Review of *Musical Agency and the Social Listener* by Cora Palfy, Routledge, 2021.

by Olivia R. Lucas

Musical Agency and the Social Listener uses research in psychology and cognition to validate and explain what many analysts have intuitively felt: that music can offer social affordances and "move" us in ways that mimic interactions with another subject. In doing so, Palfy offers a detailed view into the analytical processes that can yield readings of musical agency. The book divides roughly into two distinct halves, with the first five chapters dedicated to theorizing how virtual agency emerges in music and the subsequent four unfolding four analytical vignettes demonstrating this emergence. Building on work in ecological psychology and the adaptation of these ideas into theories of musical agency, Palfy's book contributes a meta-methodology of agential analysis that encourages theorists to become more aware of agential emergence in their listening and writing.

Palfy begins by tracing concepts of musical agency back to Edward T. Cone's *The Composer's Voice* (1974) and its further development in the work of Naomi Cumming (2000) and Fred Maus (1988). She notes that for many analysts, musical agency remains a metaphor that can help bring analysis to life and bridge some of the challenges that attempting to write about music can present. It is here, however, on the second page of the book, that Palfy marks her departure from these assumptions about the metaphorical nature of musical agency; instead, she argues that musical agency can, in some instances, be a perceptual phenomenon. She believes that in these cases, "agential analyses articulate a visceral experience that is invisible to the eye and that is, instead, aural and kinesthetic" (3). Palfy rests this idea that an agential analysis is an experiential and processual account of embodied listening on the persistence of such agential accounts in the analytical literature and her interpretation of them as evidence that analysts are writing about experiences of "virtual agency" (2).

Because music is not human, and therefore not a literal agent, Palfy connects her work to theories of "virtual experience" and "virtual agency" developed by Naomi Cumming (2000), Robert Hatten (2018), Arnie Cox (2011; 2016), and Ian Gerg (2017). The work of these theorists supports her contention that music can involve us in "social processes" that, although they occur in the mind, are experienced as real.

Palfy buttresses her contention that music can involve us in virtual simulations of social processes with chapters that review and digest the literature on virtuality (Chapter 2) and social affordances (Chapter 3). These chapters allow for the intellectual scaffolding and background necessary to fully understand the perspectives of the analytical vignettes that come later. Chapter 2 especially emphasizes virtual agency's "realness," arguing that despite the agents' virtuality, experiencing them mimics real interactions with other people—that is, literal social agents. Palfy presents engagement with various kinds of media—especially experiences that are immersive—as examples of the reality of virtual experiences. In discussing the potential immersiveness of films, videogames, and virtual reality headsets, she notes the attachments people develop to virtual environments, and the physical and psychological effects of interacting with them. Similarly, she notes how people develop parasocial, or virtual, relationships with media personae and exhibit emotional responses to fictional events depicted in books and films. As another form of media, music can have similarly immersive qualities, having the "abil-

ity to take listeners out of the present moment and place them in a virtual reality" (18), which may be augmented by the listener's imagination.

It strikes me that imagination must play a vital role in the emergence of virtual agency in music, especially in un-texted music or other situations where the music is non-narrative. Although this could be stated more plainly, I believe that Palfy views agential emergence as inherently narrative-producing, regardless of the inherent narrativity of the music under discussion. Because the immersiveness of other media discussed in this chapter (novels, films, video games) is related directly to their inherent narrativity, and because Palfy's analyses deal with both texted and un-texted examples, I would have appreciated a more direct approach to the question of how the lack or existence of an explicit narrative within a piece impacts virtual agency. As it stands, narratives that emerge in texted examples receive the same treatment as narratives that emerge in un-texted ones, and I would have liked to know if this unaddressed equivalence was deliberate or not.

Having established the real effects of virtual experiences and music's ability to provide such experiences, in Chapter 3, Palfy turns to the question of how it is that music can generate the social affordances that lead to immersion in a virtual reality. To do so, she turns to Gibsonian affordances via Eric Clarke's (2005) adaptation of these ideas to his theory of ecological listening. In Clarke's theory, the hearing of music is based on the process of hearing sound in the world, and this process is responsible for our ability to create meaning from music. These ecological approaches provide the grounding for the idea that agential analyses are based in interpretation of sensory perception rather than in metaphor: "the interpretations are descriptive renderings of what a listener has *undergone* virtually" (26, emphasis in original). Due to this emphasis on sensory perception over preconceptions, musical interpretation becomes a bottom-up process that is equally available to experienced and inexperienced listeners; listening experience simply adds layers of refinement to the process.

Palfy also addresses some of the challenges that emerge when applying ecological psychology to music, namely, that the theory was developed around the senses of sight and touch—perceptions that can be externally observed. Although music has physical uses (such as dance), analysis tends to result from invisible cognitive actions. Even visible physical interactions with real objects, however, involve these invisible cognitive components. Palfy notes: "cognitive 'actions' (thinking, analyzing, comparing, imagining) all contribute to an object's meaning and coherence over time" (29). For Palfy, this indicates that Gibsonian methodology can be useful for discussing music's social affordances, even those that are invisible and cognitively based. Of course, as Palfy points out, music also

offers plenty of real-world social affordances, such as call and response in live performances, or interactions between dancers and DJs, but the focus here is on virtual agency. On the one hand, virtual social affordances can emerge from imagined composers and performers, and from the "artistic agent," or persona of a popular music musician (38). On the other hand, a fully virtual agent—one that is imagined within the music itself without ties to an imagined persona—is "one step removed from the performer" (43). Palfy identifies this type of agency as the subject of agential analyses that emerge in music-theoretical writing.

From Chapter 4, Palfy moves on to the perception of and engagement with these fully virtual agents in music, beginning with an examination of the musical properties that support their emergence. Our perception of these virtual agents depends on our ability to anthropomorphize inanimate objects, something she contends happens when we perceive them to be "willful and intentional" (47). Citing Nicholas Epley (2015), she identifies the following factors that enable us to perceive these anthropomorphic traits: movement that reminds us of human movement, the ability to envision the object performing behaviors that the perceiver performs (which Palfy glosses as "empathy"), and "intention" indicated by subversion of expectation. Having established the criteria for triggering experiences of virtual agency, Palfy sets about examining how music can express each of these three factors, using examples from Debussy, Beethoven, and Mozart. For some examples, she responds to and interprets the agential readings left by previous analysts of the selected passages. For example, she finds agency induced by movement in Steven Ring's analysis of Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* and empathy in Fred Everett Maus' analysis of the opening of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 11, Op. 95. She closes the chapter with her own analysis of all three anthropomorphization triggers in the opening of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 31, No. 2 ("Tempest") before briefly discussing the virtual agents found by Carl Dahlhaus, James Hepokoski, and Janet Schmalfeldt in this same passage.

In Chapter 5, the work of understanding the theories of virtuality, social affordance, and anthropomorphization laid out in the first several chapters begins to pay off, as Palfy presents her ideas for improving agential analyses. The refinements she suggests center primarily on creating greater awareness of the emergence of musical agents and recentering the embodied listening experiences that tend to enable agential emergence. Palfy proposes that, when conducted conscientiously, agential analysis can both offer a path through music theory's struggle with mind/body duality and balance abstract knowledge of musical structure with embodied musical experiences. As a framework for this process of agential analysis, she revives and adapts

Cone's (1977) "three hearings," or levels of listening that direct attention to different aspects of the musical experience. These "first," "second," and "third" hearings are not actual chronologies of listening, but attitudes and modes of focus. The "attentive, embodied" first hearing is meant to be a focused listening experience, conducted with a score if possible, and should attend to emergent patterns and structures—a process of searching for "elements of interest" (67). For Palfy, if this first hearing reveals musical segments that challenge her "kinesthetic autonomy"—in other words, if she feels that the music is moving her—she notes that these areas might be spaces for agential emergence which lead to an analysis that incorporates a virtual agent. In the second hearing, then, Palfy conducts "retrospective narration" (69), which contextualizes the previously noted moments of agential emergence into a more cohesive narrative. The third hearing attempts to reconcile the embodied experience with the analytical abstractions, resulting in a "communicable narrative that uniquely captures the experience of virtual agency, that agent's characteristics, the virtual musical environment, and the overall narrative progression" (70). In Palfy's view, the slippage that has historically plagued agential analyses most often occurs around the stage of the second hearing, when analysts tend to fill in narrative gaps without acknowledging the virtual agent that emerged from their first hearing.

In Chapters 6 through 9, Palfy offers four contrasting analytical vignettes that demonstrate the "three hearings" method of agential analysis in action. Each chapter focuses on a specific musical feature as a gateway to virtual agency: rhythm and meter (Chapter 6), range and climax (Chapter 7), cadential expectations (Chapter 8), and sonata form (Chapter 9). For readers wanting more information about how each of these parameters impacts musical expectation (and therefore also the potential deferral of expectations), a brief appendix supports each chapter that summarizes important literature and ideas on the topic.

Along with varying the focus among different musical features, the analyses present agential readings of a diverse set of musical examples, including Johannes Brahms's *Sieben Fantasien* Op. 116, No 7: Capriccio (Chapter 6), "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey (Chapter 7), "How Far I'll Go" by Lin-Manuel Miranda for the film *Moana* (Chapter 8), and Cécile Chaminade's Piano Sonata Op. 21, I (Chapter 9). For me, most compelling was the chapter devoted to "How Far I'll Go." Palfy's "first hearing" sketches the song's readily graspable verse-chorus form and notes the potential emergence of virtual agency at moments when harmonic expectations are deferred by chromatically altered chords at cadence points. The "second hearing" contextualizes these lowered submediants within harmonic norms for film music and examines how the instrumentation supports multiple interpretations of its interaction with the vocal line,

and may or may not afford agential hearings, depending on the listener. The "third hearing" distills the understanding of the lowered submediant (C-natural, in this example) into an example of Cone's "promissory note," as it is a pitch that is musically foregrounded as a tonal problem for the starting tonic of E Major. Over the course of the song, the C-natural agentially embodies the tension between Moana's expected social role and her desire for a different life. When, at the end of the song, Moana chooses to leave her island, the C-natural emerges as the final tonic, pushing aside its original harmonic context. This analytical reading elegantly demonstrates Palfy's process of noticing potential agential emergence as a response to her embodied listening experience, and then gradually distilling it into the kind of analytical writing that incorporates not only this listening experience but also structures and expectations gleaned from previous musical study.

Throughout the analytical chapters, I appreciate the way Palfy illuminates the process of writing analysis by providing three versions of each analysis via the adapted "three hearings" method. Despite not being the main point of the book, these examples are vibrantly illustrative of the analytical process, and therefore have a lot of pedagogical value in and of themselves, especially for anyone concerned with teaching music-analytical writing. The consistent application of this method across four distinct repertoires and music-theoretical concepts provides a transparent model of analytical labor that is in and of itself a service to the field.

One question that was left unanswered for me after reading the book has to do with the use and interpretation of musical examples and score excerpts throughout the text. I would have appreciated instructions on how she envisioned readers using them. For example, in one of the book's first analytical examples, Palfy examines the introduction to Schubert's "Erlkönig," suggesting that these "introductory measures create an immediate, visceral impression of the piece" (39). She then notes the dynamic, tempo, and articulation markings indicated in the score and connects them to how the performer "must play, and indeed, my empathetic resonance with what I understand those movements to be" (39). I understand that the overall point of the example is that "a performer's movements and performance choices can carry social affordances for response" (39). However, the elision of score study with both an imagined performer and listening struck me as a leap that was not fully explained anywhere in the text. This lack of explanation of the role score excerpts and transcriptions play in the analysis further results in slippage around the question of what constitutes a musical work, with popular music examples being necessarily tied to specific recordings (performances), and Euroclassical examples being tied

to their scores with no reference to specific recordings. Does this mean that Palfy believes that all performances of a piece would result in the same agential hearing for her, or for any listener? Palfy clearly lays out the importance of listening, plainly stating in the Introduction that following her analytical process assumes the possibility of repeated listening to recordings (7). The fact that score excerpts and transcriptions appear frequently throughout the book, but that their role in the analytical process is not directly addressed, sometimes left me unclear as to their purpose within the text and to what extent certain agential emergences were coming from score study rather than from embodied listening.

Occasionally, I found that the idea of embodied listening slipped away in the analytical vignettes, especially in the "first hearing" of the Chaminade Piano Sonata, Op. 21 (Chapter 9). In this example, it was unclear to me from reading the description of the listening experience how Palfy's "kinesthetic autonomy [was] disrupted by unexpected deformations within the sonata form" (129). Although the passage fluently discusses expectation deferral within the context of Hepokoski- and Darcy-based sonata form expectations, I did not gather a clear sense of what this experience *feels* like for Palfy in the way that I did in the "How Far I'll Go" analysis discussed above. My guess would be that this loss has to do with the shift in the temporal scale of attention; whereas the Brahms, Journey, and Lin-Manuel Miranda examples focus their first hearings at a more immediate and processual temporal level, the first hearing of the Chaminade is already focused on the idea of large-scale form, which may be in tension with the idea of an embodied "first hearing."

Musical Agency and the Social Listener provides a serious and expansive elucidation of the research and literature on musical agency and invites theorists to think more openly and critically about how agency emerges in their own analytical work. In many ways, this book marks a potential introduction to as-yet unrealized work on musical agency, as its reflections call on analysts to be more self-critical and self-aware in their cooption of virtual agency in their work. As Palfy writes in the conclusion, "there is still much work to be done elucidating agential types, actions, and effects on audience participation" (144). She positions her work as a means for understanding how musical agency emerges, thus providing a path for others to examine specific affordances in myriad contexts going forward.

References

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