

PREFACE

THE THOUGHT OF MUSIC



What do we know when we know things about music and how do we know them? Until recently the modern answers to those questions were relatively stable, but it is generally acknowledged that they began to change dramatically toward the close of the 20th century. They have been changing ever since. This book is about those changes.

For that very reason, it is also about something more. The chapters to follow deal with music in conversation with those who perform, make, study, or just enjoy it, but they also go *through* music to ask the wider question, what is knowledge of anything—music, for instance—that we human subjects make and do? To understand musical knowledge we need to ask that question, at the same time as we call on musical knowledge to help answer it.

Looking back over the broadening horizons of understanding music since the 1990s, what stands out most is the rise of this principle of reciprocity in each discrete area of concern: meaning, subjectivity, identity, society, culture, history, and so on. It has been necessary first to recognize, and then to reject, the possibility of music's lapsing into a passive or dependent relationship on the concepts deployed around it. It is not enough, nor was it ever enough, to probe the bearing of such concerns in a chosen composer or work or style or repertoire. These musical embodiments can and should become a means of insight into general issues of meaning, subjectivity, identity, society, culture, and history. It is not enough to understand music in context (or the fiction of context: the text-context distinction looks increasingly irrelevant and the concept of context presents larger problems that will come up in chapter 5); context must also be understood through music. It is not enough to explore

subjectivity in music; subjectivity—the field of historically specific identity and desire—must also be explored through music. Each area of concern (and concern itself, another topic we will take up) finds in music not only a mirror but also a model of its own potentialities. Music is not alone in this respect, and that is just the point. It belongs to a general dynamic of knowledge as much as anything else does. Given the fullness and immediacy of its impact and its constant presence in our daily lives, we should perhaps say “as much or more.”

This reciprocity of musical knowledge and general knowledge is subject to its own conditions; it does not stand still. For that reason any new account of it requires some consideration of several important trends that emerged in the wake of, and often in dissent from, the effort—call it the cultural turn, the new musicology, critical musicology, or whatever you like, roughly from 1990 on—to merge understanding music with interpreting music. These trends include the elevation of performance over the matter performed; an associated emphasis on music in “real time”; the return of ideas of ineffability; a corresponding caution or hesitancy about interpretation (reduced to “hermeneutic approaches,” as if any “approach” could be anything else) and a reluctance to let understanding exceed quasi-empirical limits; a shift of attention from the content of music to its contexts; the de-authorizing of the musical work and, as the term suggests, of the composer as author; a reduction of the work to the “work-concept” and thus the removal of the work from its practical, material existence;¹ and the assumption that the work represents unwarranted authority, whereas a half-century or more of thinking on the topic (Blanchot, Derrida, Stewart, Agamben²) understands the work as a release from unwarranted authority. Each of these trends has had valuable (or at least stimulating) results, but each also raises questions that afford us the opportunity to rethink a series of primary concepts and assumptions, including musical understanding, the problem of music and language, music and the field of culture, context, authorship, the work, performance, collaboration, and even music itself.

I have touched on most of these issues in an extended series of books and will briefly take the liberty of referring to the two most recent of them here.³ *Interpreting Music* sought to establish a set of heuristics for investigating both music through meaning and meaning through music; to illustrate the practice of interpretation as a cultural and conceptual agency in terms that can readily be emulated; and to project something of the inventive, undogmatic, and more than empirical worldview that a focus on meaning, and in

particular on meaning found through music, entails. The subsequent *Expression and Truth* added a defense of the cognitive value of expression and of the ethos of interpretation it makes available under the rubric of descriptive realism: not realistic description, but the descriptive production of the real. *The Thought of Music* can be regarded as the third part of a trilogy on musical understanding, concentrating, in turn, and with many inevitable overlaps, on the activities referred to in the three titles: interpretation, expression, and thought.

All of these books are also about the experience of culture, and more specifically of modernity, through music, not about music narrowly conceived. It is precisely the conviction that modernity was formed as much by music as music was by a prior phenomenon called modernity that (alone) justifies a belief in the continued vitality of the music. For technological and institutional reasons, and not just cultural ones, music since at least the turn of the nineteenth century has played an enveloping, soundtrack-like role in the formation of subjectivity and a wide range of cultural practices. The music of this era (and perhaps of earlier ones, too, though on different terms that need to be addressed separately) is not just a secondary phenomenon, although it is often positioned as a kind of background against which experience emerges as figure. This music is often a sensory equivalent or realization of the horizon of inchoate understanding, the half presence of a promised or hoped-for knowledge, the weight of the not-yet-known, which forms the precondition of knowledge as discovery rather than knowledge as repetition, even when the knowledge is a retrieval of what has been known before. This is so for both good and ill. Music can acquire coercive force as idol, icon, or commodity, or music can supply, even become, a force of transformation.

Basic to these possibilities, as *Interpreting Music* and *Expression and Truth* sought to show, is an emphasis on the knowledge-value of performativity and on the constructive power of description. Both performative and descriptive force should be understood as equally musical and critical, equally imaginative and interpretive. And both inevitably lead to the age-old but seemingly inexhaustible question of music and language.

Classical instrumental music—the music addressed in this book—may be said to raise that question in its exemplary, paradigmatic form, and even, historically speaking, to have invented it. This music is my focus here in part because I value it highly but in part because of its particular qualities, which are as much exceptional as they are exemplary. By its emphasis on the formation of an event, by its insistence on the narrativity and the extrapolative

potential of expression, by its combination of expressive immediacy and the hermeneutic deferral of the immediate, this music offers opportunities to suspend language in a particular sense: to silence, for an extended period, or intermittently within an extended period, the voices in one's head. This offer carries over via stylistic protocols even to short works and to vocal ones, especially as the latter tend towards vocalizing well in excess of intoning words on pitch. But no vocal work suspends language in the same way that instrumental music does, and the relationship of vocal music to language, which is hardly confined to classical genres, needs to be examined with an ear to those differences of genre and mode.

The key word here, however, is *suspend*, which does not mean to annul or exclude; it means to defer knowingly, to make present as a potentiality rather than an actuality. Instrumental music suspends language much as literature, according to Derrida, suspends reference: "There is no literature without a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference. *Suspended* means *suspense*, but also *dependence*, condition, conditionality. In its suspended condition literature can only exceed itself."⁴ The effect of such suspension is not to solicit silence but to solicit an enriched return of language: more language, not less, and language refreshed by being reconnected to the primary dynamism—the universal impetus toward becoming intelligible that Walter Benjamin identified as the linguistic character of being, an idea developed more fully by Heidegger⁵—which language tends to conceal in the act of revealing itself. The relation of music and language is not an opposition, even when the two are, contingently, opposed.

This summons to language also serves as a model for humanistic knowledge broadly conceived. A powerful way to cast this argument (and the book might be said to proceed precisely by casting it in multiple ways) is to extend Derrida's analysis of the as-if structure of humanistic knowledge. The as-if, like its complement, the neither/nor, is to be understood here not as a logical or verbal formula but as a general conceptual operation the force of which is performative. Derrida traces this operation to Kant's recurrent use of the as-if (*als ob*) to suspend—here he says to "disconcert"—understanding and/or perception between the terms that for Kant determine what is proper to humanity, namely necessity and freedom. The work of art, for example, and it is not just any example, must be apprehended "as art and not nature; yet still the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all compulsion [*Zwange*] by arbitrary rules as if [*als ob*] it were a product of mere nature."⁶

The terms *necessity* and *freedom* place Kant's thought in a world where harsh necessities of all sorts were much more a part of everyday life than they have become in the wealthier, technologically saturated societies of the present century. But the as-if, once it assumes what Derrida calls "the gravity, seriousness, and irreducible necessity"⁷ it has in Kant, becomes a form of thought that extends beyond its historical occasion. Expanding the frame of reference to accommodate other concerns is not difficult. In the strong sense of *suspend* identified earlier, the performative as-if suspends the activities of understanding and/or perception between their material/empirical and their imaginary/symbolic conditions of possibility. Derrida takes "a certain *as if*" of this kind to mark "the structure and the mode of being of all objects belonging . . . to the Humanities," including not only "what are called *oeuvres*, singularly *oeuvres d'art*, the fine arts (painting, sculpture, cinema, music, poetry, literature, and so forth), but also . . . all the symbolic and cultural productions" of the humanities and even "a certain structure" of knowledge in general.⁸ Humanistic knowledge has suspension at its core.

How does this suspension operate? The immediate effect of the as-if is to block the issuing of a truth claim. The as-if makes us, of necessity, fall short of asserting that something is true, or, more strongly, it compels us to acknowledge that something in which we have an interest may not (yet? ever?) be known as true. But at the same time, the as-if allows us (its very compelling force enables us) to disregard this necessary default on truth even in the act of observing it. This is not a simple matter of supposition against the facts. The as-if allows us to take as *true enough* what we cannot verify; it allows us to extend our interest to that dimension of assessment in which the possibility of truth outweighs both the lack of certainty and the possibility of error; it enables us to find a terrain of understanding where what concerns us (concern being the measure of interest) may intimate something true and where that *may*, that possibility as such, what Derrida calls the *perhaps*,⁹ itself becomes the truth to which we can give our credit, our credibility, to which we can choose to be—true. The aesthetic is the mode in which this may, perhaps, happen. Whether or not it happens in an official work of art is unimportant.

Put in its most robust form, the thesis would be this: that knowledge in the strong sense, knowledge in its most robust form, is never a matter of simply knowing what is true or false. Knowledge of the world, as opposed to knowledge of data, arises only in understandings that can neither be true nor false, that is, in understandings the epistemic form of which is the form of

the aesthetic. And to develop these understandings and give them credibility is to coax, draw out, summon, conjure—among other alternatives—the neither/nor (see *Expression and Truth*) in which robust knowledge begins to assume its positive form: the as-if.

The central issue arises paradigmatically in the third essay of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, with its analysis of the academic form of ascetic ideals, that is, of the university faculty as a secularized form of ascetic priesthood:

It is precisely in their faith in truth that [these *so-called* "free spirits"] are more rigid and unconditional than anyone. I know all this from too close up perhaps: that venerable philosopher's abstinence to which such a faith commits one; that intellectual stoicism which ultimately refuses not only to affirm but also to deny; that *desire* to halt before the factual, the *factum brutum*; . . . that general renunciation of all interpretation (of forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, falsifying, and whatever else is of the *essence* of interpretation)—all this expresses, broadly speaking, as much ascetic virtue as any denial of sensuality (it is at bottom only a particular mode of this denial).¹⁰

The persistence of this attitude (to which no one is immune, as Nietzsche acknowledges) is discernable in a little maxim of Derrida's that takes on an extra shade of *différance* with the addition of a Freudian element (the super-ego, not the phallus): "It is difficult, in the dominant philosophical tradition (to be deconstructed)[,] to separate rigor from rigidity."¹¹ This rigidity is a kind of armor against what Derrida calls "what remains to be thought," and to be thought "without alibi"; rigid rigor always has an alibi, a plea on behalf of prudence and forensic probity against the claims of meaning as an emergent property irreducible to its apparent sources and supports. What remains to be thought, and always remains to be thought, is a livable venue for exuberant understanding—my translation of Nietzsche's *fröhliche Wissenschaft*, less usefully known as "gay science" or "cheerful wisdom."

This orientation toward what remains to be said, which includes what must be said anew, often repeatedly, depends on an affirmation of genuinely open interpretation—an activity based not on a technique but on the embrace of exuberant understanding. Movement in that direction is incessantly confronted by a pull in one contrary or another, reflecting not only the difficulty of separating rigor from rigidity but also the temptation to turn resources into systems that end up doing one's thinking for one.

The most recent instances have come from affect theory and cognitive science, each of which in its own way depends on the human body's wiring to anchor understanding in empirically robust terms. Each is a conceptual field with its own measure for significant results and statements. But both, in much the same way, repeat the long-standing effort of other empirical disciplines to either dismiss or domesticate the form of knowledge on which the humanities depends, for which the movement of meaning is not merely a source of vitality and pleasure but the condition of possibility. This movement in turn depends on a refusal of the distinction between ideas and language (I do not say signifier and signified, though this famous duality is included, because, as I have argued elsewhere, meaning is not primarily a product of signification—meaning is not a signified). The movement of meaning, the movement that *is* meaning, therefore also depends implicitly on a refusal of a Cartesian mind-body distinction in any of the myriad and annoyingly persistent forms this distinction takes. (I do not say a solution; no one has a solution, and by now the possibility is real that no one ever will.) There is no reason why affect theory or cognitive science should not form collaborative means of producing humanistic knowledge, but there is every reason why they should not become complicit with its replacement.

As Ruth Leys observed in a decisive critique, affect theory depends entirely on a disavowed Cartesian dualism.¹² The logic involved is simple and inexorable; to Leys's critique, which shows this dualism at work in the founding texts of affect theory, I would add only that the moment one conceives of affect as preconceptual and prelinguistic, the mind-body duality has already been fully installed. (Affect as thus understood occupies the place that music in its aesthetic dimension has often been assigned.) The same stricture applies if one draws the line between behavior and cognition, or neural processing and cognition. If the *pre-* (or even stronger *non-*) holds good, then mind and body, and accordingly language and life, already stand as different registers of the human subject with a gap between them that is constantly bridged in practice and constantly reopened in theory.

Cognitive science can live with this problem because it is, after all, seeking empirical knowledge. Affect theory has a harder time because its core concept, affect itself, is speculative and anecdotal rather than empirical unless one identifies affect entirely with autonomic nervous-system response, and even to do that requires the intervention of a typology, that is, a regulative fiction. We can acknowledge that the aim of such arrangements is to make a certain kind of understanding possible within an independent conceptual

field. But the aim of such arrangements in the humanities can only be negative and cautionary, not to say suffocating. The aim is protection—but protection of whom? And why is it needed?—against the wandering of understanding. Nietzsche was quite right to identify the discipline involved as ascetic virtue, a form of self-denial with pleasures of its own.

Music is a particularly seductive target for this habit of mind, partly because of the obvious pliancy of its meanings (so hard, we say, to say what they are, as if it were easy anywhere), and partly because music until very recently has required embodiment in order to exist; music has to be performed, or at least that's how things used to be. (Computers can take care of that now for instrumental music. Voices are a bit harder—but just wait.) The body in performance, under the sway of “real time,” overrides the mind's performance, which we call listening. So, at any rate, we have sometimes been told, and seem to take any opportunity to assume even without being told. But we can believe it only if we want to be abstracted subjects mysteriously bound to a world of objects, a condition we may then refuse to recognize but cannot escape.

The only way out of this impasse is to cut the knot and retie it. In the humanistic sphere, presence of mind is potentiality of body, presence of body potentiality of mind, and both may exist at the same moment. “Recollection” may be substituted here for “potentiality,” also at the same moment. “Idea,” “apprehension,” “perception,” or “experience” may substitute for *either* “mind” or “body” and “language,” “gesture,” or “expression” for the counter-term, though with the proviso that language—discourse, speech act, even raw vocable or bare jotting—is preeminent. Its preeminence is important to emphasize partly because it is language that provokes the very movement of meaning it is then often asked to arrest, and partly because the resentment of language, the insistence not that words sometimes fail but that they *must* sometimes fail, opens up the question of the ineffable, the apophatic, for which music has so often been asked to play the poster child.

Umberto Eco once made an over-confident distinction between firm and fanciful interpretations (we will revisit it in chapter 5),¹³ an action that demands the presupposition that he holds the sovereign position of knowing the difference, the most high judicial position of separating the sheep of historical truth from the goats of fiction. This ex cathedra claim is flawed not only because of its conceptual and institutional rigidity and not only because it is obviously an expression of the interpretive will to power described by Nietzsche. It is flawed because the interpretation that is supposedly out of

synch with the facts (ignoring for the moment that the “facts” are partly irrecoverable, always partly opaque, and partly established by the questions posed and interpretations proffered about them) is the interpretation connected with its object in a way that the guardian of interpretive probity *does not like*. The lofty claim is also flawed because it regards understanding, and a fortiori interpretation (which must belong to all acts of understanding), as a *representation* of the facts. Of course there is a crude sense in which correspondence to “facts on the ground” is necessary; Nietzsche did not like democracy; Wagner did not like Jews. But the arena of this kind of certainly is highly limited and very quickly exceeded. Representation has nothing to do with any knowledge beyond raw empiricism. The substance of knowledge is in part a creation of the aims of knowledge: one has to ask, in Austin’s manner, in what dimension of assessment one is operating.¹⁴ Understanding events and conditions, as opposed to compiling data, constitutes what Wittgenstein would call a form of life,¹⁵ a mode of concerned address in the sense both of action and speech.

This last observation brings up a fundamental question that has so far not been addressed adequately by anyone. The question needs to be acknowledged even in default of an answer, because both critical knowledge of music and humanistic knowledge generally depend on the phenomenon of which the question is posed: the mysterious efficacy of expressive acts, the power of word and tone to make things be, to become themselves, to become other than what they have been. The reason why Austin’s concept of the performative speech act has been so consequential is that it calls attention to the working and the pervasiveness of this power while at the same time failing—and I mean productively failing, usefully failing—to account for it. In particular, the power of the performative does not come exclusively, or rest exclusively, with its social determinants, which are at a more fundamental level only a medium. The power of the performative is ontological, and it has to be theorized accordingly, in particular by an ontology based on immersion in the expressive language of descriptive realism. Any theory adequate to the task would be in the strange position of having to exemplify itself; it could “prove” itself (in the several senses of the term) only by being the thing it describes. Giorgio Agamben moves in that direction with his proposal, in *The Sacrament of Language*, that becoming human is continually reenacted in those moments when we give our word, when we promise or commit ourselves to our words, those moments in which we perform the gesture that “determinates the extraordinary implication of the subject in his word.”¹⁶

To this understanding we need to add that the implication of the subject in the word is at the same time an implication in a world that the word helps to compose. And to this addition we need to add, further, that the word may be distilled to the tone of its utterance, and that musical utterance arises to repeat that concentration in reverse, as an expansion. In music, too, we give our word, even though we do not speak it.