

# **Rethinking Music as/in Musical Rethinking: Proscriptions, Opportunities**

(A Short Critical Reflection on Essays in *Rethinking Music*, Part 1 (eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999))

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*There is more to the musical ear than meets it.*

Many music scholars seem to think this is true. Scholars differ not on whether there *is* 'more,' but on what counts *as* 'more.' Some have said music reflects (or parallels) our innermost drives (Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, etc.); others have said it reflects metaphysical essences and deep structures (Heinrich Schenker, Arnold Schoenberg, etc.), or cognitive archetypes and listening grammars (William Thomson, Fred Lerdahl, etc.); still others have said music reflects historical dialectics and social ideologies (Theodor Adorno, Rose Subotnik, John Shepherd, etc.), or subjective identity formations and psychoanalytic configurations (Susan McClary, Ruth Solie, David Schwarz, etc.). The list goes on. *Thinking music*, it seems, exceeds music. It involves categories from elsewhere: *Wille*, *Grundgestalt*, *Umlinie*, Archetype, Structure, Class Consciousness, Patriarchal Hegemony, and so on.

Of course, though I group them together here, these approaches mostly fail to recognize their shared methodological condition. In fact, many of the new 'cultural' and 'historicist' approaches to music fundamentally set themselves *apart* from the 'aesthetic' and 'formal' approaches. The former approaches aim to challenge the institutionalized priorities of a field of studies that ostensibly reflect a structural emphasis on the self-referential aesthetic autonomy of music and its independence from other forms of social discourse. So, this act of setting apart does not acknowledge the equally 'extra'-musical nature of the categories

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grounding the formalist project, say; it also does not recognize the business of theory and analysis *as* social. Instead, this act of setting apart paradoxically secures the hermetic aspirations of theory and analysis as if some unmediated empathetic bond really *did* exist between music and a certain discourse about it. In contrast, I will not assume the validity of formalism's hermetic claims. Instead, I will mark the methodological kinship between these approaches. Their differences qualify the paradigm; they do not challenge it.

There is more to the musical ear than meets it in another sense as well. For, although the categories used to analyze and interpret music seem to *surpass* its unfettered sounding, they are often said to be *inadequate* to it as well. Indeed, it has become a ritual commonplace to emphasize the partial nature of one's musical findings; to recognize the validity of more than one interpretation; to recognize facts about musical experience to be somewhat relative, metaphoric, subjective, and so on. It is an irony that the 'cultural historicists' tend to announce this diminished epistemological expectation more readily than do the 'formal aestheticists.' It is ironic because the insight that an interpretation cannot exhaust the musical object under investigation at once *elevates* that object. By recognizing its interpretative limits *apriori*, the cultural/historical approach becomes hermeneutic: its object becomes always-already beyond the realms of the fully knowable. Hermeneutics, in short, paradoxically grants music the 'autonomy' ordinarily associated with formalism. Still, under both approaches, music is often said to lie beyond our immediate grasp; to give every decisive interpretation the slip. After all, *thinking / writing* about music bypasses an experience (or a performance) of it. The belief that writing is a surrogate and a substitute for the transparency of participation in music is popular and widespread. Indeed, the disjuncture between the phenomenon and its discursive elaboration may even be the necessary tension for the possibility of the discipline of music scholarship.

Thus, there is more to the musical ear than meets it. Our descriptions and analyses and theories and interpretations seem at once to say too much and too little. They connect music to *more* than it is (cognitive archetypes, structural shapes, ideological beliefs, etc.) and simultaneously grant music *more* than these categories can capture. Shuttling between excess and lack, this paradigm for scholarship assumes a split between music and discourse about music. (It is a theater-world paradigm sometimes dividing the music-as-spectator from the critic-as-actor and sometimes dividing the critic-as-spectator from the music-as-actor.) In short, music and writing on music exist in a state of non-identity.

Is it possible to *rethink* this relationship between music and writing? Some essays in the collection entitled *Rethinking Music* (ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) engage this question. After all, the divided paradigm I describe

above usually freights dichotomies that buttress epistemological *hierarchies* at various levels of argument. As one of the editors, Nicholas Cook, argues, the traditional dualism between musical analysis and musical performance, for example, is frequently tilted in favor of analysis (239-261). Using Fred Lerdahl's writing on the matter as a representative case, Cook demonstrates how performance tends to become a mere "epiphenomenon" of analytic competence; the explanatory paradigm moves "*from competence to performance, from abstract knowledge to practical realization*"(242). In short, performance is subordinated to analysis. Cook, in contrast, attempts to redeem the priority of performance (the subordinated term). Relatedly, Joseph Dubiel attempts to rethink the relationship between hearing music and writing about it by granting distinct listening experiences — rather than abstract theoretical constructs — privilege of place (262-283). Elsewhere, Kevin Korsyn attempts to menace the hierarchized dualism between approaches located 'inside' and 'outside' musical pieces with reference to Harold Bloom's model of intertextuality (55). Most trenchantly perhaps, Robert Fink attempts to debunk the widely believed opposition between music's 'deep' structure and its 'surface' detail with reference to Frederic Jameson's thoughts on postmodernism (102-137). As can be seen, then, one of the central themes of *Rethinking Music* involves contesting the violence implied by Inside / Outside paradigms of musical thought. How successful is this project of de-hierachization?

## **FORMULAIC MANUEVERS**

Not all efforts to rethink music effectively deconstruct oppositions; nor do all such efforts proffer genuine paradigm shifts. In fact, there is a pattern of thought emerging in the new critical musicology that has begun to take on the character of a formula. It too betrays a particular will to assume the non-identity (between music and discourse) I mention above; and it goes something like this:

STEP ONE: Rethinking music involves a heightened awareness of the ideological dimensions of the 'purely aesthetic' paradigm of music scholarship. The reductive focus on the 'music itself' betrays an aesthetic escapism (or narrow idealism) intent on isolating culture from everyday life and then defending that isolation in terms of universal and timeless ideas. This compression of music into formal categories has negative ideological and musical consequences. Witness this *leitmotif* in the first articles of the book. First, ideology: Kevin Korsyn attributes the fetishization of music's autonomy to an ideological need for subjective autonomy / personal freedom: "Indeed, the more precarious our hopes as real individuals have become, the greater the tendency has been to

proclaim art the region where all restrictions on freedom and autonomy are transcended. This tempts us to make inflated claims for artistic unity, attributing to art a fantastic degree of autonomy, beyond the power of any artefact to achieve" (60). Thus music's autonomy functions as a surrogate subjectivity; an imagined solution to a real problem. Second, music: Philip V. Bohlman denounces the narrow understanding of music in the West: "The metaphysical condition of music with which we in the West are most familiar is that music is an *object*. As an object, music is bounded, and names can be applied to it that affirm its objective status". This view falsifies the music's true processual nature — "unbounded and open ... necessarily incomplete" (18). Likewise, Jim Samson argues: By hearing music as form, "we translate the temporal into the spatial, freezing the work in a single synoptic moment and laying it out for dissection in an imagined, illusory space" (49). Formalism, in short, falsifies music's dynamic temporality. Thus, methodologically speaking, formalism should not take center stage.

STEP TWO: Rethinking music involves a renewed interest in the heterogeneous and much contested cultural arena that is its condition of possibility. This shift impinges upon the content and method of scholarship: it embraces traditionally excluded social categories, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on, no less than an array of new methodological categories, such as deconstruction, intertextuality, performativity and so on. Worldliness, in short, assumes center stage: music cannot be understood apart from its social context(s). Witness this *leitmotif* in the first articles of the book: Bohlman drives home the idea that "ontologies of music" are contingent upon "musical practices," which in turn are rooted in shifting temporal and spatial contexts (17-19). Samson calls for a redefinition of analysis in the professional discipline; one that would "step beyond the identification of musical structures, and would focus, rather, on the identification of musical materials, confronting the social nature of those materials ...;" in this way "music theory ... would draw context into its universe" (53). Korsyn values the "social heteroglossia" of musical language (62), and Arnold Whittall seeks to affirm music's "worldliness;" "to put music back where it belongs in time, place, and thought" (100).

STEP THREE: Because of the methodological shift from 'abstraction' to 'worldliness,' the argument goes, investigations into musical matters become less verifiable in the robust sense. Analyses, themselves mediated by shifting social contexts, become interpretations — contingent, perspectival, relative, poetic, incomplete. This insight takes the form of an acknowledgment or a disclaimer in the text, which, in turn, destabilizes the investigator's point of view, renders visible the text's mediating filters, and so on. Witness this *leitmotif*: "Accepting analysis as interpretation presupposes ... that there will be alternative interpretations," argues Samson; thus he calls for an "accommodation

with relativism,” which implies an “accommodation with plurality” (46-47). Relatedly, Samson’s “concern for heteronomy” negotiates the demands of an “open-minded pluralism” (75). From the point of view of ‘intertextuality,’ Korsyn argues that all unified utterance is “relative and provisional” (59). Scott Burnham’s high regard for an interpretation of Beethoven by a character from *Howards End* is announced with a proviso: “Helen’s reading of the music is thus presented as truth. But this truth is not about the music; nor is it, strictly speaking, about Helen. Rather, it is a truth *for* Helen. ... We may call it ‘poetic truth.’” (214). Most elaborately, Nicholas Cook redeems the status of relativism and pluralism. On relativism, for example: “The point is not that Beethoven is better than pop – or, for that matter, the opposite – but that they are different” (256). On pluralism: “If today ... we are content to let a thousand theoretical flowers bloom, then the only epistemological basis for this must be a conviction that each approach creates its own truth through instigating its own perceptions, bringing into being a dimension of experience that will coexist with any number of others” (261).

To write in the new musicological way, therefore, is to write in the contours of a certain prototype: (1) Criticize the limits of aesthetic autonomy and analytic formalism; (2) Value social and historical contexts highly; (3) Relativize the findings. By mapping this pattern of thought in a vulgar three-stroke formula, I am definitely not saying that all the essays in *Rethinking Music* take these steps; nor am I saying, when they do take these steps, that this is the most significant aspect of their contribution. Instead, by mapping this pattern of thought, I am attempting to identify a certain paradigm that has, to a large extent, become *unproblematic*. Skepticism about the autonomy of musical texts, along with an effort to contextualize these texts, to produce interpretations that are aware of their limits, has become correct to such an extent today that it is practically self-evident. While its aspirations may be critical, then, widespread acceptance of this pattern of thought diverts attention from its ideological limits. That is, widespread acceptance detracts from the fact that this is a pattern of thought that nurtures a particular theoretical terrain with its own technical *modus operandi*: a manner of proceeding complete with its own technical language and its own list of no-longer-possibles. It is this ideological malaise to which I will now turn.

## ON ANTI-AESTHETICISM

From this 'critical,' 'progressive' stance, it is no longer possible, for example, to embrace the value of aesthetic autonomy as a basis for structural listening. But why the prohibition? Why the taboo? It is possible to cast aesthetic autonomy in a different light. It is possible, first, to broaden our sense of what at its best the aesthetic has been, how it can function between sensory experience and the rigors of systematic discourse to imaginatively grasp the radical particularity of musical experience, which in turn can resist the control of totalizing concepts and sedimented beliefs about it. Romantic figures like Heinrich Wackenroder, E.T.A. Hoffman, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and (early) Nietzsche posited music's ineffability in order to preserve a critical gap between the world and the work. In other words, for these writers, any single reading of a musical work was necessarily impoverished in the face of its inexhaustibility. The work's autonomy had a dual function: it disconcerted epistemological certainties and assurances, and, by receding from ordinary grasp, it provided the necessary compulsion (*Zwang*) to interpretation. For example, Schopenhauer's attempt to situate music in a transcendent realm beyond all semantic grasp was not escapist idealism as much as it was an attempt to pose a critical challenge to music's decipherment. It was an attempt to sustain the radical open-ness of music; an attempt to expand the conceptual possibilities of the subject and the world through music's boundlessness. In this paradigm, interpretations of music resisted ideological closure: representations of music were but one limited angle in a boundless field.

Alternatively (even if the aesthetic no longer holds an emancipatory potential of this sort), it is possible to direct attention away from the kind of language used to capture the musical text ('formalism,' or what have you), and to direct attention towards the *use* to which it is put in specific social contexts and political conjunctures. No language is inherently progressive (or reactionary); its progressive worth depends on the concrete context within which it operates. A revaluation of aesthetic autonomy in the public sector today, for example, may challenge the institutionalized mediocrity of mass music in the hands of increasingly domineering corporate oligopolies. In an era of titanic mega-media industries (such as Disney and Time Warner) and communication and radio monopolies (such as Clear Channel Communications), music is granted relatively little autonomous value. This is not to say that music's autonomy is assured in the academy, but to acknowledge that what can be heard on radio and television has been shored in significant measure by the logic of the profit margin, and what is produced must be within the ideological range and political interest of its producers. On considering

alternatives to music produced under the corporate juggernaut, it is perilous to shun all notions of cultural autonomy.

A revaluation of aesthetic autonomy in the public sector today may also attribute credibility and status to music of the marginalized world, for example. The mantra 'let the market decide' (an ideology of unprecedented centralization posing as deregulation) is less likely to preserve, and more likely to wipe out, huge swaths of the world's culture. Thus, considerations of traditional music in the non-western world 'on its own terms' (free from market considerations) may, to some extent, redeem its value today in both local and global contexts. Again, preserving some notion of aesthetic autonomy may matter politically. Indeed, there are countless other possibilities for the progressive use of aesthetic autonomy, which I cannot rehearse in this essay.<sup>1</sup> The point I am trying to make here is simple: Rejecting the idea of aesthetic autonomy along with the project of analytic formalism (labeled 'Step One' above) should not become routine or unproblematic.

## ON THE RUSH TO CONTEXTUALISM

Of course the ideological prohibition on autonomy and formalism does not spirit away the problem of 'form' attending writing on music in general. It is not surprising, therefore, that music's repressed autonomy returns practically intact in many of *Rethinking Music's* essays. First, the new prizing of contextualism and historicism is largely conceptualized in response to aestheticism and thus evokes and confirms the prohibition even as it tries to go beyond it. Second, musical autonomy is paradoxically recovered under the (ostensibly antithetical) conceptual rubric of 'social context'. Let me explain using Bohlman's argument as an example. While resolutely committed to the shifting ontologies of music in shifting historical and social contexts, Bohlman simultaneously grants music a general character over and above these contexts: "As a process, music is unbounded and open. Whereas names may be assigned to it, they are necessarily incomplete" (18). But what kind of idealization of music must already be in place to judge all representations thereof inadequate? The answer is: an old-fashioned Western one. That is, Bohlman grants music a general character that recapitulates the very autonomy articulated by nineteenth-century romantic notions. Like the romantic attempt to place music beyond linguistic certainty, names assigned to music in Bohlman's scheme are *necessarily incomplete*. Bohlman betrays his Western

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<sup>1</sup> On the uses of aesthetic autonomy, see my *Musical Formalism as Radical Political Critique: From European Modernism to African Spirit Possession*. PhD, Columbia University, 2001.

romantic bias paradoxically in his critique of (apparently) Western music conceptions of itself: Music's "metaphysical condition" in the West is reducible to a "bounded" (instead of "open") "object" (instead of "process") to which "names" can be assigned (instead of remaining "incomplete"). While Bohlman expands the point on the terrain of musical notation – arguing that "the fear of loss drives the technologies of notation," and so on – it is unlikely that any Western theorist would recognize their work in the "object" of Bohlman's representation (18, 28). Indeed, most Western theorists would identify with Bohlman's "process"-oriented ontology of music. But, beyond this, it is Bohlman's surrogate belief in musical autonomy that I am trying to demonstrate here. Apparently committed to locating various ontologies of music (from South India to the Brazilian Amazon) in specific historical and social practices, Bohlman's text in fact identifies a particular Western ontology of music – with its own peculiar social and historical context – and applies it ahistorically to music in general.<sup>2</sup>

This paradoxical recovery tactic is a central theme in *Rethinking Music*. Like Bohlman's stance, Samson, for example, is unequivocally dedicated to historicizing and exposing "the ideological roots" of music's "project of autonomy" (47). Like Bohlman, Samson diminishes the dimensions of this historical project: "It seems that if we are to hear music as form ... we translate the temporal into the spatial, freezing the work in a single synoptic moment and laying it out for dissection in an imagined, illusory space" (49). Instead of recognizing that, within the protocol of the 'project of autonomy,' music's break with context precisely produced an unbounded mobility of reference, Samson reads the break reductively: music becomes spatial, frozen. On the other hand, Samson recovers the critical dimensions of music's autonomy (as I have described them above) in terms that value contextualism: "It becomes of ... importance ... to scrutinize the nature of the images, models, or metaphors used in analysis, since their *modus operandi* defines the gap between our experience and our description of that experience" (46).<sup>3</sup> Once again, the limits of formalism (which is rhetorically affined to the 'project of autonomy' in Samson's text) are described in terms of a critical gap between music and writing about music. But this gesture recapitulates the very project of autonomy it sets out to critique. At this point in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Bohlman withdraws this overarching ontology only from the very music that spawned it – viz., Western music, which Bohlman falsely identifies as falsely identifying as an "object".

<sup>3</sup> For Samson, music condemns "even the most 'scientific' of descriptions to opacity" (47). Samson emphasizes the point in his brief survey of analytic projects of the past: "From Koch's exposition of phrase structures and extensions, through Schoenberg's parsing of periods and sentences, to more recent generative theories, such methods have often proved illuminating. But they remain firmly on the level of imported models or metaphors, whose application to an ontological distinct art-form can never prove more than suggestive" (49). Music's essential autonomy, it seems, exceeds linguistic efforts to define it.



text, therefore, it is as if music's autonomy is paradoxically recruited to argue against music's autonomy.

What I am suggesting is that the high valuation of social and historical contexts ('worldliness') in recent times often recalls traditional notions of autonomy even as it attempts to resist them. In other words, like the romantic writers on musical autonomy, this new musicology posits a disjuncture between music and discourse in order to widen the horizon of the interpretable. While it does not recognize itself as such, this late twentieth-century use of what I will call *musical autonomy by proxy* is fairly widespread in apparently socio-contextual accounts of musical phenomena. And this is not inherently problematic. Burnham, for example, historicizes the gap between the realism of words and the idealism of music, and then brilliantly suggests that the gap itself might compel the hermeneutic inquiry: "The obligatory assurance that words can never do justice to the revelation that is music has never stopped anyone from the attempt, and in fact stages the attempt, which is after all the central challenge for the Romantic literary artist: how to fit the reality of words to the revelation of ideality. Understood in this way, our verbal relationship to music is fundamentally poetic" (195). For Burnham, this paradigm became problematic only when critics abandoned the "twilight vagaries of spiritual divination" in favor of the "rigours of formalism and structuralism" (195). The twentieth-century sublimation of music's spiritual challenge (which necessarily figured interpretation in terms of poetic perspective) into formal structure (which claimed to achieve epistemological closure via analysis) was, in fact, a reversion to pre-dialectical eighteenth-century thought: a "Kantian backlash" (196). What seems to disturb Burnham is the way certain interpretative modalities attempt to close the gap between language and music and thereby also to narrow the horizon of the musically possible. Burnham takes the debate to an important new juncture. He undercuts the opposition between 'analysis' and 'interpretation' *as such*, and marks instead a contrast between analyses that open options for engagement beyond music and those that close them: "Analyses and poetic criticism are not either/or alternatives. One might go further and claim that we need to understand music as music, as an autonomous language, if we want to grant it the power to speak of other things: we could not reasonably expect something without its own voice to comment on anything. ... In short, precisely because music is musical, it can speak to us of things that are not strictly musical" (215).

The dangers of formalist reduction befall purely formal accounts no more than they do historico-contextual ones. While it is not always made explicit, the idea that historico-contextualism itself is an effective panacea to analytic reductiveness is one of the axiomatic threads running behind the methodological scene of much new musicology. For example, Samson's surrogate endorsement of a critical gap between music and writing about

music to illuminate the limits of formalism does not necessarily extend to contextualism. On whether a theory that recognizes the “social nature of [musical] materials” (by, say, drawing “context into its discourse”) will reduce the gap, Samson is elusive; still, Samson does suggest that “analysis *in context*” widens critical perspectives (italics mine, 35, 53). Likewise, for Whittall, restoring music’s social dimensions resists the “unhealthy” tendencies of musicological writing “concerned solely with music’s ‘internal workings’, as if nothing else in the world existed ...” (75). Whittall’s objective, in short, is to “affirm music’s worldliness” (100). But the low regard for formalism coupled with the high regard for worldliness does not allay the ‘formalism’ inherent to the ‘worldly’ account. The socio-historical interpretation of music risks simply transposing those attributes formerly associated with musical form onto the world and then reading them as if they were a genuinely material approach to the musical text. In this process, the music as such threatens to disappear against a general background of social determination. Thus, while the language of such an interpretation may draw on various extra-musical discourses, its textualized shape is patterned by formal constraints of its own. I will call this situation a *hybridized formalism*. Whittall in fact illustrates a case of hybridized formalism using Timothy L. Jackson’s study of Richard Strauss’s *Metamorphosen* as an example: Jackson’s concern for contextual heteronomy and pluralism are synthesized into an organic unity that is ultimately beholden to an adapted Schenkerian analysis (82-88). Samson too recognizes the dangers of reading right through the aesthetic dimensions of music — “that vital capacity of the significant text ... to make its own statement” — as if it was a mere representation of the social (53). In short, ‘Step Two,’ the high regard for social and historical contexts as they mediate musical material, should also not become routine or unproblematic.

## ON POLICING THE PLURAL

The general call for opening musicological debate to plural perspectives frequently ushers in an antithetical impulse to close options for debate; to discipline and limit musical inquiry to those features that count as ‘worldly’ (the really real?). Hence, Whittall’s interest in heteronomy and “open-minded pluralism” is tempered by his interest in putting music “*back where it belongs* in time, place, and thought” (italics mine, 75, 100). Likewise, while he celebrates the “heteroglossia” of musical texts, Kevin Korsyn is reluctant to grant methodological heterogeneity all the way down: “Questioning [the] fetishization of unity ... does not mean surrendering to chaos” (60). Korsyn’s essay in *Rethinking Music* (“Beyond Privileged Contexts: Intertextuality, Influence, and Dialogue”) reads like

an introduction to Bakhtinian intertextuality in music; it provides no substantial musical analysis, and reads instead as a “belated preface, or perhaps an extended footnote,” to an earlier article: “Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence”.<sup>4</sup> Here Korsyn applies Bloom’s model to music by comparing the intertextual relationships of works by Reger and Brahms to a work by Chopin. While both are ‘discontinuous’ with their ‘precursor’ text, Reger’s misreading is weak, while that of Brahms is strong. Thus, moments of ‘discontinuity’ and acts of ‘misreading’ are hierarchized into ‘strong’ and ‘weak’. More exactly, ‘discontinuities,’ as Korsyn understands them, are distinguished via a particular Schenkerian depth narrative; one that ironically registers resemblances between texts in terms of features on both musical surfaces and in musical depths. Reger’s *Träume am Kamin*, op. 143, for example, contains numerous conspicuous allusions to Chopin’s Berceuse, op. 57 but fails to “... hear that Chopin’s continuity exists in a dialectical tension with his four-bar groups [whereby] continuity arises from overcoming the sectional divisions”.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Brahms’s Romanze, op. 118, no. 5, does register this dialectical tension adequately and thus also misreads Chopin’s work ‘strongly’ (a.k.a. ‘deeply’). In short, Korsyn is able to control the decentering multiplicity of intertextuality (“chaos”) and recoup an aesthetic hierarchy of works.

Robert Fink’s essay “Going Flat: Post-Hierarchical Music Theory and the Musical Surface” provides a lengthy critique of notions of musical ‘depth’ as they are harnessed to buttress canonic hierarchies. The author links his anti-depth stance to democracy in a postmodern world, which is characterized by “egalitarian mass culture” (135). His awareness of the duplicitous association of musical depth with value does not, of course, encourage an awareness of the duplicitous association of mass culture with the titanic corporate centralization that undergirds it. Thus, I am not arguing against the need for aesthetic judgment — outside of these omnivorous structures — as such. Rather, I want to draw attention to the force of ideological constraint and closure implicit in the general quest for inclusion, multiplicity and pluralism. The essays in *Rethinking Music* generally embrace a plurality of approaches and interpretations, but they tend not to focus on the exclusions that fragment the disciplinary terrain into plural dimensions in the first place. Thus, placing a high premium on pluralism does not guarantee a genuinely pluralized musical thinking. In *Rethinking Music*’s essays, a single concept-metaphor often organizes and guides (and hence contains) its ‘plural’ field of operation: For Bohlman, the key category is ‘practice,’ for Korsyn it is ‘intertextuality,’ for Fink it is ‘flatness,’ for Cook ‘performativity,’ and so on: A policed pluralism.

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin Korsyn, “Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence,” *Music Analysis* 10, 1991, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Korsyn, “New Poetics,” 1991, 46.

## ON EPISTEMOLOGICAL DESIRE

Again, I am definitely not saying these central organizing categories do not open perspectives. (After all, Fink's work illuminates the limits of Korsyn's work, Cook's work illuminates the limits of Lerdahl's work, etc.) The point is, these approaches cannot not close options for debate as they open them; they come at an irreducible cost. Second, a genuine acknowledgment of this irreducible cost (or what Derrida might call an 'experience of the impossible') turns the matter of "rethinking music" away from unfettered epistemological criteria and towards social and political criteria as they intersect with epistemological ones. As Cook argues, we should "think of analysis, or for that matter any musicology, in terms of what it does and not just what it represents" (258). Joseph Dubiel raises the interest in what analysis *does* to a higher degree: "What do theories tell me? Not what to do; but what there is to do. Not what moves will sound good; but how each possible move will sound. Not 'If you do it this way, it will work'; but 'If you do it this way, it will sound so-and-so – and whether you want it is up to you'" (282). Dubiel's epistemological ambitions are tied to musical possibilities rather than certainties: Musical theories (a.k.a. 'ways of hearing') are "more like states of affect than like the maintenance of propositions" (282). This contrasts with the unconstrained epistemological attitude axiomatic in much new musicological writing. For example, even Cook's epistemological doubt – that the "scientific truth value of analysis [can] become ... at best secondary, and at times simply irrelevant" – recovers its certainty in a particular context: "... the primary significance, or *truth value*, of analysis *must* lie in its potential for realization in the perceptual or imaginative terms of Lewin's 'poetic deeds'" (italics mine, 257). Thus, however contra-fundamentalist these deeds turn out to be, they exert a claim to truth that necessarily excludes at least one other theoretical method. In short, fundamentalism is a necessary accomplice to (and even the condition of possibility for) any music analysis or interpretation. Without illusion, Nietzsche might say, we cannot do anything. As long as considerations of truth (knowledge) remain unhinged from considerations of ethics (value), the eternal return of the same critique is possible.

What I am trying to suggest is that the desire for unfettered epistemology necessarily encounters a limit. When a musical interpretation is oriented towards *mere knowing*, it fails to raise the question of the *value* of what is being done, and must miss opportunities. That is, in this paradigm, critically-minded analysis can only adequately reckon with its own diminished epistemological claims (the move from 'science' to 'poetics', for example) in two ways: (1) It can grant the reader a choice about accepting the result. Dubiel's approach to theory, for instance, is like an invitation to hear something, which the reader/listener can take or leave: "it is up to you" (282). Or, (2), it can grant the validity of

a plurality of perspectives. Cook once more, "If today ... we are content to let a thousand theoretical flowers bloom, then the only epistemological basis for this must be the conviction that each approach creates its own truth through instigating its own perceptions, bringing into being a dimension of experience that will coexist with any number of others" (261). Thus, if there is one, the moral of rethinking the musical story is to keep an open-minded acceptance of many diverse approaches.

Why is this valuable? First, to the extent that my diagnosis of formulaic maneuvers above is accurate, these approaches may not be as diverse as they might seem at first glance. Second, how egalitarian is this tolerant embrace in practice? Scientifically objectivist analyses are not going to go away or lose their social power just because some people think that formal analytic language is really poetic, or that objectivity is a social construction, or that science is really performative, or what have you. Exposing inventions does not proffer alternatives. Also, genuinely distinct perspectives freight different agendas, ideologies, values. Some insights are surely more valuable than others. One might argue, for example, that Burnham's musical thinking (as it intersects with that of Beethoven and E.M. Forster) provides insight into the paradoxical structure of faith (intimately connected to doubt) by adding to it a level of complexity not available to non-musical thinking alone. Or one might argue, for example, that Dubiel's musical interest in marking for consciousness music's radically unpredictable moments have a critical role to play in the world; that keeping an ear open for the unique, capricious and open-ended aspects of music is also an effort to challenge reification and the formal standardization of experience; that D# in Beethoven's Violin Concerto *matters* socially.

Is there not every reason in the world to make more of musical thinking, let alone musical rethinking?

*The*

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