



**Theory,
analysis
& meaning
in music**

edited by Anthony Pople

Meaning In Music

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Theory, analysis and meaning in music

Edited by

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Preface

To tackle music theory, music analysis, and musical meaning at one and the same time may seem ambitious. The nature of musical meaning, and indeed the very possibility of its existence, have occupied philosophers for several centuries. Music theory has an even longer pedigree, having been established in classical antiquity, and has for at least a millennium served composition and musical pedagogy both in a utilitarian way and as a medium of reflective thought. Analysis, a relative newcomer, has often paid more heed to ends than to means, putting itself at the service of performers, listeners and historians rather than politely working within the boundaries of ramified theoretical systems. Yet theory and analysis in music have always been interlinked – at the very least by virtue of their common subject matter, and sometimes by far more – so that the relationship between them has come to be constantly redefined across changes in the currents of intellectual history.

Within the past decade or so the change has been quite dramatic. It seemed that theory and analysis had for some time been locked in a dualism deriving from the perceived methods of the natural sciences – rather along the lines of hypothesis and experiment – which was reflected both in the format of academic papers and in patterns of argument. Quite suddenly, under pressure from forces elsewhere in musicology, analysis was refocused during the mid-1980s as a critical discipline.¹ A comparison between, for example, Allen Forte's monograph on *The Rite of Spring*, which expounds an analysis in order to demonstrate a theory, and the essays collected in Lawrence Kramer's *Music as Cultural Practice*, suggests a paradigm shift of major proportions.² Certainly, the attendant contrasts and controversies have been clearly observable, and it must be

1 I refer, in particular, to Joseph Kerman's 'How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), pp. 311–31, and *Musicology* (London: Fontana, 1985).

2 Allen Forte, *The Harmonic Organization of 'The Rite of Spring'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

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said that some recent examples of critical writing do little more than revert to the indulgence in personal idiosyncrasy on which scientific theory and analysis had sought to improve. Yet, as has been recognised by a growing number of scholars, there is much about the practicalities of the new type of analytical writing that lies within the orbit of critical theory; and by projecting this awareness in their work – through an explicit concern with narratology, for example – these writers have demonstrated that a move away from certain kinds of music theory does not represent a retreat from theory *per se*. In this new context, analysis has come to be seen as one form of discourse or metadiscourse on music, raising the question of how music itself can be a text – sonic, written or remembered – and promoting analysis itself as a kind of theory through which a range of possible meanings can be described, prescribed or circumscribed. At the same time, and perhaps ironically, the interpenetration of analysis and theory – so evident in the explicitly scientific wave – has revealed theory, too, as a construction.

But it is not enough to characterise these developments as a re-orientation of analysis achieved simply through a divorce from music theory followed by a honeymoon with narratology. Bringing analysis into the orbit of recent developments in intellectual history has not displaced its traditional concern with explanation and technical description; and any discourse that incorporates technical description seems bound to use the terminology of basic music theory – crotchets, quavers, pitches, dynamics³ – even if the theoretical nature of such categories is not always acknowledged. Two concerns immediately flow from this: first, whether the use of such language is interpretive in the same sense as criticism is interpretive; second, whether the unhesitating use of such terminology, as if it were straightforwardly descriptive, reflects consistencies of musical cognition amenable to scientific enquiry. These are different sides of the same coin, of course, and the first is explored at length in this book's opening chapter by Naomi Cumming. With regard to the latter it is interesting to note, on the one hand, that a move in the direction of cognitive science was evident in theory/analysis circles just prior to the impact of Kerman's injunction to criticism;⁴ on the other hand, it could be said that the failure of many of those most prominently committed to the theory/analysis dualism to embrace cognitive musicology as some-

3 This seems to me to be true even of Thomas Clifton's attempt to avoid it, in *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

4 Notably in Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff's *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983) and the journal *Music Perception* (1983–).

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thing that was genuinely scientific – or, at least, potentially so – confirms that the scientism of formalist analysis was illusory in epistemological terms, however decisive the impact of scientism on analytical language.

Choosing to examine theory and analysis in relation to musical meaning might appear to be a symptom of desperation – no more than an invocation of ‘meaning’ as a constant in a time of doubt. Certainly, very many analyses have been presented in the professed belief that they expound some kind of musical truth; certainly, there have been attempts to justify various kinds of musical theory on the grounds that they allow music artefacts to be discussed in relation to apparently objective knowledge of acoustic phenomena. But such strategies are no longer thought to be satisfactory – if indeed they ever were. If many of the essays in this volume do, admittedly, take meaning as a cipher for something opposed to vagueness, they do so in full recognition of the endless provisionality that comes when the question of what it means to ‘mean’ is addressed – a semiological Pandora’s Box of differences, deflections and deferrals. But, if meaning is a journey rather than a destination, it is still a journey through terrain which can be mapped through an examination of linguistic usage, traversed sure-footedly through consideration of the pragmatics of the theory/analysis interface, and explored through the construction and evaluation of analogical narratives that are aware of their own status as text. The broad divisions of the book follow this outline.

Such relativism might appear to be decidedly at odds with the old analysis. Yet, as Jonathan Dunsby’s chapter makes clear, an examination of the various modes of analysis can avoid historicism while confirming that old habits die hard. One may question whether the search for deeper meaning is anything other than constructively deflected by the recognition that a web of potential meanings may be construed within ever expanding boundaries of signification. That there are new difficulties need not and surely will not prevent the continuation of analysis as an activity, though it may redefine the parameters of the discipline. If one may easily, though perhaps misleadingly, read these in terms of an antithesis between theory and practice, then by this criterion the chapters of this book possess aspects of both in more or less equal measure. It is, however, the nature of that ‘measure’ that is arguably the most fundamental concern of the following pages.

Acknowledgements

The impetus for this book came when Jonathan Dunsby convened a group of four British-based authors to present papers under the heading 'Analysis and Meaning' at the 1990 meeting of the Society for Music Theory in Oakland, California. That we were not alone in our concern for this topic was confirmed by other contributions to that conference, and by papers given at the Music Analysis Conference at City University, London, in 1991. The collaboration that resulted has led to this book in some cases more or less directly from conference materials, in others not.

Among those who helped this book on its journey, I should like to thank Robert Pascall, Derrick Puffett and Alan Street for their help in the early stages; Arnold Whittall for his constructive criticism of the book's concept and layout; and my colleague Robert Samuels for providing a second opinion on numerous occasions. For Cambridge University Press, Helen Beach, Claire Brodmann, Karl Howe and above all Penny Souster have made my task far easier than it might otherwise have been. At home, Angela and Lucy sustained the conditions which enabled me to give long periods of time to the production of the book. The assistance of others may more formally but no less gratefully be acknowledged:

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It goes without saying that a book of this kind is made by its contributors. By keeping to deadlines, by responding faithfully to enquiries and through their many fruitful suggestions, the authors whose work is gathered here have helped to make my self-appointed task a fulfilling and largely enjoyable one.

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Languages



Metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music

NAOMI CUMMING

This article looks at the role of metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetic theory, specifically as it is applied to music. A preliminary exploration of musical understanding is found in *Art and Imagination*, but a more developed statement of Scruton's position on music is reserved for a later book entitled *The Aesthetic Understanding*.¹ Scruton's treatment of metaphor in this work poses questions, first, about the epistemological claims implicit in a musical analysis and, second, about the aesthetic relevance of structuralist approaches to music.

Hanslick's question of musical meaning

Scruton's concern with metaphor arises from his desire to provide an answer to the question posed by Eduard Hanslick, of how absolute music is capable of having an expressive content, given that emotions usually have an object, and music lacks reference to anything outside of itself which might serve to identify what is expressed. The problem is summed up in the question: 'If music has a content, how can that content be described?'² Scruton's strategy in exploring this question is to change the object of discussion from musical expression to musical understanding. Any content attributed to music must, he argues, be the object of a listener's understanding and, if this is accepted, a theory of musical expression should be susceptible to translation into a theory of musical understanding.³ Scruton believes that access to the cognitive categories

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1 Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (London: Methuen, 1983).

2 Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p. 77.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

used by listeners is afforded by an analysis of the descriptive language used by them to characterise musical sounds. He attempts to find the most basic categories of musical understanding by distinguishing language that is appropriate for musical descriptions from that which is used in the scientific description of the acoustic or 'material' properties of sound. Certain basic categories used by listeners are, he claims, non-congruent with any physical property of sound, but are nonetheless essential to the understanding of music. His more general claim is that an 'aesthetic understanding' is quite distinct from a scientific one and that the use of language embodies this difference:

There is a kind of understanding which rests in appearance. I shall call this kind of understanding 'intentional'. A scientific understanding addresses the world as material object, and seeks out the causal connections which underlie and explain appearances. But scientific understanding does not eliminate appearance: it only dispenses with it. An intentional understanding considers the world as intentional object (or, to use the Husserlian idiom, as *Lebenswelt*): it therefore uses *the concepts through which we perceive the world*, and makes no connections or observations that are not in some way already implicit in them.⁴

Scruton sets out to show that musical content is embodied in the 'intentional' object. According to Hanslick's argument it is not attributable to the sounding medium itself (the 'material' object), since content has been defined as reference to an external object, a possibility denied to absolute music. The idea of an 'intentional object' is put forward as a path to solving this problem because it offers one way of describing how the understanding of a perceiver is implicated in the content ascribed to a percept. An intentional object is the object of a thought, belief or other cognitive attitude. While 'intentional objects' may include any objects of thought, whether purely imagined, conceptualised or perceived, Scruton is interested specifically in the object of *perceptions*, which are taken to embody thought and to be influenced by beliefs. Most important for his argument is the observation that the coincidence of an intentional object with a material object is not guaranteed, given that beliefs (and the perceptions founded upon them) may be false.⁵ If he can show that the language used in our culture to describe the musical behaviour of sounds

4 *Ibid.*, p. 78 (emphasis added).

5 A well-known example is given by Quine in his discussion of referential opacity. To paraphrase: Tom believes that Cicero denounced Cataline, but not that Tully did, even though (unknown to him) Tully *is* Cicero. The intentional object of Tom's thought is Cicero. In this case the intentional object of thought depends on a belief (and therefore, on a believed description) which is false. See W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), p. 145.

is inconsistent with what is known of their material attributes, he can also claim that the properties described belong to the intentional object and not to the material one. This argument serves the purpose of showing that musical content is an imposition on sound of the cognitive categories used in listening. Following this conviction through, Scruton is led to make an ontological claim, that 'music belongs uniquely to the intentional sphere, and not to the material realm'.⁶

Speculation of this kind might seem to be of dubious value, but its significance is found by keeping in mind the question of how music can have expressive content. Scruton takes melody, harmony and rhythm to be the most fundamental categories of music, and develops his case by looking at two properties which are attributed to them in various ways, namely space and motion. He argues that musical space and motion are attributes of the intentional object, not the material one, and then seeks to draw a parallel between the structural content which is described using these (or derivative) terms, and the expressive content which is described with affective language. Starting from an observation that the perceived motion of a pitch in musical space is different from, and lacks reference to, the motion of objects in physical space, he excludes the possibility that it might reflect any physical property of sound. He argues that pitch motion can only be understood by looking at those processes of understanding which create categories of 'space' and 'motion' applicable to music, *not* by examining music itself on the assumption that motion is present in the relationship of pitches. In his terms, 'A theory which tries to explain music in terms of musical movement is not a theory of music at all: it "explains" its subject only by blocking the path to explanation.'⁷ By this argument, descriptions of musical motion in the analysis of specific structures are rendered intelligible not by reference to any objective state of affairs, but by reference to cognitive/perceptual proclivities. Scruton believes that the categories of space and motion are so basic to understanding that a description of music which substituted neutral acoustic terms ('change of pitch or frequency' for 'motion') would fail to capture the musical experience. Thus musical 'content', even when described purely in structural terms, is found to be in the intentional object of perception, and not to be an attribute of a material (acoustic) object.

Scruton concludes from his study of space and motion that 'any analysis of music must be an exercise in intentional rather than scientific

6 Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p. 86

7 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

understanding',⁸ and on this conclusion builds the first part of his solution to the problem of musical expression. The aesthetic understanding displayed by a listener when expressive content is found in music has characteristics similar to those displayed when formal content is being identified. A description of musical form typically includes reference to the motion of pitches in musical space and this, no less than the use of emotive terms, reflects a cognitive attitude of the perceiver. Scruton believes that the content is, in both cases, in the intentional object. As a consequence, an acceptance of one kind of content as being 'in the music' should lead to an acceptance of the other. Like the 'motion' of a series of pitches, the 'sadness' of a motive derives its meaning from the imposition on music of a mental attribute, and its intelligibility from a common experience of such 'projection'. This does nothing to explain why we might commonly want to apply the epithet 'sad' or 'melancholy' to certain passages of Schubert, but it does attempt to legitimise expressive content as being no more nor less objective than other kinds of musical content.⁹

Metaphors and music as an intentional object

Scruton pursues a further discussion of how non-referential expressive content can be explained using the doctrine of *Einführung* as a more sophisticated substitute for the idea of 'projection', but his argument up to this point is already controversial and it is on this part that I propose to concentrate. It has been seen that Scruton suggests a commonality between the analysis of structural features in music and the analysis of its expressive content, but he does not convincingly reconcile technical analysis and aesthetic criticism without creating some confusion, particularly in the appraisal of how language is used in the two related disciplines. Most obviously problematic is the key word, 'metaphor' which is used, without explicit definition, to designate any term which refers to an attribute of music as an intentional object. The category 'metaphor' is thus taken to include both musical space and motion and terms referring to expressive content such as 'sadness'.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 95:

We project into the music the inner life that is ours, and that is *how* we hear it there. This is not the same as hearing resemblances between music and feeling, any more than hearing musical movement is hearing structural relations on which the movement depends. The experience of transfer is *sui generis*. The emotion that is heard belongs purely to the intentional and not to the material realm.