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*Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* by Kevin Korsyn

Review by: MARTIN SCHERZINGER

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fieldwork-enabled research Agawu considers valuable, leaves *Representing African Music* standing as a monument to unconsidered field-bashing. By “undercomplicating” (pp. 19, 163, and elsewhere) the scholarship of others, the book reduces characterization to caricature, missing the opportunity to demonstrate how ethnographic work might develop a more progressive political engagement and tighter music analysis.

Agawu calls the solution he offers for a “truly emancipated discourse” (p. 223) a necessarily pragmatic one: in order to be heard, scholars need to speak with the authority of the master—in this case, the art music establishment of the North. To speak with such authority, scholars need to join the hegemonic discourse and speak in its terms. (This is “the scientific project of African musicology,” p. 49.) He hopes that this strategy may eventually shift the values of the Euro-American center, so that they are more inclusive of what he sees as the values of continental African scholars and musicians, and more responsive to continental Africans’ political conditions. In disciplinary terms, he advocates formalist analysis of African music as the avenue to an emancipated discourse: free of (unequal) relationships with musicians, free of the colonial legacy that ethnographic work carries as its burden, free of the necessity of accounting for the “context” of the research and of research procedures; free to focus on musical genius and the structure of the musical work. In the end, by falling back onto the ideals of imperial science, Agawu reproduces the modernist epistemology he sets out to deconstruct.

What is his metatheoretical project? He presents a view that is antihistorical yet its presentism is located twenty years past. He recuperates a comparative framework yet he is against the effects of difference. He favors a disinterested listener and an analytic view from nowhere but he wants it founded on the authority of the cultural insider. I am troubled by the extent to which inattentive scholarship and questionable narrative strategies hinder the discussion of the book’s central issues and of progressive change in the academy, and I am left wondering about the state of the editorial process at a major press. Whose interests are served by the carelessness of a text on this important topic?

LOUISE MEINTJES

*Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, by Kevin Korsyn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. viii, 221 pp.

Toward the end of Kevin Korsyn’s book *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musicological Research*, his fictional interlocutor—by this point all but indistinguishable from Korsyn himself—gets into a debate about resistance and acquiescence to authority with references to familiar scholars of music (Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., Joseph Kerman, Kofi V. Agawu, Philip V. Bohlman,

Ellen Koskoff, David Lewin). How, asks the Korsyn-figure, do we tackle the challenge of critical voices in our discipline without undermining the entire institutional apparatus? The answer: “[By incorporating] some resistance to their own authority.” Likewise, on the problem of how ethically to frame conflicting positions in scholarly discourses, the speaker points the way: “By building a resistance to *themselves* into their own work” (pp. 186–87). Self-undercutting, it seems, is assigned privilege of place in this argument, for ultimately, according to another significant mythical figure in the book, Thamyras (an ancient Thracian bard who challenged the Muses to a contest), the only thing the oracle knows is that “there are no oracles” (pp. 4, 189).

This is the most penetrating self-insight in a book that, in its dazzling array of topical discussions and argumentative strategies, is as much concerned about its own processes and *raison d'être* as it is about the truths it hopes to proffer. Yet, despite its self-negating moment, the book has transformative ambitions; in Korsyn's words, it is a book that “seeks to change musical scholarship by addressing a crisis confronting us today.” The crisis, argues Korsyn, is grounded in “discourse,” understood here in the Lacanian sense as “a social link (*lien social*) founded on language” (p. 5). Because language, under recent French philosophical lights, is prior to individual utterance and expression, it always exceeds (and escapes) our grasp. Korsyn argues that the practice of music scholarship is likewise bound up in sociocultural forces that lie beyond its immediate control. The book includes discussion of programmatic constraints on musical discourse no less than institutional rigidities, right down to the nitty-gritty of the tenure process and the dynamics of program committee selection.

Korsyn casts a broad net across a motley array of historical/geographical topics and methodological perspectives. From Marxist interpretations of Chicano culture to deconstructive engagements with Frédéric Chopin's preludes, from Louis Althusser's theories of ideological interpellation to Jacques Attali's fabled genealogy of music and noise, *Decentering Music* offers considerable food for thought to music theorists, musicologists, and ethnomusicologists alike. The author conducts his case in a mostly solid and capably argued series of essays, often by means of generous explanatory summaries of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings for his analytic excursions.

*Decentering Music* (whose original subtitle appears to have been “A Post-disciplinary Fantasy”) is itself a *decentered* text; “laughing” and “dancing,” one might say, along a Nietzschean path crisscrossed by paraphrases and paradoxes, preludes and postludes, myths, and fictional dialogues between unnamed figures and those with names (“Dorothy” and “Auntie Em” of the Wizard of Oz, for example, or, more allegorically, “Dr. Zyklus,” “Nomadia,” “Mr. Paradox,” and “Monadia”), all of whom vie for argument-formation as the book unfolds (pp. 10, 106–9, 189). Korsyn's primary “dialogic” strategy is to allow a host of fictional characters, usually simply “traditional scholars,” “skeptics,” or “critics,” to interrupt the narrative flow and argue with one an-

other (pp. 34, 36, 50–56). All these elusive narrator-avatars bring impressive constellations of thought, drawn from philosophy, history, critical theory, and music analysis, to every page of *Decentering Music*.

To launch his argument, Korsyn diagnoses a symptomatic dialectical impasse in music scholarship today. On the one hand, the splintering of scholarly dialogue into specialized branches of study (“crisscrossed by . . . antagonisms, which divide the field into ever smaller units”) has produced a kind of “radical disengagement” between factions of a discipline, which nonetheless bears the marks of hierarchically imposed exclusions (pp. 6, 15). In short, musical research, under current professional pressures, is becoming a hierarchized “Tower of Babel” (p. 16). As a remedy, Korsyn aims to retrieve and engage the marginal and excluded domains that ground the very possibility of the discipline (p. 16).

On the other hand, the very “corporatist” model that divides scholarship into subdisciplines simultaneously mandates “increasing uniformity” within these disciplines (pp. 6, 26). Korsyn isolates key features of scholarly standardization when it is mediated by the commodity form: abstraction, efficiency, quantification (pp. 20–25). Here he draws a tantalizing link between the “ideology of the abstract,” which issues the professional “tendency toward uniformity,” and the broader economic sphere of “Fordist economics,” which governs the way the university operates (pp. 24–25, 182). In short, music research, under current professional pressures, is becoming an Orwellian “Ministry of Truth” (p. 25). As a remedy to *this* problem, Korsyn aims to imagine new forms of musical community no less than to restructure the university system. In sum, he seeks scholarly heterogeneity without lapsing into the Charybdis of Babel-esque relativism or imposing the Scylla of Ministry-esque consensus.

In the manner of Michel Foucault, this dilemma sets Korsyn in quest of an “antimethod” that will excavate the enabling conditions of current scholarly methods. He illustrates how various hierarchic oppositions encircle, and thus keep intact, the fundamental paradigm of musical research (pp. 32–33). These he aims, following Jacques Derrida, to deconstruct, and ultimately jettison in favor of a radical plurality, built on what the literary theorist Bill Readings calls a “dissensual community”; a shared “common symbolic space” characterized by “agonism” instead of “antagonism” (pp. 176–78).<sup>1</sup> Writing about music in these enhanced democratic conditions will feature two key interrelated characteristics: it will be both reflexive and dialogic. In Korsyn’s words, “Abstract and counterabstract, position and counterposition, might be interwoven within a single discourse, a discourse that recognizes its partial character and its own contingency, a discourse that fosters critical thinking even at the risk of fostering resistance to itself” (p. 184).

1. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

As a result of this reflexive vigilance, Korsyn's assessments of different music scholars are often insightful and unpredictable: Attali's politically motivated account of historical "networks" through which music passes, for example, paradoxically betrays a lingering "persistence of romantic ideology"; while David Lewin's precisely rationalized analytic procedure paradoxically opens into the "private realm of [Lacanian] *jouissance*" (pp. 128, 175). These are illuminating revisions of the traditional characterizations of these scholars. Korsyn's curious interdisciplinary juxtapositions in the text also deliver some surprising results. One of the more original chapters involves the productive—at times quite funny—pairing of Wayne Koestenbaum's erotic rhapsodies on various operatic performances with Eugene Narmour's meticulous charting of microscopic durational shifts in performances of the same works. Korsyn astutely frames this comparison in a discussion of technologies of hearing; he demonstrates how changing technical media not only facilitate experience but "alter perception, create new modes of sociality, transform time and space" (p. 143). While there is a technological basis to the findings of both Koestenbaum and Narmour, it differs in telling ways. Koestenbaum relies on sound recordings; these open the possibility of an exquisitely introspective musical experience, which in turn sanctions an extensive emotional range (from shame and embarrassment to fascination and ecstasy; p. 147). Narmour relies on statistically manufactured norms (no less than stopwatches measuring variations among performances); these provide the possibility of a detached and universal musical experience, which in turn sanctions claims about the rules constituting normative musical behavior (in "competent listeners"; p. 148). Korsyn is right to put Koestenbaum's interpretative escalations in tension with the "brute, mandatory system" Narmour claims as the primary perceptual mechanism for normal listening subjects (p. 148). Not only does each encounter the other as its limit in Korsyn's adventurous juxtaposition, thereby dramatizing the peculiar disciplinary split between hermeneutically and formalistically inspired approaches, but the comparison raises ethical questions about the status of alternative hearings in cognition studies in music scholarship: is a Koestenbaumian hearing a deviant emblem of homosexuality?

But Korsyn may be wrong in the general thrust of his argument, which seeks above all to demonstrate that both writers equally inscribe the mechanics of "normalization" in their writing (p. 150). In Korsyn's words, "the discourse of norms and deviations becomes a condition of possibility both for Koestenbaum assuming a certain kind of sexual identity and for Narmour regarding statistical confirmation and normative hearing as a significant theoretical goal" (p. 150). This is a curious position to hold for a writer who shows himself at home on the terrain of post-structuralism, a terrain that treats the world as a labyrinth of differentiated signs. Just because Koestenbaum's writing must carry overtones of an imposingly hierarchized norm does not mean the writing shares in it. Koestenbaum's text is a specific act of resistance contaminated by what it opposes. Particular acts of (complicit) resistance, however

contaminated, must be distinguished from general complicity. This distinction permits us to identify particular analytic elements that are open to judgment from general ones that are not, being their condition of possibility. Let me explain. It would be more accurate to say that Koestenbaum's account opens into experiences that menace and even bypass the imagined norm, while Narmour's account attempts to secure it. For Narmour, in contrast, the norm is not exactly a "condition of possibility" as much as an analytic goal, deeply at odds with Koestenbaum's elusive prose. Korsyn's Foucaultian cleverness, at this level of argument, risks collapsing these important distinctions.

Indeed, the enthusiasm for collapsing distinctions must be curbed if it is to avoid falling into error. One egregious example occurs in Korsyn's discussion of Joseph Kerman's skepticism of traditional music theory (especially of the Schenkerian sort). Korsyn writes, "[Kerman's] demotion of theory stands in a paradoxical relationship to Kerman's own choice of literary criticism as a privileged model for musical criticism, since literary criticism has engaged theoretical issues with increasing urgency over the past several decades. Indeed today the field is often called literary theory, or simply theory." Korsyn goes on to associate Kerman's suspicion of [music] theory with an "unconscious legacy of the positivistic musicology [Kerman] has hoped to supersede"; and so Kerman ultimately "immobilize[s] history" (p. 84). The problem here is that Korsyn has simply elided the projects of literary theory and music theory (under the rhetorically repetitious sign "theory") as if they had similar aspirations and somehow shared a parallel history. This is a naming trick that equally immobilizes history. In truth, the mid-century invention and subsequent practices of modern music theory in the American academy—at least its scientific, generalizing, and predictive ambitions—bear little obvious or generally recognized resemblances to postmodern literary theory—with its interest in the discursive limits, ideological underpinnings, and so on, of literary texts.

Korsyn's own deep familiarity with literary theory, ironically enough, may account for the elision of this important difference, and it comes at a cost in other contexts as well. A common strategy in *Decentering Music*, for example, is to borrow arguments from well-known literary theorists and philosophers, and then to apply them to some aspect of the musicological scene. For example, Korsyn's feminist-inspired critique of Susan McClary's account of pre-sixteenth-century European culture is run in tandem with his description of Christopher Norris's political critique of T. S. Eliot's antiromanticism. This kind of argument-by-analogy authorizes ideas crafted by Norris (with Eliot on his mind) to target shortcomings in McClary's work. The results of this rhetorical tactic are uneven and contradictory. Using the logic of guilty association—in this case, both Eliot and McClary seem to be critical of excessive individualism and to make approving nods toward images of social harmony and organic sensibility—Korsyn highlights Eliot's "deeply conservative" political agenda, and then implausibly argues that McClary "could be read as an endorsement of [an analogous social] hierarchy" (p. 132). Again, not all

images of “individualism” or “social harmony” are equal, and it is perilous to construe them as such.

Likewise, Korsyn uses Derrida as a guiding figure in theorizing his argument about compositional identity (pp. 91–100). With incomplete success, Korsyn tries to bend Derrida’s analysis of our uncertain hold on self-presence to the identity of musical phenomena.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Korsyn takes his cue from Derrida’s notion of iterability to discuss musical repetition. Korsyn quotes Derrida—“the presence-of-the-present is derived from repetition and not the reverse”—and correctly notes that the sign depends on a kind of “originary repetition” (p. 93). But the translation of Derrida’s philosophical values into his music analyses is weak, incongruous even. For example, Korsyn discusses musical repetition in the context of traditional ideas about phrase rhythm in a work by Mozart. The Piano Sonata, K. 283, opens with an expansion of the first ten measures via near-repetition of measures 5–10 in measures 11–16. For Korsyn this is a case of “originary repetition” because, instead of following one another consecutively in time, “repetition and expansion appear together” (p. 93). Moreover, argues Korsyn (following William E. Caplin), the ten-bar prototype of this expansion is itself an expansion of an “eight-bar norm,” figured as an “absent prototype” (p. 95). Likewise, Korsyn interprets Chopin’s B-Minor Prelude as “an expanded repetition of *itself*: it is an expansion of a sixteen-bar prototype that is nowhere given.” Korsyn continues, “To establish the identity of this piece once and for all it would be necessary to say here is the original, there is the expansion, establishing a hierarchy between the two. Instead, however, the piece exemplifies what Derrida calls *différance*: it differs from itself—its identity is deferred. It is precisely because the identity of the piece is uncertain that we need analysis” (p. 96).

This is an odd argument, for Korsyn collapses general and particular levels, namely, the workings of “repetition” between pieces and “repetition” within a piece. The absent norm he identifies in K. 283 hinges on the idea that “nothing precedes it that might constitute a prototype” (p. 95). This claim is overdrawn. “Norms,” whether they describe average sizes of modern American families or lengths of classical musical phrases, are “absent” only in a limited, literalistic, sense; they are the *result* of empirically oriented experience seeking to grasp the general characteristics of things. (In scientific empiricism this can involve the use of surveys and statistics.) For Derrida, the irreducible undecidability of *différance* is not the result of some empirical imperfection, but rather of a trace of contingency lodged within the logic of any structure (at its origin). Likewise, the “phantom existence” of the eight-bar prototype in Chopin’s Prelude shares no kinship with Derrida’s “absence” prior to the sign’s

2. This paragraph and the following one of this review are drawn from my recent article “Music in the Thought of Deconstruction / Deconstruction in the Thought of Music,” *Muzikološki Zbornik / Musicological Annual* 41, pt. 2, Special Edition: *Glasba in Destrukcija / Music and Deconstruction* (2005): 81–104. They are reproduced here with permission.



repetition. Derrida is not addressing the absence of some kind of abstract plenitude (like “2.3 children” per household, for example, or “eight-measure units” of music), which guides the signification process. On the contrary, *différance* marks the differential structure of our hold on presence and plenitude. Far from marking the sign’s normative background, the operations of *différance* foreground its irreconcilable dialectical extremes. In the deconstructive analysis there is no doubt about the sign’s ordinary meaning; indeed, the movement of deconstruction illuminates the conditions of possibility and impossibility in which such ordinary meaning is instituted. In Korsyn’s analyses, in contrast, the “identity of the piece is *uncertain*”; indeed the uncertainty prompts the “need [for] analysis” (p. 96). In sum, where the deconstructive account renders undecidable the certainty of the sign, Korsyn’s account clarifies the uncertainty of the music’s identity.

This is not to say that Derridaen deconstruction is out of place across the terrain of music and musical thought. It is possible, for instance, to configure music as a performative dramatization of Derrida’s theory of language formation, an idea that resonates with music’s privileged position in Continental philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this is not the thrust of Korsyn’s argument. Herein lies the problem with running an argument on the insights of others—a predictable pitfall when the crew of interlocutors harnessed to the cause is as motley as that chosen by Korsyn.

On the positive side, Korsyn’s broad palette contests the institutionalized subdivisions that define the discipline. To his credit, for example, Korsyn takes up scholarship dealing with music from both the West and the West’s Second- and Third-World hinterlands: Syrian Jewish music (pp. 71–74), music of the Mexican American *orquesta* (pp. 74–75), recordings of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea (pp. 153–54), Islamic chant (pp. 161–64), and so on. However, Korsyn is not concerned to develop the political dimension of his account, or to exploit with much energy the possibilities these tropical *tours de force* offer the project of uplifting music, musicians, and others in these corners of the world. What we find instead is an unflinching eye on the textual patterning of these accounts.

For instance, Kay Kaufman Shelemay’s *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews* is diagnosed from the point of view of “emplotment” alone. For Korsyn, Shelemay’s narrative plot is “comedy, the genre that reconciles contraries” (p. 71). Korsyn prefers to concentrate his critical acuity on Shelemay’s narrative strategies, instead of on the content of her book. When Shelemay daringly judges the *pizmonim* (paraliturgical hymns with Hebrew texts) “a Judeo-Arab musical discourse,” whose melodies are indebted to Middle Eastern Arab sources, the practical contribution this insight might make to the vexing political crises raging in the Middle East today is ignored (p. 71). Instead of emphasizing the shared (instead of irreducibly divided) history of cultural interaction congealed in these documents, Korsyn stresses the “system of metaphors in her text,” where “images of connection



abound" (p. 72). He reserves his political interests for the "ideological moment" in Shelemay's narrative: her failure critically to address the absence of women in Halabi instrumental practices (pp. 71–73). (Interestingly, the ideological exclusion hinges less on constraints organic to the comedic rhetorical strategy itself than on an excluded empirical investigation. Korsyn writes, "The question of why [Halabi women] never played instruments, or how they might have felt about this, is never asked" [p. 73].)

So it is with Korsyn's treatment of Manuel Peña: instead of directly engaging the factional politics, and the attendant economic determinants, that divide Mexican American musical styles, Korsyn dwells on the author's emplotment strategy; namely, "tragic . . . Marxism" (p. 75). For the most part, then, the non-West is used as a fictitious backdrop to the book's rhetorical action around rhetoric itself. Ultimately, the "change" sought out in Korsyn's book turns out to be more about situating "language games" in their manifold musicological guises and less about productive political possibilities in the world beyond academic scholarship (pp. 187–88).

There has been a great deal of critical debate about the need for heightened "critical awareness" in the past decade, much of it fueled by a concern about the ideological dimensions of musicological positivism and music-theoretical formalism. Korsyn's response to this concern is admirable. He calls for a new musical research that will "question [its] own language and value systems"; musicological stories that, like his own, will "acknowledge that [the] story *is* a story" (pp. 160, 137; italics in original). The use of fictional interlocutors and critics can be a useful technique for marking narrative limits and contradictions in one's own arguments. Of course, it is probably worth asking who these various faux-scholars and skeptics and phantom-critics are, over whom the author consistently triumphs (pp. 34, 36, 50–56, etc.). But Korsyn's sophisticated convolutions of self-reflexiveness have a curious quality in another sense; they seem, at once, too dissociated from one another to lead to a meta-argument, and too enmeshed in the grand illusioning of realism to challenge one fundamentally. Central postmodern motifs are often paradoxically reported in non-nonsense realist tones ("Just as the postmodern social is decentered, so too are its individuals"; "experience is already constructed in discourse"; and so on), thereby sparing the writers who initiated these ideas from all critique (pp. 17, 36). Thus, the language in which Korsyn discusses "romantic irony" is unabashedly embracing: on Gottfried Weber's analysis of Mozart, Korsyn offers what could be a description of *Decentering Music* itself. He writes, "One moment the listener is in a state of complete tonal certainty, the next she or he is faced with the most various possibilities. . . . The subject is in a state of uncertainty, longing, suspense" (p. 173). As it is with all the writers Korsyn holds in esteem (Philip Bohlman, Ellen Koskoff, and David Lewin, in particular), Weber is identified in the final analysis as inhabiting an "ironic mode" (p. 173). In Korsyn's ethical universe, the self-reflexive quality of irony is granted pride of place. Thus, he admires Koskoff's multiple and contradictory

perspectives (sanctioned by irony), for example; or Lewin's "integrity" in refusing to suppress "potentially messy factors" (pp. 165, 175). This pattern of admiration is worth noting on the part of a writer whose own project revolves so much around the skeptical interrogation of claims to truth. In sum, Korsyn's ideal (dissensual) community would ideally be peopled by *ironic* scholars, whose texts are prepared to *acknowledge* the limits of their positions.

This is pretty much the whole of Korsyn's core story. For my taste, the writer is too little anguished by this fate. The problem is that an "ironic" gesture, coupled with a ritual "acknowledgment" of the discursive constraints layered into one's scholarship, does not entail a genuine intellectual engagement with the subject under investigation; nor does a genuine engagement entail such acknowledgment. Put differently, unmasking one's limits may be used to mask other limits, which are no longer ethically marked in Korsyn's ideal scholarly republic. Korsyn's scrupulous lucubrations on all manner of narrative types and tropes (heroic Romanticism, comedy, Marxist tragedy, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, and the like) evade this rather obvious point. If the ironic mode ultimately trumps in this community of scholars, are they permitted to say anything, as long as they do not take it as the full truth? If so, when does not quite believing what one says become not quite saying what one believes?

Thamyris, it turns out, was blinded for his vanity and conviction.

MARTIN SCHERZINGER