

The Musicology of the Future

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Repercussions: until the 1988 meeting of the American Musicological Society in Baltimore, that is what musicology seemed not to be hearing from the *Götterdämmerung* in progress in so many other disciplines. Baltimore, everyone seemed to agree, was a crossroads: the site where, like it or not, the conceptual innovations that had long since shaken up literary and social theory and philosophy finally crossed—or collided—with the familiar positivism and formalism of musical scholarship.

The new conceptual modes are too motley a grouping to form a school, and too critical of grand syntheses to admit of one. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that they are constellated by their embrace of what, for lack of a better term, may be called postmodernist strategies of understanding. The theories that ground these strategies are radically anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, and anti-totalizing. They emphasize the constructiveness, both linguistic and ideological, of all human identities and institutions. They insist on the relativity of all knowledge to the disciplines—not just the conceptual presuppositions but the material, discursive, and social practices—that produce and circulate knowledge. While often disagreeing with each other, poststructuralists, neopragmatists, feminists, psychoanalytic theorists, critical social theorists, multiculturalists and others

have been changing the very framework within which disagreement can meaningfully occur. Inevitably, their collective work, much of which takes the Nietzschean form of systematic iconoclasm, the *Götzendämmerung* that comes of “philosophizing with a hammer,” would have repercussions for musicology.

For some, the sound of these repercussions arrived not a moment too soon. The familiar ways of talking about music, the familiar assumptions about the character of music, had come to seem insular, untenable, disengaged from an increasingly pluralistic and decentered world. Meanwhile the canon of “classical” music itself had begun to unravel. Its audience was shrinking, graying, and overly palefaced, and the suspicion was voiced abroad that its claim to occupy a sphere of autonomous greatness was largely a means of veiling, and thus perpetuating, a narrow set of social interests. Postmodernist thinking, though it ran the risk of fostering fragmentation and intellectual razzle-dazzle for their own sakes, offered new and badly needed means for criticism of the arts to meet not only its aesthetic but also its social and conceptual responsibilities. The restiveness in the hotel corridors and meeting rooms at Baltimore betokened an impulse, not, of course, shared or welcomed or even acknowledged by everyone, but still galvanic, to renovate the field, widen the scope of discourse, broaden the spectrum of musics.

By Oakland in 1990, the impulse had become galvanic enough for Harold Powers, delivering the plenary address, to issue a sober warning to musicologists against rushing incautiously to embrace alien disciplines and perspectives. Sitting in the audience, I found myself recalling similar warnings I had heard at Modern Language Association meetings in the early 1970s—warnings that had obviously been bound to fail, as I hoped this one would be. For the question that both musicology and the musical culture it serves must answer today is not merely what institutional path to follow, but whether, in any sense worthy the name, to survive.

The two questions are necessarily intertwined. In his address, Powers wittily doubted that the belated arrival of the new thinking in musicological circles could be attributed merely to the innate dull-wittedness of musicologists. And he was right.

The musicological, and, we might as well add, music-theoretical resistance to postmodernist thinking is correlative to what has been seen as the innate peculiarity of music as an object of study. In the days before postmodernism, this resistance expressed itself as a resistance to criticism (meaning critical interpretation, not musical journalism), and its history is written in Joseph Kerman's watershed text, *Contemplating Music*.¹ The pivotal issue is the juncture of music and language. Preceded by both opera, with its perpetual war of music and words, and philosophical aesthetics, with its parallel opposition between music and definite concepts, musicology has presumed that music and language lie on different sides of an epistemological divide. Consistent with nineteenth-century valuations, as well as with traditional poetic figures, music holds the superior position. In Charles Seeger's well-known formulation:

The core of the [musicological] undertaking is the integration of speech knowledge in general and the speech knowledge of music in particular (which are extrinsic to music and its compositional process) with the music knowledge of music (which is intrinsic to music and its compositional process).²

Language on the outside, music on the inside: the temptation to deconstruct Seeger's parentheses and his adjectival use of the substantives "speech" and "music" is almost—almost—too great to resist.

1. Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

2. Charles Seeger, *Studies in Musicology: 1935-75* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977), p. 16.

The cardinal point here, however, is the insistence that music and language cannot (or is it *must* not?) mix. Language is denied access to music, it cannot represent musical reality; music is the very means by which the epistemological limits of language, that would-be omnivore, are set. But if this is so, it leaves musicologists with only two disciplinary choices. Either they can use language to present positive knowledge about the contexts of music—its notation, provenance, performance venues and practices, material and mechanical reproduction, etc.—or they can develop a technical vocabulary that asymptotically draws language so close to the axis of “music knowledge” that musical style and structure can be studied with a minimum of misrepresentation.

This rather dry procedural bifurcation tends to work in combination with, and perhaps to rationalize, something more impassioned. Since the early nineteenth century, the difference between music and language has been taken as a sign that the experience of music, or more exactly of musical “masterpieces,” is a venue of transcendence. Originally, this attitude involved a naively literal replacement of religion by music. As Carl Dahlhaus puts it, commenting on an exemplary text by W. H. Wackenroder:

whereas music, in the form of church music, used to partake of religion as revealed in the “Word,” it now, as autonomous music capable of conveying the “inexpressible,” has become religion itself.³

Gradually, however, the religious truth signified by autonomous music is effaced by the very autonomy that is, or had once been, its signifier. Where “strict concentration on the work as self-contained musical process” once meant the apprehension of the work in its unworldliness, the same concentration now means the apprehension of the innate character, the complex unity-in-diversity, of the musical process itself. To de-

3. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), p. 94.

lineate that character would eventually become the goal of musical analysis, which would thus assume the role, at least ideally, of directing the aesthetic cognition of music.

Inflected dryly, the supposition that music represents a non-linguistic immediacy creates, as I have suggested, the mutually reinforcing necessities of positivist and formalist musicology. Inflected fervently, the same supposition invests the objects of musicological investigation with the glamour or charisma of both truth and beauty. Language, ever intractable, does not always conform itself to the austerities of this system. But where language exceeds the mark (thus continuing another great nineteenth-century tradition) it can be treated as rhetorical rather than descriptive, as subjective rather than scientific: treated, that is, as criticism.

It is no wonder, then, that musicology should have been deaf so long to the voices of postmodernism. Different as they are, the one thing that postmodernist theories all seem to agree on is that there is no such thing as a characterologically pure, epistemologically self-contained experience. Musical autonomy, even Carl Dahlhaus's "relative autonomy," is a chimera; neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through. Immediacy cannot be the authorizing locus of a discipline, for immediacy is a performative effect. What's more, it is an effect which, when mystified or idealized, functions to empower the persons, institutions, and social groups in control of its production. From a postmodernist perspective, music as it has been conceived of by musicology simply does not exist.

This is not to say—emphatically not—that immediacy, musical or otherwise, is something spurious and pernicious that must be deconstructed on sight. The last thing a postmodernist musicology wants to be is a neo-Puritanism that offers to show its love for music by ceasing to enjoy it. But it is to say that what we call musical experience needs to be systematically rethought, that the horizons of our musical pleasure need to be redrawn more broadly, and that the embeddedness of music in

networks of nonmusical forces is something to be welcomed rather than regretted. Those projects can only be achieved through criticism: through the rigorous use of a language that, while conceding its own "rhetorical" and "subjective" character, responsibly seeks to situate musical experience within the densely compacted, concretely situated worlds of those who compose, perform, and listen.

But surely, it might be argued, music itself is the best refutation of this postmodernist position. Music is still the most immediate of all aesthetic experiences, however we relativize the concept of immediacy, and words, do what they might, are still unable to capture the character, texture, and force of compelling music attentively heard. If the first clause of this response simply begs the question—different things hold different people spellbound, and the fact of spellbindingness is not in question, only what it involves—the second clause rings true. Its truth, however, says nothing special about music. Language cannot capture musical experience because it cannot capture any experience whatever, including the experience of language itself. Language always alienates what it makes accessible; the process of alienation, the embedding of a topic in supposedly extrinsic discourses, is precisely what produces the accessibility. Describing the experience of reading Proust's *Within A Budding Grove*, with its leitmotif of the sea at Balbec, is just as difficult as describing the experience of listening to Debussy's *La Mer* or, for that matter, of passing the time from dawn till noon on the sea.

The emergence of a postmodernist, that is to say, a critical, musicology will depend on our willingness and ability to read as inscribed within the immediacy-effects of music itself the kind of mediating structures usually positioned outside music under the rubric of context. I offer a brief example to illustrate the kind of discursive difference that such conceptual relocations may make. The example will show, too, that music itself, even in its supposedly most autonomous form, the Viennese

classical style, can sometimes be heard to lead the way in accentuating the mediated character of its own immediacy.

Charles Rosen writes that Mozart's Divertimento for String Trio, K. 563:

is [...] an interesting precursor of the last quartets of Beethoven, in its transference of divertimento form, with two dance movements and two slow movements (one a set of variations), into the realm of serious chamber music, making purely intimate what had been public, and, as Beethoven was to do in many of the short, interior movements of his late chamber works, transfiguring the 'popular' element without losing sight of its provenance. In Mozart's Divertimento, the synthesis of a learned display of three-part writing and a popular genre is accomplished without ambiguity or constraint.⁴

The key terms in this paragraph are "synthesis," "transfigur[ation]," and "purely intimate." Their effect is to posit for the music an effortless, exalted immediacy, which Rosen identifies as the product of Mozart's mastery of divergent compositional styles, the popular and the learned. The divergence, a potentially mediating or alienating element, disappears without "ambiguity or constraint"—that is, without a trace—into the higher (synthetic, transfigured) immediacy of "serious chamber music." This same immediacy, coded as "intimacy," also marks the disappearance of a formerly public expressiveness. It is not the culturally resonant process of negotiating between the intimate and the public which appears in the music, but only its homogenous outcome. Presumably, residual traces of the process would count as aesthetic flaws.

But what if the music were heard, not as the site where its contexts vanish, but precisely as the site where they appear? Not long ago I attended a performance of K. 563. Its texture, which as Rosen suggests includes a great deal of complex three-voice writing, struck me not merely as transparent but as pain-

4. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, rev. edn. (New York, 1972), p. 281.

fully transparent, transparent to excess. The instrumental voices seemed to be entwining and disengaging with something like physical friction—or so I thought until I realized that this figurative idea was close to being literal. The friction *was* physical, or, more exactly, corporeal. By emphasizing both the linearity of each instrumental voice and the textural differentiation among the voices, and by doing so in the spare, exposed medium of the string trio, Mozart was foregrounding the effort required to produce the music in performance. This effort was specifically bodily, conveyed by the bodies of the performers to and through the bodies of their instruments, so that the music became a tangible projection or articulation of bodily energy.

At an early moment of the performance, this recognition added a silent fourth voice to the ensemble. I was no longer simply listening to a string trio, but specifically not-listening to a string quartet. (This moment of Derridean *différance* was enhanced, though in retrospect, by my understanding that the combination of violin, viola, and cello, unlike the quartet combination, was not yet standardized when Mozart wrote K. 563.) Had the work been a quartet, its trio sonority intimated, the bodily labor that went into it would have been effaced. The quartet combination has a sonority resonant enough to envelop its constituent voices without blurring them, but open enough to distance any impression of sensuousness—an “intellectual” sonority, perfectly suited for being idealized in Goethean terms as a conversation among four intelligent people. A skillfully managed trio can, of course, approximate the same effect, but Mozart confines that sort of management largely to the Trio’s two Minuet movements, the only ones that offer the sort of light musical entertainment suggested by the title “Divertimento.” Most of the rest, the “serious chamber music” that, in ironic contrast to the minuets, lacks overt associations with the body, renders palpable the muscular effort of arms and fingers, the rhythmic sway of the players’ torsos.

The body thus represented is not a natural fact but a social figure: the performer's (and by proxy the composer's) body shuttling, with ambiguity and constraint, between labor and pleasure. In revealing that figure, K. 563 opens the question of why it is usually concealed. T. W. Adorno's notion that the *Festspielhaus* at Bayreuth, with its invisible orchestra, embodied a bourgeois disavowal of behind-the-scenes labor, may or may not apply to Wagner, but seems to fit neither Mozart's historical moment nor his medium.⁵ More pertinent is the suggestion by the art historian Norman Bryson that Western representational painting typically conceals the labor that goes into it, and does so, in part, because the distancing of the *palpable* body has historically served as a cardinal sign for the condition of being civilized.⁶ Mozart's Trio collapses this signifying structure; it casts its most obviously civilized (and civilizing) feature, its learned three-part writing, as not only compatible with but thoroughly contingent on a heightened corporeality. In so doing, the Trio intimates that the artistic and social distancing of the body is fictive at best, fictitious at worst—something resembling what would later come to be called a defense mechanism. Push that thought a bit further and inflect it darkly, and you get the dynamic of delusion and desire that underpins the ambiguities of *Così fan tutte*.

Once recognized, Mozart's staging of the body in K. 563 alters the epistemic value of Charles Rosen's statement that the music seamlessly unites public and private spheres of expression. What seemed to be a historically informed act of criticism becomes an ideologically fraught act of praise. (Not that the two categories exclude each other! But there is a shift of emphasis.) The body figured by the music is decidedly public and

5. T. W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1981), pp. 82-84.

6. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, 1983), p. 159.

specifically artisanal; in this capacity, it is also decidedly gendered with a homosocial masculinity.⁷

There is, however, a single episode, marked by the discontinuity of its presentation, in which the music exchanges this figure of the public, artisanal, masculine body for its contrary. The episode occurs during the second slow movement, a set of variations on a quasi-popular tune. Variations 1 and 2 are decorative, but not routinely so. Decorative to excess, they push both the labor and the pleasure of performance to dubious and, as it turns out, unstable extremes (ex. 1). Variation 3 follows like a sleeve drawn suddenly inside-out. Ornamentation disappears, and with it the sense of motion; the mode changes from major to minor; the style ricochets from melody-and-accompaniment past learned counterpoint all the way to archaic polyphony (ex. 2). Withdrawing from labor, withdrawing their labor, the performers (the imaginary performers performed by the real ones) appropriate their bodily energy by turning it inward. In so doing, they posit a sensitive, enclosed interiority that is at once private, reflective, and feminine. They play, though overheard, a passage for themselves.

Nothing seamless here. And nothing long: the variation, slow as it seems, is painfully brief. Variation 4 follows to end the movement in perplexity. A simplification of the theme, suggestive of a primary truth discovered through introspection, the final variation is also a return to extravagant decoration, and this in the lushest texture to be found in all of K. 563 (ex. 3). Here the figures of the public and private bodies themselves form a kind of counterpoint—or is it an unrelieved dissonance? Is the public body always a figure of excess, appointed, in line with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's argument in his

7. The homosocial is the general spectrum of same-sex affiliation and bonding. It continually mediates between work, pleasure, and affection, and is easily sexualized; hence, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, there is a modern social imperative, incapable of realization, to mark a clear division between homosociality and homosexuality. See Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985), pp. 1-20.

49 [Var. I]

Musical score for Variation I, measures 49-54. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats. It features a melody in the right hand with grace notes and trills, and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include piano (p) and forte (f).

125 [Var. II]

Musical score for Variation II, measures 125-130. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats. It features a melody in the right hand with grace notes and trills, and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include piano (p) and forte (f).

Example 1: Mozart, K. 563, Mvt 4 (Andante).

145 Minore [Var. III]

Musical score for Example 2, Minore [Var. III], measures 145-148. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The music is written for three staves: Treble, Bass, and a lower Bass staff. The upper staff contains a melodic line with a trill (tr) in measure 147. The middle and lower staves provide harmonic support. Dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo) in the middle staff of measure 145 and *pp* in the lower staff of measure 146.

Continuation of the musical score for Example 2, Minore [Var. III], measures 149-152. The notation continues across the three staves, maintaining the melodic and harmonic structure established in the previous measures.

Example 2

177 Maggiore [Var. IV]

Musical score for Example 3, Maggiore [Var. IV], measures 177-180. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (F). The music is written for three staves: Treble, Bass, and a lower Bass staff. The upper staff contains a complex, rapid melodic line. The middle and lower staves provide harmonic support. Dynamics include *f* (forte) in the upper staff of measure 177 and *f staccato* in the lower staff of measure 177.

Continuation of the musical score for Example 3, Maggiore [Var. IV], measures 181-184. The notation continues across the three staves, maintaining the complex melodic and harmonic structure established in the previous measures.

Example 3

Second Discourse, to disguise by over-refinement the alienation of civil society from primitive health and vigor?⁸ Or is this body in its artisanal form a vehicle of reintegration in which vigor and pleasure combine effectively with the technical and mechanical labor characteristic of the arts in civil society? Is the sensitive private body the origin and founding truth from which the public body derives? Is it the artist's body rather than the artisan's? Or is it a secondary formation in which the artisan is deceptively idealized as the modern figure of the artist?

Here, however, I imagine the sound of a skeptical voice. "This is all well and good," it says pointedly, and with some tartness. "But where is Mozart's *music* in this series of questions?" The shortest answer is that the questions are in the music. Mozart raises them by making his music behave as it does, and trusting the listener to hear the music within a broader field of rhetorical, expressive, and discursive behaviors. The questions engage us, with varying degrees of directness and displacement, whenever something that they bring to the music—the overwrought texture of Variations 1 and 2, the archaizing strangeness of Variation 3, the antipodean rhetoric of Variation 4—arrests our attention, affects our pleasure, or incites us to intermittent, silently verbalized commentary on what we are hearing. From the postmodernist perspective I have been advocating here, listening is not an immediacy alienated from a later reflection, but a mode of dialogue. And like all dialogue, it is fully participatory even when one's interlocutor is doing the talking.

It follows that the aim of musicology, ideally conceived, is to continue the dialogue of listening. At stake in the current crisis of the discipline is the participatory scope of that dialogue: the issue of whether and how to (dis)locate the bound-

8. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York, 1964), pp. 101-16.

ary between the musical and the “extramusical.” A little over fifty years ago, a similar crisis arose in another discipline, a discipline that, like musicology, is primarily concerned with phenomena strongly felt and semantically indirect. Arguing against the idea that only medical doctors should be allowed to practice psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud speculated on the curriculum of an imaginary psychoanalytic college:

Much would have to be taught in it which is also taught by the medical faculty: alongside of depth psychology...there would be an introduction to biology, as much as possible of the science of sexual life, and familiarity with the symptomatology of psychiatry. On the other hand, analytic instruction would include branches of knowledge which are remote from medicine and which the doctor does not come across in his practice: the history of civilization, mythology, the psychology of religion and the science of literature. Unless he is at home in these areas, an analyst can make nothing of a large amount of his material.⁹

Freud’s remarks translate with uncanny aptness into musicological terms. Faced with the question, Where is the music? a postmodernist musicology would—will—reply that wherever it may be, we can only get to it by getting beyond it.

9. Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1969), pp. 93-94.