron Carpenter'. Interview with Insight Germany: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXRSFzzebSY>. See also Carpenter, *If You Could Read My Mind*, CD booklet text.
- <sup>67</sup> See Nicholas, review of *If You Could Read My Mind*.
- <sup>68</sup> I am thinking here of Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* in which the drag queen is characterised as 'a magical dream figure: the fusion of mother and son'. See Newton, 'Note to the Reader' in *Mother Camp* (no page number). Like most camp theorists, Newton thinks of camp humour as growing out of a critique of patriarchy. My sincere thanks to Moynagh Sullivan to whom I owe this association of Carpenter's instrument with a symbiotic, maternal space.
- <sup>69</sup> According to psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, playing takes place in the 'potential space' between the baby and the mother figure, which then develops into a safe and inviting (cultural) interpersonal field essential for spontaneous play and creative experimentation. See Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 1994 [1971]).
- <sup>70</sup> The concert took place at the Brucknerhaus in Linz, Austria on 28 September, 2016. The Wagner overture was that of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, transcribed by Carpenter for his International Touring Organ. An informal performance of the piece (for a group of young musicians who happened to enter when Carpenter was practising at Tanglewood Music Center) can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72\\_77Zers0U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72_77Zers0U)
- <sup>71</sup> See e.g. Nicholas, review of *If You Could Read My Mind*. Philip Rice ('The Excessive Machine', p. 2) is of the opinion that Carpenter fails in his attempt to liberate the organ from its enclosure because his console is 'just as tall and obscuring as others: to display his body to the audience he must still face his back to them'. I do not see this as a hindrance to what Carpenter is after.
- <sup>72</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, translated by Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/ MIT Press, 2004), pp. 66–71.
- <sup>73</sup> As Moe Meyer notes in a nostalgic tone, camp was 'the grand vehicle of twentieth-century homosexual/gay identity formation', Meyer, *An Archeology of Posing*, p. 7.
- <sup>74</sup> On the problematisations of Chopin's gender expression and sexuality, see Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 62–86; Erinn E. Knyt, 'Ferruccio Busoni and the "Halfness" of Chopin', *The Journal of Musicology*, 34/2 (2017), pp. 254–63.
- <sup>75</sup> In an interview, Carpenter says that he is very interested in the suppressed queer and feminine voices in the history of organ music. Carpenter, 'Not your typical organist'.
- <sup>76</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 178.
- <sup>77</sup> Meyer and King, 'In Defense of Gay/Performance', pp. 179–80.