A New Frontier for Music Theorists

In a famous article, Edward T. Cone suggested there were aspects of compositional choice that were "beyond analysis."[1] If by analysis we mean logical or predictive explanation by means of formal models, then most of us would cherish the private motivations of a composer who just "liked the tunes." But music theory itself goes "beyond analysis" in its range of inquiry, including speculative theories of musical meaning that attempt to contextualize the results of analysis with the results of hermeneutic inquiry—interpreting structures as resulting from expressive motivations that can in turn be generalized to create culturally-sensitive models of musical style. The back-and-forth dialectic between interpretation of analytical observations and reconstruction of the stylistic competency[2] that constrains those interpretations is at the heart of a music theoretical practice that would go beyond mere inventories and systems of observable structures.

Just as generative linguistics found it possible to generalize the underlying principles of organization to help account for the infinite creativity of language—the syntax that provides coherence, and the semantics and pragmatics that provide context for any meaningful utterance or its interpretation—so has music theory sought deeper levels of explanation to account for a wide array of compositional choices as motivated by generalizable principles. To seek a systematic (logical, predictive) explanation for a bewildering array of possible musical surfaces, however, would be to misunderstand the place of systematic theory in the complete package: the generalizable—whether as categorization or as

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[1] "Beyond Analysis," *Perspectives of New Music* 6/1 (1967): 33-51. Reprinted in *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*, Benjamin Boretz & Edward T. Cone, eds. (New York: Norton): 72-90; and Cone, *Music: A View from Delft: Selected Essays*, Robert Morgan, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 55-75.

[2] I use the word "competency," borrowed from Chomsky, to emphasize an active capacity for interpretation (or creation) that, for music, entails the flexible understanding (or variable implementation) of stylistic principles, strategies, types, and tokens.

syntax—must reside at the level of the type (hence, at the level of style); the token, in the work itself, cannot, by its very nature, be systematically exhausted.

Yet the most sensitive, "personal" aspects of a musical work can be productively interpreted by theorists seeking to enlarge the realm of the generalizable—be it the individual expressive language of a composer, or the stylistic contribution to our understanding of such synthetic musical elements as are labeled "gesture," "texture," and "timbre." Leonard B. Meyer noted the distinction between "parameters" that are discretizable (pitch, duration) and thus lend themselves to syntactic development, as opposed to those that are more continuous or analog (timbre, dynamics) and—at least until later developments in music history—are more likely to be treated in statistical fashion.[3] But how can such a basic distinction help us understand musical gesture? A musical gesture is a complex unit with various possible articulable elements (pitches, rhythms) that can be accurately notated and performed, as well as more statistical ones (dynamics, articulations, and temporal flexibility within a chosen tempo) that cannot be explicitly notated so as to prescribe an exact performance, all wrapped up in a package that gives priority to the continuities of embodied expressive movement—i.e., a shaping of energies through time that must be commensurate with the emotion to be communicated, and yet cannot be established as a fixed recipe of its ingredients. But a thematic gesture may be the soul of a work—its most characteristic identifying expressive feature—and its expressive shape may be subject to the same developmental or variational strategies (even of the shape itself) that we tend to analyze only in the more discrete aspects of a motive. And if we would interpret the expressive significance of such a gesture, we need to bring all of our theoretical and analytical, or stylistic and strategic, competencies to bear—to say nothing of an expanded cultural context that includes a "thick description"[4] of contemporaneous social practices. All this work for

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[3] *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989): 14-15.

[4] "Thick description" involves the detailed description of individual instances from which one can generalize the basic structural principles underlying given practices

a few notes that in the past we might simply have categorized as a basic formal unit—a subject, a theme, a motive.

Another perspective one might generalize from the study of musical gesture to the field of music theory as a whole is the investigation of the synthetic, wherever it may be found and however it may appear in music.[5] Such exploration would provide a much-needed complement to all that music theory has so successfully accomplished in the realm of the analytic. Future music theories will likely address the following characteristics of the synthetic, which are not always amenable to traditional analytical approaches: (a) continuity, (b) integration, (c) intermodality, (d) multi-functionality, (e) multiple motivations, (f) multiple levels, with respect to such continua as immediacy vs. mediacy, and (g) the relationship of cognition to rich perception.[6]

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in a society. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 3-30. For cultural interpretation, Geertz argues that "the essential task of theory building is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them" (26).

[5] The term "synthetic" refers to the way elements are integrated in our understanding. Perceptual integration, which enables us to hear a collection of musical elements as a singular event (a gesture, a motive, a chord) is one kind of synthesis. At higher cognitive levels, topics are syntheses involving more deliberate acts of interpretation, and tropes are syntheses involving more creative acts of interpretation.

[6] With the term "mediacy" I invoke the Peircean notion of triadic meaning: a sign relates to an object (or *designatum*) by the mediation of interpretation. Besides an interpreter, one must consider an interpretive tradition (a style, a cultural convention, or a mere habit), and an interpretive context (the particular occasion of an act of signification). Together, I would argue, these contribute to the meaning Peirce called the *interpretant*. In this sense, no meaning is ever "immediate": the apparent immediacy of the iconic is mediated by conventions of similarity, and the indexical by conventions of association. Nevertheless, the deeper into our embodied experience we can find motivations for meaning, the more immediate or transparent our experiences of interpretation are likely to feel, and these experiences may occur prior to our interpretation of the more symbolic levels of a musical style. Thus, we may experience the immediate sense of a musical gesture (its energetic shaping through time) prior to its interpretation as a motive,

I mention the latter because the syntheses entailed by gesture, both in its motor production and its intermodal perception, are strikingly similar to states of consciousness in the brain, as described by Antonio Damasio, Gerald Edelman, and Giulio Tononi.[7] The brain provides far richer syntheses of information at a basic perceptual level than is generally realized, and these syntheses cannot be reconstructed by discrete computational means. An already complex perceptual synthesis is available as primary data for cognition. In the case of music, these perceptual syntheses are thus available for inspection and employment in interpretation, as guided by higher levels of stylistic understanding.

The new frontier I envision for music theory, then, will be engaged by going beyond the limits of the systematic in its earlier, formalist sense, yet continuing to propose speculative generalizations to account for those aspects of a work that might appear inherently unsystematic—generalizations that respect the individuality and synthetic character of unique tokens, and support sensitive interpretation rather than attempting to displace it, but generalizations nonetheless. When these generalizations about synthetic stylistic types, processes, and principles of organization begin to suggest systems, as they inevitably will, let us hope that the new systems remain in their proper place: as underlying frameworks guaranteeing coherence, not as attempts to generate creative surfaces or demonstrate organic unity. May the new, more flexible modelings be as rigorous in their respect of relevant evidence, but not as constricted by logical, axiomatic models or theoretical constructions more appropriate to the hard sciences. And may our generalizations be ever more intelligently conceived in order to address the varieties of musical meaning, stylistic gestures, and social practices that inform and constrain our critical interpretations of musical works (or other musical practices). In

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and prior to an analysis into its constituent implications (tonal, melodic, rhythmic, contrapuntal, etc.).

[7] See Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999) and Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *A Universe of Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

turn, we will find that the ongoing expansion of our field to other repertories—including popular and non-Western cultures—will allow us to share a wealth of perspectives on a common theme: how music interacts with humans and cultures in ways that are meaningful, expressive, and fundamental to our lives.

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Music Theory, Music Cognition, and 'The Case of the *Iguanodon*'s Thumb'

Six years have passed since I was last asked to comment on the state of music theory. At a joint meeting of AMS and SMT in New York I put my money on forging closer ties with music cognition.[1] I knew, of course, that many would disagree. For some, the goals of music cognition and music theory are simply different and there is nothing to be gained from using the one to inform the other. As Nicholas Cook puts it, "it is up to the psychologist or the social scientist, and not the music theorist to study music scientifically."[2] Even music psychologists have warned against making facile connections between the two disciplines; Eric Clarke, in particular, has stressed that music psychologists and music theorists are concerned with very different phenomena and inevitably rely on very different methods and standards of verification.[3] Clarke insists, therefore, that we "mind the gap" between the two disciplines.

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[1] This commentary was later published as Matthew Brown, "Adrift on Neurath's Boat: The Case for a Naturalized Music Theory," *Journal of Musicology* 15/3 (1997): 330-342.

[2] Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 243.

[3] Eric Clarke, "Mind the Gap: Formal Structures and Psychological Processes in Music," *Music Perception* 3 (1989): 1-13.