The Cultural Study of Music
A Critical Introduction
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Music Studies and the Idea of Culture
RICHARD MIDDLETON

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CHAPTER 10

SUBJECTIVITY RAMPANT!

Music, Hermeneutics, and History

LAWRENCE KRAMER

The hardest of all the arts to speak of is music, because music has no meaning to speak of.
—Ned Rorem, Music from Inside Out

But I’ve gotta use words when I talk to you.
—T. S. Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes

The two epigraphs tell my story in miniature. No one doubts the formidable power of music to communicate on its “own” terms, but to communicate about it you have to use words. When words are added, though, they are commonly felt to say the wrong thing, no matter what they say. In one sense they say too little. Many would agree with Nietzsche (1901 [1969, 428]) that “compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common.” Music that fails to cultivate its difference from language betrays “the law of its being” (441). In another sense words say too much. They are specific where music is suggestive. Words carry more meaning than music, which “has no meaning to speak of,” can bear.

The purpose of this chapter is to say the contrary: to suggest, in so many words, that music does important cultural work by being spoken of, and would not be what we call “music” otherwise. Words situate music in a multiplicity of cultural contexts, both those to which the music “belongs” in an immediate sense and those to which it stands adjacent in ways that often become apparent only once the words are in play. In the process, words invest music with the very capacity to “speak” of its contexts that it is usually thought to lack, and is often prized for lacking. Neither the speech nor the contexts—this can’t be stressed too much—are “extrinsic” to the music involved; the three terms are inseparable in both theory and practice.

But how, really, can we say what music means? Surely the music doesn’t say, and a good part of our response to music is intuitive and physical—unspeaking, and all the better for it. In other words, our responses are deeply subjective. Even if our statements about musical meaning are guarded, generalized, and resigned to being inadequate—as most have generally been—this is a hurdle too high. Even these limited efforts are vulnerable to the charge that inevitably greets attempts to address music with the rich conceptual and verbal resourcefulness routinely applied to texts and images: given music’s semantic poverty, any attempt to say what it means is not just subjective but hopelessly so. It makes no difference whether the subjective utterance is merely depreciated or valued as “personal” or “poetic.” Either way, musical meaning forfeits in advance any possible claim to represent musical knowledge.

The result is a familiar paradox. Although both the everyday conduct and ceremonial forms of culture are filled with music, regarded in its own right music is cut off from its cultural relationships, and indeed used as a means of escaping or denying them. Aside from familiar talk about the expression of feeling—as if feeling, too, were not socially and culturally conditioned—there is nothing more to be said. But it is one thing to enjoy not filling in music’s semantic blanks, and quite another to prohibit filling them: to turn a custom into a law. The prohibition is pointless in any case. Semantic energies are irrepressible; the voices of culture refuse to be stilled. But until quite recently there has been a consensus that enforces a certain silence about music by requiring that any meanings ascribed to it be both vague and modest, as befits their origin in mere subjectivity.

Only since around 1990 has there been a concerted effort to ascribe complex, broadly intelligible meanings to music without restriction to feelings and without constraint by music’s lack of representational-semantic richness. Usually called “the new musicology”—I prefer to speak of “cultural musicology”—this trend resists easy summary. It represents a habit of thought more than a program or consensus. Nonetheless, it seems fair
to say that there has been widespread interest in the interaction of music with social and cultural forms. Attention has gone particularly to the way music helps shape historically specific modes of subjectivity on grounds that are, taking the term in its broadest sense, ideological. Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata might be found to uphold the links drawn by Enlightenment anthropology between sympathy and social evolution (Kramer 1998), or Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony to model a hedonistic alternative to bourgeois masculinity (McClary 1994), or Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe to link colonial fantasies with the pleasures of mass consumption (Kramer 1995, 210–26). This choice of examples from "classical" music reflects my own interests, but most cultural musicology destabilizes firm distinctions between cultivated and vernacular forms, and in principle takes all music as its province.

For those persuaded by it, cultural musicology solves a number of important problems about musical meaning. It answers the charge of the interpreter's subjectivity by taking that very subjectivity as the object of inquiry, understanding it as a socially constructed position made available by the music and occupied to a greater or lesser degree by the listener. Subjectivity so understood is not an obstacle to credible understanding but its vehicle. The semantic problem is solved by seeking, not to decode music as a virtual utterance, but to describe the interplay of musical technique with the general stream of communicative actions. Musical hermeneutics is asked, not to decrypt a hidden message, and far less to fix the form of anyone’s musical experience, but to suggest how music transcribes some of the contextual forces by which the process of listening to it may be or may once have been conditioned. Having detailed these positions elsewhere (Kramer 1995, 2001), I will provisionally take them for granted here to focus on a new aspect of the general problem.

Cultural musicology can claim to show that music has cultural meaning despite its lack of the referential density found in words or images. But musical meaning can be made explicit only by language, and the process of "translation" therefore presupposes some sort of vital relationship between music and text. Yet the nature of that relationship is just as problematical, if not more so, in cultural musicology as elsewhere. Interpretations like those sketched above inevitably involve a gap between what is said about the music and what can be said to be "in" it. Music per se is not only nonsemantic, but "unsemantizable"; even the simplest interpretations of it rapidly exceed anything that might be con-

cervably encoded in its stylistic and structural gestures. Where interpretation is practiced the most, the pragmatic arenas in which meanings are negotiated and shared as music is talked about, taught, visualized, and rehearsed, there is rarely a demand for reference to such codes. People are literally taken at their word.

The gap between music and meaning does not have to be glaring; in statements that seem sensible, obvious, or otherwise unobjectionable, it may often go unnoticed, or at worst be written off as an accidental effect of metaphor. Consider, for example, what seems—indeed, is—a fairly innocuous remark by Robert Schumann about the first movement of Chopin’s piano sonata in B minor (1837–39, published 1840). Reviewing the newly published score, Schumann says that the "stormy, passionate" character of the movement is relieved by a "beautiful cantilena" that "leans toward Italy via Germany," but that "when the song is over, the Sarmatian flashes from the tones in his defiant originality" (Schumann [1840] 1946, 141). The impassioned storminess is easy enough to ground in the music's tempo, mode, and texture, and the contrast of national characters is conventional for both composer and critic in 1840; but the image of "flashing out" as a sign of defiant (why defiant?) originality has no unambiguous musical correlative, and nothing in the music mandates the use of the term Sarmatian, which refers to a legendary race of mounted hunter-warriors who supposedly ruled primeval Poland. In the nineteenth century, with Poland politically dismembered, the image of the Sarmatian band of brothers, natural aristocrats on horseback "equal before each other and invincible to foreigners" (Schama 1995, 38), was an important source of nationalist nostalgia and revolutionary fantasy. Schumann's language thus constructs a metaphor of creative originality as a combination of feral energy and primitive nobility, a force from beyond the social and geopolitical boundaries of modern western Europe. The metaphor is one that the music might well be able to convey, but could hardly be said to signify.

Gaps like this are endemic in musical hermeneutics, and their presence is usually used to discredit the whole idea of musical meaning, which, it is argued, is an arbitrary construction of the interpreter that at best addresses the strictly musical qualities of a work in superficial terms. Plausible as it may seem, this view is untenable. Not only are these hermeneutic gaps not a sign of arbitrariness, they are the enabling condition of musical meaning, and the site where the interplay of music and culture is most fully realized. To make sense of this argument, it will prove helpful to consult a neighboring process of interpretation. That process is descriptive, and the
most suggestive account of it I know of is a philosophical poem, Wallace Stevens’s “Description Without Place” ([1945] 1954, 339–46). The poem is an attempt to define precisely what kind of statement calls meaning forth across hermeneutic gaps, whether “on the youngest poet’s page,/ Or in the dark musician, listening/ To hear more brightly the contriving chords” (stanza 3).

Stevens is interested in getting beyond the classic empiricist distinction between fact and value. To that end, he takes up a special type of vivid description that does more than simply convey information, if it conveys anything at all. Description in this sense has the peculiar quality of “sticking” both to its object and in the mind. It enhances the object in our cognizance by infusing the object with meaning, but it does not disappear in the process; on the contrary, in enhancing the object it also enhances itself. For Stevens, this sort of description is “a sight indifferent to the eye” (stanza 5); it has sensory acuity without sensory limitation. It combines real or virtual sight with “the difference that we make in what we see” and again with our “memorials of that difference” (5). In other words, the description is less a representation than an invention, not a description at all in the ordinary sense of the term but a construction from which meaning is extended to the object addressed.

Far from being merely fabricated, however, constructive description is a form of truth: “Description is revelation. It is not / The thing described, / or false facsimile.// It is an artificial thing that exists./ In its own seeming” (6). The effect of this seeming, a seeming that is revelation, is not simply to repeat or reaffirm something about the object described, but to reconstitute the object in the act of describing it. In a sense, all description can be said to do this, but constructive description does it so forcefully as to produce a qualitative shift, a quantum leap. Constructive description, “description without place” (i.e., without a literal referent) endows its object with meanings that return to it from the object in a new form: it is “the column in the desert, / On which the dove alights” (5), “a sense / To which we refer experience” (5). It is even a specifically musical sense, “a point in the fire of music/ Where dazzle yields to a clarity and . . . we are content” (3).

Verbal attributions of meaning to music have the force of constructive descriptions: they do not decode the music or reproduce a meaning already there in it but attach themselves to the music as an independent form or layer of appearance, “its own seeming.” The language does not have to be eloquent to do this; the constructive dimension is a function, not a trait. Something in the music—music played, heard, or recollected—or someone involved in the musical experience prompts the description, which may pass through several versions or be negotiated with others before it “sticks” with a typical sharp fusion of knowledge and pleasure.

But sticks for how long? Any constructive description that outlives the circumstances of its utterance becomes a historical artifact. As time passes, particular descriptions may seem to retain their freshness, or to become dated, or comfortably familiar, or disturbingly unfamiliar, or legendary, or strange. This is not to say, however, that past descriptions are necessarily “finished,” that they are hermeneutically inert, either because they are regarded as obsolete or, on the contrary, regarded as speaking with the voice of history itself. The very vicissitudes of constructive descriptions form new sources of meaning. Worn or faded descriptions can be revitalized by sympathetic acts of interpretation and contextualization; still vivid descriptions, and new ones as well, rely on the same process to animate and transform the meanings they provide. So constructive description is more than a historical artifact; it is a historical agency, a cultural practice that installs the past in the present, and installs its objects in history even in the absence of overtly historical language. I discuss that installation and its consequences next.

To broach the topic, we have to look more closely at constructive description as a type of statement. It is virtually axiomatic in modern hermeneutics that all acts of understanding depend on frameworks of prior supposition and disposition: what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls “prejudgment” (Vorurteil, the common German word for “prejudice”). In contrast to the classical assumption that the responsible interpreter must set prejudgment aside, Gadamer argues that no understanding is possible without it. Prejudgment does not—or should not—determine or exhaust understanding; it is a catalyst, and as such indispensable, but it is not a cause. The proper way to use prejudgments is to put them at risk. Maybe so, says Jürgen Habermas (1977), but Gadamer tends to immunize prejudgment from risk by grounding it in a tradition that is not open to criticism (1975). My use of Gadamer here risks believing that it’s possible to adopt his analysis of prejudgment without giving it a preemptive or coercive foundation.

In practice, of course, helpful disposition and blind predisposition are not always easy to tell apart. Prejudgment commonly operates tacitly,
without reflective awareness. That it does so is what gives the classical view a continuing kernel of truth: no one wants to be merely prejudiced. In practice, too, therefore, viable acts of understanding seek (at least ideally) a variety of middle grounds between blind judgment and full-fledged philosophical reflection. One such ground is occupied by constructive descriptions, which can be characterized as statements that are simultaneously recognized as expressions of judgment and accepted as expressions of good understanding. In constructive description, the structure of judgment assumes a manifest, palpable, even dramatic form.

In this context, music emerges as perhaps the paradigmatic object of constructive description. Because it is semantically underdetermined, music renders the inevitable gap between meaning and the object of meaning much more palpable than texts or even images do. In music, therefore, the structure of judgment becomes lived experience more plainly, palpably, and dramatically than virtually anywhere else. But judgment is not an abstract or unconditional form; it is a contingent cultural—historical formation. When music brings judgment to life, it brings culture and history to life, too, and in exactly the same open space between semantic lack and constructive description.

It follows from the recognition of this process that music is saturated with meanings attributed to it by the subjects it addresses, which are always already a part of any music we actually hear or play. Musical meaning is produced less by the signs of a musical semiotics than by signs about music, signs whose grounding in historically specific forms of subjectivity is the source of their legitimation, not of their—literal—insignificance. The historical presence of these signifiers cannot be excluded from the constitution of whatever we understand as music itself.

More broadly, it follows that the question of musical meaning and its relation to subjectivity is far more political than epistemological. The disengagement of music from worldly contexts and constructive descriptions offers a certain pleasure in return for observing a rule that prohibits certain kinds of speech and devalues others. If speech is understood as the primary medium through which subjectivity is negotiable, then this same pleasure is the reward for surrendering a certain portion of one’s rights or privileges as a subject. The politics of disengaged listening is based on the systematic misrecognition of this surrender as either a transcendence of subjectivity or, contrariwise, a fundamental enhancement or expression of it. These alternatives are only apparently in opposition, because both enact the same compliant relationship to music regarded as an agency of socialization. In the language of Michel Foucault (1978, 1980), disengaged listening is a disciplinary practice in which the subjective power of music is policed by the very subjects who enjoy it, subjects who experience their discipline as a form of freedom. In some circumstances they may even be right; disengaged listening can offer real pleasure, and certain forms of engaged listening—for instance with attention mandated to national or racial character—can be as coercive as their opposites. Be that as it may, music is never more engaged with subjectivity than when it is disengaged from the worldly grounds of subjectivity, and when, accordingly, “subjective” verbal responses to it are written off as inessential or merely personal.

Once these relationships are recognized, the familiar objections to the idea of musical meaning collapse, and the notion that music, or some invariable part of music, floats somewhere beyond cultural contingencies collapses with them.

Take the core argument that because music is nonsemantic, claims about its meaning are necessarily subjective and arbitrary. This would hold good only if subjectivity were extrinsic to meaning, whereas the exact opposite is the case. The structure of judgment grounds subjectivity in a specific sociocultural situation, and thereby allows sense to be made of experience; subjectivity and meaning are historical correlatives. Interpretation is contingent on particular structures of judgment but never completely determined by them. With music, as we have just seen, this process is at its most explicit, but the musical case involves nothing not also present in the interpretation of texts or images.

To illustrate, consider once more Schumann’s simple statement about the first movement of Chopin’s Bb minor sonata. One of the presuppositions of this statement is the concept of a true or original self (Chopin the Sarmatian) that may be deceived by its own false or borrowed appearances (a Chopin who leans toward Italy via Germany). However beautiful, the secondary character is inauthentic; Schumann stresses that the end of the movement leaves it behind. The true self is identified with defiance and difference, and assigned a character both primitive and exotic with respect to western European norms. (In the process, certain stereotypes, including Chopin’s sensuous effeminacy and the opposition of German and Italian styles, are pointedly ignored.) Strictly speaking, this characterization would apply only to someone like Chopin, an eastern-European “other” by birth. The evident value that Schumann places on
Chopin, like Sarmatian, however, points to a more general resonance. Underlying the contrasts of east and west, primary and secondary self, there lies a characteristic bourgeois separation between private or interior identity and public demeanor, the former of which escapes or transcends the social determinations that the latter obeys. For Schumann, Chopin's Sarmatian character serves as a paradigm for what he takes to be the socially resistant quality of authentic identity.

For Schumann, too, Chopin carries the expression of authenticity to its limit in the sonata's last movement, which defies all available resources of prejudice: "[In] this joyless, unmelodious movement breathes... an original and terrifying spirit that holds down with mailed fist everything that seeks to resist [it], so that we listen fascinated and uncomplaining to the end—though not to praise; for this is not music." The movement's only intelligible element is the aggressive power, the mailed fist, of the Sarmatian self, which Schumann associates with an eastern identity even older and more remote: "the sonata closes as it began... like a Sphinx with an ironic smile" (Schumann [1840] 1949, 142). Some three-quarters of a century later, the influential American music critic James Huneker would more fully assimilate this last movement to Schumann's model for the first. With the imperial adventures of the later nineteenth century behind him, Huneker links the movement's "sub-human growling... expressive of something that defies definition" with a definite "Asiatic coloring... like the wavering outline of light-tipped hills seen sharply in silhouette, behind which rises and falls a faint, infernal glow" (Huneker [1909] 1927, 299).

Nothing in either Schumann's statement or Huneker's is unwarrantably "subjective" in the sense—a problematized sense, but let that go—of being idiosyncratic or ungrounded. On the contrary, their remarks are informed by a structure of prejudice with a serious track record, something both durable and flexible. When interpretive statements do seem "subjective" in the pejorative sense, the reason is not their necessary origin in a historical subject and cultural subject-position. When the great pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow writes (after Schumann, before Huneker) that Chopin's Prelude no. 9 in E Major portrays the composer bludgeoning himself in the head with a hammer (cited by Schönberg 1963, 128), the statement is—famously—absurd. What makes it so, however, is not (or not only) Bülow's personal perversity, but the lack of any plausible connection to a structure of prejudice. The remark might make sense as satire, but it is not meant satirically; it might make sense in psychopathological terms, but it is not meant that way, either. Like the sonata finale, but without its artistic license, Bülow's remark alienates itself from the available resources of sense making.

Two other objections can be considered more briefly. It is sometimes argued that musical meaning cannot readily be heard in musical sounds; to do so the listener would have to quickly piece together an improbably long and specific chain of signifiers. This argument mistakenly prescribes that meaning must arise immediately in the act of listening rather than in anticipation, retrospection, or some combination of the three. Even more importantly, the argument fails to acknowledge the power of constructive description to live up to its name. The description is what constitutes the music as a particular kind of object, and allows that object to be experienced as meaningful in concrete ways. Without at least a rudimentary discursive or descriptive background, listening could not take place. But there is no need to stay rudimentary. Schumann's and Huneker's descriptions of the finale of Chopin's sonata allow them, and anyone so inclined, to "hear" an extreme esotericism in the music that challenges (even though it does not escape) both the social and conceptual norms of Western rationality.

Finally, music is sometimes acknowledged to have meaning in a general sense, but musical detail, the musical nitty-gritty, because (once more) it lacks semantic value, is said to have only musical meaning, which is the real object of musical understanding. This argument is a holding action that tries to redraw the boundary breached by its own admission of a general though inferior kind of musical meaning. Music has no means to reserve some specific layer or pocket for meaning. Once it has been brought into sustainable connection with a structure of prejudice, music simply becomes meaningful. There is no guarantee that any particular detail will become hermeneutically active, but no detail is exempt from the possibility. In light of Schumann's description, the end of the first movement of Chopin's B♭ minor sonata—a booming proclamation of the major mode—might well be heard as a "defiant" affirmation of the original Sarmatian self.

The affirmation extends to details of the movement's sonata form, which, most unusually, begins its recapitulation with the second theme, that is, with the cantilena in which Schumann heard a borrowed identity. The cantilena resolves the harmonic drama of the movement in the tonic major, but the resolution, though structurally correct, is rhetorically unstable. At the end of the recapitulation the minor and major modes
treatment dramatically, leaving the coda to begin with the major in
snatches, beset by dissonance and presented in the weakest, most
ambiguous of chord positions (the second inversion). When the
closing measures finally right the balance, their “Sarmatian”
vehemence may thus appear as the true resolution—or else as a
rhetorical excess that, perhaps self-consciously, deconstructs the
idea that a resolution is ever simply true.

All of these hermeneutic arguments lead straight to culture and
history, and all of them counteract the familiar social practice of
using music to erase its own social specificity. Musical meaning,
like meaning generally, carries its contingent, socially
constructed character as part of its content. The moment that part is
recognized, culture, history, and society come flooding in. This is
a moment that twentieth-century musical aesthetics sought to
defer indefinitely, but that in some sense has always already
arrived. Constructive description is a fact of musical life, and
more, one of its foundations. Particular descriptions may be either
informal or scholarly, improvisatory or deliberative. They may also,
of course, be good or bad, perceptive or silly. Even failed
descriptions, however, reflect the condition that successful ones
depend on: a full, open engagement with music as lived experience,
experience rendered vivid and vivified by a host of overlapping
cultural associations. Why bother with anything less?

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