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Contemplating Music

Challenges to Musicology

Joseph Kerman

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To Vivian
ancora

Acknowledgments

This book is, ultimately, one musician's analysis of modern ideas and ideologies of music. It deals with musicology and other fields of music study mainly as he has apprehended them in the United States and Britain in the years since the Second World War. I should first acknowledge, admit, or simply advise the reader that in looking back at this period, I have drawn a good deal on writings of my own germane to this broad topic. References to these writings will be found in the Notes and the list of Main Works Cited.

Looking at the present, as I have tried to do by reading widely in the current literature, what I find most impressive are various signs of novelty, evidence of new approaches that are being tried not by all, of course, but by many writers. Perhaps this impression is simply the result of paying closer attention than usual, but I do not think so. Thinking about music seems to be undergoing a rather rapid change just now. The latest issues of journals and the newest publishers' catalogues offer constant surprises, and in my mind this book has even assumed what advertisers call 'time value'. I am therefore especially grateful to those who have sent me prepublication copies of material that could be considered here before it was generally available. Also, if it does not seem too fatuous to do so, I should like to acknowledge the work of young musicians and scholars who seem to be moving music study in new directions. Some of them will be mentioned in the following chapters.

This was a hard book to write. Many friends and associates read parts or all of it in draft form, and I have profited very greatly from their comments. The most usual and, at first sight, the most gracious formula on these occasions is for an author to

list and thank such readers, stressing also that any errors or *bêtises* that remain are due to him alone. There is another formula, though, which seems more appropriate in the present case. This book is by design a personal one, to the point of idiosyncrasy, and often I have neither accepted advice ('Give it up') nor responded to suggestions in ways that my friends surely hoped. Better that they not be named specifically, so they cannot be subject to any imputation of complicity with my viewpoint or my analysis – it would be a particular shame, certainly, if they were to feel any constraint about commenting on these. But the fact that they are not named does not mean that I am any less grateful to them all. I might indeed have given up save for the encouragement I managed to construe out of their always kind, always astute, sometimes touchingly concerned assistance. And often their direction and correction was indeed accepted.

I will therefore thank by name only those whose complicity with me is hopeless anyway, Vivian Kerman and Gary Tomlinson.

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J.K.

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1. Introduction

'Musicology' is a coinage that is recent enough – the OED dates it to 1919, even though the *Musical Quarterly* commenced publication with a famous leader 'On Behalf of Musicology' in 1915 – so that there still exist pockets of somewhat surly purists who take exception to its use. It early suffered a modification or contraction of meaning. Adapted from the older French term *musicologie*, itself an analogue to the nineteenth-century German *Musikwissenschaft*, the word was originally understood (as *Musikwissenschaft* still is) to cover thinking about, research into, and knowledge of all possible aspects of music. Musicology ranged from the history of Western music to the taxonomy of 'primitive' music, as it was then called, from acoustics to aesthetics, and from harmony and counterpoint to piano pedagogy. Subtle and elaborate categorizations of knowledge were proposed, starting with the classic formulations of Hugo Riemann and Guido Adler in the nineteenth century and continued by not a few German scholars down to the present day. The last person to work seriously with 'systematic musicology' in English – it was the fixation of a long and great career – was Charles Seeger, the guiding spirit of modern American ethnomusicology. After reprinting several avowedly preliminary formulations of a comprehensive classification of music and music study in his collected essays, published at the age of ninety, Seeger completed two more extensive redactions of it before his death a few years later.

But in academic practice, and in broad general usage, musicology has come to have a much more constricted meaning. It has come to mean the study of the history of Western music in the high-art tradition. The academic musicologist teaches

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courses in the music of the Renaissance, in the symphony, in Bach, Beethoven, and Bartók. The popular musicologist writes programme notes for chamber-music concerts and intermission features for opera videocasts. Furthermore, in the popular mind – and in the minds of many academics – musicology is restricted not only in the subject matter it covers but also in its approach to that subject matter. (I say ‘restricted’ rather than ‘constricted’ here, for this approach is not the result of any paring down of an earlier concept.) Musicology is perceived as dealing essentially with the factual, the documentary, the verifiable, the analysable, the positivistic. Musicologists are respected for the facts they know about music. They are not admired for their insight into music as aesthetic experience.

Which is the subject of this book – musicology in the ideal, comprehensive, original definition, or musicology in the restricted, more mundane, current one? The broad or the narrow? The answer lies somewhere in between. Few people today could claim to write with much authority about the broad range of musical knowledge as mapped out by Adler or Seeger. Even those who could would need an outsized book to deal with so large a subject – and in any case, I am distinctly not one of those few. Still, a glance at the table of contents of this book may suggest to the reader that my view of the history of Western art music is less narrow than it might be. In what ways, I shall try to explain in a moment. It will be necessary first to say a word about other directly relevant disciplines of music study: music theory, analysis, and ethnomusicology.

Everybody understands what musicology is, at least in a general way. Music theory is much less widely understood, even by musicians, and to non-musicians it is usually a closed book. The latter can hardly be blamed, for music theory is invariably technical in nature, sometimes forbiddingly so. The former entertain a number of different estimates as to the relation of theory on the one hand and its ambivalent adjunct, analysis, on the other.

Theory, says *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ‘is now understood as principally the study of the structure of music’. Another way of putting it – hardly more

informative – is that music theory is the investigation of what makes music ‘work’. Thus the range of its subject matter extends from the formation of scales and chords to procedures for the distribution of pitches in time – such as counterpoint and twelve-tone or serial operations – to principles of musical form and even semiology. Choosing our words with great care, we might say theory deals with those aspects of music that might be thought analogous to vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and rhetoric in the field of language. And musical analysis as a technical procedure might be thought analogous to parsing, linguistic reduction, and *explication du texte*. While theory clearly is an indispensable part of the study of any one of the world’s music systems, musicians who call themselves theorists nearly always confine themselves to Western art music, past and present. It is characteristic, too, that even when they deal with past music, they decline to deal with it in historical terms.

Ethnomusicology is popularly understood to mean the study of non-Western music – or ‘musics’, as the ethnomusicologists themselves prefer to put it. Indeed, they have their own all-inclusive definition of ethnomusicology, Alan P. Merriam’s famous phrase ‘the study of music in culture’. They see the whole world of music – Western art music, Western folk and popular music, non-Western musics both simple and complex – as their dominion; it is no accident that Seeger the systematic musicologist was also a father of modern ethnomusicology. Still, what has in fact occupied ethnomusicologists most intensely are the highly developed art musics of Indonesia, Japan, and India and the less developed musics of the American Indians and subsaharan Africans. These are studied to yield accurate technical descriptions on the one hand, and information about the musics’ roles in societies on the other. There are no generally accepted names for students of Western popular musics such as jazz, rock, or reggae, or for students of European folk music (a field that now flourishes particularly in Eastern Europe). One has the impression that the ethnomusicologists would be glad to swallow them up.

The musicologist likes to think of himself as a historian, like the art historian or the literary scholar, and aligns himself with

the goals, values, and style of traditional humanistic scholarship. That is why although he is a relative latecomer to the academy he (and even she) has had a relatively easy time there. Typically musicologists write or aspire to write essays and books in ordinary academic English, with the result that their work can be read outside the profession more easily than can that of theorists or ethnomusicologists. The ethnomusicologists' alignment is with anthropology; they are likely also to have special sympathies with some nation, 'world', or class other than that of their own origins. Seldom are their articles and reports free of social-scientific apparatus, if not jargon. Music theorists are the hardest to generalize about. Some of them lean in the direction of philosophy, and some write papers in a self-generated language as highly specialized as that of symbolic logic. But the more fundamental alignment of music theory is with musical composition: for if theorists have an intellectual interest in the structure of music, composers have this same interest from their own strictly practical viewpoint.

And indeed, while people have presumably been intrigued by theory for as long as music has existed on any level of sophistication – in all literate cultures, treatises on music theory predate by many centuries essays in music history or criticism – theory has acquired a special urgency in this century on account of the movement in the arts known as modernism. There will be a good deal to say about modernism in this book; one way or another, it remains a determining issue in the ideology of many musicians – and in particular, of many whose views we shall have to consider. In music, modernism falls into two broad phases. The first phase was accomplished just before the First World War, with works such as Debussy's *Jeux*, Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*, and Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. The second was launched directly after the Second World War, with the compositions of Boulez, Stockhausen, and Cage.

Unlike great changes in art of the past, modernism has not resulted in a new consensus; that negative fact is practically a part of its programme. We no longer agree on how new music is to 'work'. Hence composers continue actively to seek new ways

of making it do so. Modern theory is sometimes not (or not only) descriptive, then, but rather (or also) prescriptive. Much of the power and prestige of theory derives from its alignment, at least until very recently, with the actual sources of creativity on the contemporary musical scene.

So it might appear as though the three disciplines I have sketched above divide up the subject matter of music fairly equably among them. Musicologists deal with Western art music before around 1900, theorists with the same after 1900, and ethnomusicologists with non-Western musics and Western music outside the elite tradition – folk and popular music. Generalization on this level, even in the conventionally safe preserve of a book's Introduction, makes the head spin, yet this is probably a fair enough description of what happens as far as day-to-day work and year-to-year publication are concerned.

Musicology, theory, and ethnomusicology should not be defined in terms of their subject matter, however, but rather in terms of their philosophies and ideologies. Even without going into detail at this point, we can probably see that when they are defined in this way, the disciplines overlap appreciably in the musical territory they cover. It may be suspected, furthermore, that it is often where two or even all three systems can be said to compete for the intellectual control of territory that we will find the most promising fields of study.

And in the areas of overlap all is not equable. Ethnomusicologists, as has already been remarked, are disposed to see as their province the entire universe of music, encompassing the more limited domains of musicologists and theorists. While they have not plunged into work on Western art music to show exactly what they mean, some of them have repeatedly called for an 'ethnomusicological approach' to this music. It is a message that musicologists repeatedly claim they are taking to heart, and one that they do indeed, in some cases, take substance from for basic orientations of their work. Theorists, so far from concentrating exclusively on the composers' immediate concern, the music of modernism, have also developed powerful doctrine about the so-called standard repertory of music. By proposing

analytical models for the canonic masterpieces of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and the other familiar masters, they come up with quite a different view of musical repertoires than do the musicologists, who treat the same works within a much wider empirical context. Particularly with music of the nineteenth century, as we shall see, a confrontation and accommodation between the two viewpoints is offering an avenue of fresh understanding.

History, anthropology, the analysis of structure . . . it will be noticed that nothing has been said so far about another thoroughly traditional method of considering the arts. Criticism – the study of the meaning and value of art works – does not figure in the explicit programmes of musicology or theory. (For the moment the reader is asked to take this on faith; the point will be substantiated – and qualified – later.) Ethnomusicology encompasses the meaning and value of music along with everything else about it, but what is usually considered is the meaning of a musical genre to its culture and the value of a musical activity to its society. This is rather different from the sort of thing we mean by Shakespeare criticism or the body of criticism that has grown up around *Paradise Lost* or *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. In music-academic circles, the term ‘criticism’ is little used. It is, in fact, positively distrusted.

Part of the problem is the vexing common usage of the term ‘criticism’ in musical parlance to mean the reviewing of concerts for daily or weekly papers – that and nothing more. Journalistic criticism has a very bad odour among the profession. The folklore of journalism is rich in rascally tales of music critics who switched over one fine day from the sports pages to revel in a life of ignorance and spite. People tend to forget that within living memory composers and musicologists as reputable as Virgil Thomson and Jack A. Westrup practised daily journalism for a time, and that someone as profoundly knowledgeable and civil (or, rather, humane) as Andrew Porter has devoted himself to it for decades.¹ But whether practised badly or well, and it is usually practised badly, criticism conceived of in journalistic