Theorizing Musical Meaning

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"I hold that there can be no truth which is not the effect of an interpretation, and hence of a social contract . . . But when we come across those lines of resistance which prevent us from making certain statements, that is the closest we can get to truth. There is something in reality that says, 'No, you cannot say this'." (Umberto Eco)[1]

No academic discipline has a charter endowing it with permanent existence. Patrick McCreless raised the specter of music theory's demise when, in 1996, he recalled how music theory carved out its own space in the 1950s from the then dominant disciplines of the musical academy and wondered whether the development of a more culturally oriented musicology in the 1990s might not perhaps be "doing to music theory what theory itself did to composition and musicology."[2] But, in retrospect, the writing had been on the wall at least since 1980, when Ruth Solie published her seminal article "The living work," the message of which (heavily amplified five years later by Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating Music*) was that organic unity represented not a universal criterion of value but rather a historical construction of strictly limited applicability.[3] The challenge, of course, lay in the extent to which the demonstration of unity had come to be seen as the purpose of music theory, at least insofar as it was applied to the analysis of specific pieces of music rather than pursued as a purely speculative project (and it was in the former role that it had become firmly embedded in universities and conservatories throughout the English-speaking world). In effect, the basic assumptions from which the discipline drew its identity were being reduced to little more than a wrinkle, to borrow Michel Foucault's word,[4] in the passage of musical and aesthetic history.

There is an element of unfinished business in all this, for the urgency of McCreless's response represented the exception rather than the rule. After all, there were still classes to teach and pieces to analyze, and so for many theorists, it remained business as usual. Such responses as there were mainly took the form of direct counter-attack. The rather scatter-gun approach which Pieter van den Toorn adopted in *Music, Politics, and the Academy*[5] was predictably less effective than Kofi Agawu's persistent probing of the weak points in the musicologists' challenge.[6] In particular, Agawu pointed out that analysis was certainly to be found in, say, McClary's interpretations of Beethoven, based as they are on traditional conceptions of harmonic motion, cadential direction, and

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[1]Eco 1998, 19.

[2]McCreless 1997, 295. (First published in the March 1996 issue of *Music Theory Online*.)

[3]Solie 1980; Kerman 1985, Chapter 3.

[4]Foucault 1970, xxiii.

[5]van den Toorn 1995.

[6]Agawu 1997.

so forth, but instead of being thematized, analysis is disguised as common sense: "Rather than develop new methods for analysis, methods that are free of conventional biases," he complained, "new musicologists often fall back on conventional methods. The props of insight-formation are considered self-evident."[7] Or to put it another way, the emphasis is always on the interpretation and not the analysis that underlies it, which accordingly comes across as just how the music is. Hence Agawu's observation, with just a hint of sarcasm, that "It is hard to square this particular manifestation of reticence among some new musicologists with the searching no-nonsense spirit of post-modern inquiry."

And this links to a more general criticism, voiced, for instance, by Tia DeNora, according to whom McClary "treats musical compositions as if they are simply 'waiting to be read' "—that is, as if their meanings are located outside of situated contexts of reception." Similarly, Stephen Miles complains that for McClary, "meaning is clear and there for the taking: we have only to crack the codes."[8] There is something paradoxical about such complaints. One of the basic principles of the culturally oriented musicology of the 1990s was that there is no such thing as "purely musical" meaning: Lawrence Kramer claimed that "neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through,"[9] while the aim of McClary's latest book is to demonstrate that all social and cultural knowledge, even that granted the status of the "purely musical," consists of conventions, none of which "counts as anything more than artificial constructs human beings have invented and agreed to maintain."[10] This in turn undermines traditional positions of interpretive authority, replacing them with the interpretive mobility that Kramer also called for. And when McClary's writings are read with some modicum of sympathy, it is perfectly evident that she is equally open to the multiplicity of interpretive opportunities offered by musical texts, and to the provisional quality of any given interpretation.[11] Yet the impression described by DeNora and Miles persists. Undoubtedly one reason for this is the kind of common-sense, unreflective, in a word, *untheorized* approach to analysis that Agawu criticized.[12] But I think there is another reason as well, and it is with this that I am concerned in the present article: the lack of an adequately theorized conception of how music might support, or not support, the meanings ascribed to it.

That, thirteen years after its original publication, McClary's interpretation of the first-movement recapitulation from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony retains its power to provoke will be doubted by nobody who has been following the SMT or AMS email lists during the past few years.[13] But where does its compelling quality come from? Not, as James Johnson and others have pointed out, from evidence of period perceptions along such lines, for there is none.[14] If the association of Beethoven's music and sexually motivated murder strikes us as in any way plausible—and if it were simply implausible it would hardly have stimulated the controversy

[7]Agawu 1997, 302.

[8]DeNora 1995, 127; Miles 1995, 31. Peter Martin (1995) not only makes the same criticism of McClary (156) but also extends it to Adorno and Shepherd (160–1).

[9]Kramer 1992 (reprinted as Chapter 1 of Kramer 1995), 9.

[10]McClary 2000, 6.

[11]A representative example from her book *Conventional Wisdom* is a characteristically authoritative account of tonal drama in Vivaldi's Concerto op. 3, no. 8, followed by a discussion of the reasons why she adopted this particular critical strategy in this particular case (2000, 93).

[12]Agawu has also intimated that McClary's analyses are not always as secure or as complete as they might be (Agawu 1993, 96; see also Treitler 1999, 368). But that is not really the point in the present context; Timothy Jackson (1995) has demonstrated how it is possible to create gender-based interpretations based on the same principles as McClary's but with all the conveniences of what he terms modern Schenkerian theory, and exactly the same criticisms might be made of his work.

[13]McClary 1991, 128–9; first published as "Getting Down off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," *Minnesota Composers' Forum Newsletter,* February 1987. In *Conventional Wisdom,* McClary reveals that it has been quoted "in places as unlikely as *Entertainment Weekly* and *Reader's Digest*" (McClary 2000, 189 [n. 17]).

[14]Johnson 1995, 287–8 (n. 4). Treitler (1999, 369) has made similar observations about McClary's interpretation of Mozart's K. 453.

it did—then this is in part because of the influence of another unhistorical way of thought: Freudian psychoanalysis, with its pursuit of latent sexual meaning. Put that on one side and any number of other metaphors come to mind which might fit the music just as well: war, for instance, with its battles, skirmishes, strategic retreats, and Pyrrhic victories (and, after all, we are talking about the composer of *Wellingtons Sieg*). But what underwrites the plausibility of any such metaphor, what assures its "fit" with the music, is the notion of homology. At the most obvious level, McClary's interpretations involve equating the frustration and achievement of musical goals with sexual ones; at a more subtle level, they depend on an equation between conformance to or subversion of normative patterns in music on the one hand and in society or ideology on the other. Take away the homology and the interpretation loses its plausibility as an interpretation *of* the music rather than one imposed *on* it; it becomes, in a word, arbitrary.

In claiming that Beethoven's music reveals something about early nineteenth-century gender constructions, and more generally that "tonality . . . constructed musical analogs to such emergent ideals as rationality, individualism, progress, and centred subjectivity,"[15] McClary is of course drawing on the interpretive tradition associated with Adorno ("and explicated so compellingly by Rose Subotnik," she adds).[16] At the heart of this approach lies the claim that, in Adorno's words, music "presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws—problems which music contains within itself in the innermost cells of its technique."[17] In this way the tensions and contradictions of society are "defined as technical problems,"[18] from which it follows that social meaning can be decoded by appropriate analysis of musical texts. This, however, is where the trouble starts. One criticism of Adorno matches Agawu's barb about the searching, no-nonsense spirit of post-modern enquiry: Max Paddison complains that Adorno "does not really subject the traditional terms of his inherited analytical approach to the same kind of rigorous, self-reflective critique that he brings to his philosophical and sociological methodology."[19] And there is a further criticism of the 1990s musicologists that, perhaps surprisingly, might equally be made of Adorno: Miles's complaint that they "posit a relation between music and society yet develop only the former in detail."[20] It is not just that, as Richard Middleton says of Dick Hebdige's work on the mods (which is based on homologies between the music of bands like The Who and aspects of mod lifestyle or self-image), the fit between the two terms of the relationship is slack.[21] (I meant to imply as much, of course, in suggesting that the metaphor of war might fit the Ninth Symphony as well as that of sexual murder.) Nor is it just that such homologies depend on understanding both music and society at a level of abstraction which leaves any possibility of empirical demonstration far behind.[22] It is that, as many of Adorno's readers and critics have found, it is hard to put your finger on exactly how the linkage between musical and social structure is meant to work. Even Subotnik describes it as "indirect, complex, unconscious, undocumented, and mysterious."[23]

[15]McClary 2000, 65.

[16]McClary 2000, 119.

[17]Quoted in Martin 1995, 100 (from Adorno's "On the social situation of music," *Telos* 35 [1978]).

[18]Quoted in Martin 1995, 114.

[19]Paddison 1993, 171.

[20]Miles 1997, 728; by "the problem of mediation" referred to in his title, he means "the concrete links between music and society on the levels of production and reception" (723).

[21]Middleton 1990, 163. Middleton's general discussion of the concept of homology (159–66) emphasizes its links with the British cultural-studies tradition; for further perspectives see Martin 1995, Chapters 3 and 4; Moore 1993, 165–7, and Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 31–41.

[22]This criticism might in particular be levelled at John Shepherd's early work (e.g., Shepherd 1977), which itself is more reminiscent of Ernst Bloch than of Adorno. To provide a representative example, Bloch writes of the Viennese classical style that "the dominance of the melody-carrying upper part and mobility of the other parts correspond to the rise of the entrepreneur, just as the central cantus firmus and terraced polyphony [of earlier music] corresponded to the hierarchical society" (Bloch 1985, 201, quoted in Paddison 1993, 77). For the relationship between Adorno and Bloch, see Paddison 1993, 74–8.

[23]Subotnik 1976, 271.

Peter Martin, who quotes Subotnik's description, concurs with Miles in locating the problem at the social, or rather sociological, end of the relationship; he characterizes the failings of not only Adorno but also Shepherd and McClary as "reification of concepts such as society and social structure, and a potentially deterministic view of behaviour," adding that these "are among the failings of a 'structural' sociology in general" (he particularly has Durkheim in mind).[24] This critique cuts to the heart of the problem. In effect, Martin is saying, Adorno and his 1990s followers assume that social structure has some kind of objective existence, which is represented through homology within the patterns of music; this is what gives rise to the impression that social meaning is inherent in the music (as well as to the authoritative stance, the certainty, which characterizes Adorno's pronouncements). And that brings us back to the same paradox I have already mentioned, only more forcibly. As Martin explains, the basic disciplinary premise of sociology is that all such structures and meanings are socially constructed; as a result, the concept of the "natural," of structures and meanings that are materially rather than socially grounded, becomes the object of critique—in the same way, and for the same reasons, that the idea of the "purely musical" became an object of critique in musicological circles. And it is this premise of social constructionism, as definitive of the (then) "New" musicology as of sociology, that has caused critical attention consistently to veer away from the question of just how particular pieces of music might support particular meanings, and indeed whether there are constraints on the meaning that any particular piece can support. Kramer writes on the first page of *Music as Cultural Practice* that meaning is "inextricably bound up with the formal processes and stylistic articulations of musical works,"[25] but the specific manner of the binding remains unexplained. And in the absence of such explanation, the only safe model of the relationship between music and meaning would appear to be a Saussurian one—in other words, that it is arbitrary.

[24]Martin 1995, 162.

[25]Kramer 1990, 1.

But of course, if the relationship between music and meaning is simply an arbitrary one, wholly conditioned by historical contingency, then there is nothing in the music that can constrain interpretation. Just as in the case of the loosely fitting, overinterpreted homologies I have described, there is inadequate evidentiary basis for reasoned interpretive debate; as Agawu comments, "One's insights need not meet the test of intersubjective corroboration."[26] That is why email list discussions of McClary's work degenerate so quickly into flames. It is also why Leo Treitler made the acid observation that McClary's readings "seem precariously close to interpretations that are driven by little more than the need to make them," adding that such interpretations "are not different in form or verisimilitude from the sort of nineteenth-century hermeneutic that interpreted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in images drawn from Goethe's *Faust*."[27] And indeed there is a striking parallel between the conditions attending musical discourse today and those of a hundred and fifty years ago. Borrowing Middleton's useful phrase,[28] one might speak of a mid-nineteenth-century "rush to interpretation" in which extravagant claims about musical meaning were made in the absence of serious engagement with musical texts.[29] Under such circumstances it would be plausible to see the development later in the century of more formalized approaches to analysis as an attempt to regulate debate through principled reference to the relevant empirical data, in other words, the score.

That attempt, as I shall shortly argue, went well and truly off the rails. But the aim might still be thought a valid one. My purpose in this article, then, is to outline a way in which we can understand at least some of the meanings ascribed to music as at the same time

[26]Agawu 1997, 301.

[27]Treitler 1999, 369, 370; the remark about McClary relates specifically to her analysis of Mozart's Piano Concerto K. 453.

[28]Middleton 1990, 220.

[29]A vivid (although of course caricatured) impression of the interpretive babble that surrounded the Ninth Symphony is conveyed by Schumann 1947, 100–1.

irreducibly cultural *and* intimately related to its structural properties. And I shall suggest that engaging in this way with issues of meaning forms the basis of a theoretical project that does not reject or ignore the "New" musicological challenge to its disciplinary identity, but instead builds upon it.

HANSLICK'S LEGACY

It is convenient to borrow Lydia Goehr's terminology and see the development of nineteenth-century criticism as the conjunction of a "*transcendent* move from the worldly and the particular to the spiritual and the universal" and a "*formalist* move which brought meaning from the music's outside to its inside."[30] That way we can understand what happened towards the end of the century as a repudiation of the transcendent move, leaving the formalist one in place as the sole criterion of musical significance and value.

The most visible symbol of this is the way in which Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* came to be read as a denial of music's capacity to support expressive meaning. Looking back on it, it is hard to see how even so richly polysemic a text as *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* might have been thought to say *that*. A more careful reading might have seen it as asserting the continuity of structure and meaning, and arguing that any understanding of music's meaning has to be predicated on an understanding of its structure.[31] It would also have seen Hanslick's book as an exercise in aesthetic categorization, not denying music's expressive power but drawing a clear line between expression and beauty. What matters in this context is not so much what Hanslick meant, however, but what he was generally understood to mean. And by the early twentieth century, the generally accepted reading of Hanslick was that music was to be understood in exclusively structural terms while issues of meaning were ruled out of court. That became the orthodoxy on which, after the second world war, both music theory and (within the British empiricist tradition) the philosophy of music were based. In this way, the concept of structure acquired the narrowness by comparison with early- to mid-nineteenth-century formalism that Joseph Dubiel has complained about—a narrowness that, he says, has caused him to stop using the term altogether.[32]

This problematic Hanslickian inheritance is most evident in the work of those philosophers and, more recently, music theorists who have readmitted issues of meaning within academic debate, but on terms which maintain the underlying values of formalism: I shall refer mainly to Peter Kivy, Stephen Davies, and Robert Hatten, but could just as well have referred to Jerrold Levinson, Jenefer Robinson, Edward T. Cone, Leo Treitler, or Eero Tarasti. The basic premise of these writers is that, in Hatten's words, "musical meaning is inherently musical," so that in speaking of the expressive qualities of music, of its qualities of acquiescence, resignation, or abnegation, we are as much talking about the music as when we speak of themes, harmonic progressions, or formal prototypes.[33] It follows that, as Kivy argues, expressive concepts should be integrated within the analytical process. But this turns out to be rather problematic in practice.[34] Kivy attempts to demon-

[30]Goehr 1992, 153.

[31]Wilson Coker expresses the claim more explicitly: "For musical works to be effective bearers of metaphoric meanings, they are expected to be adequate sign vehicles, coherently organized in themselves so as to sustain pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic dimensions" (Coker 1972, 153). Scott Burnham effectively reiterates this when he says that "precisely because music is musical it can speak to us of things that are not strictly musical" (Burnham 1997, 326; this passage also appears in Burnham 1999, 215).

[32]Dubiel 1997, 313; for similar comments see Maus 1988, 73.

[33]Hatten 1994, 276. The same is claimed by Cone: "formal and expressive concepts are not separable but represent two ways of understanding the same problem" (Cone 1974, 112) and echoed by Newcomb: "Formal and expressive interpretations are in fact two complementary ways of understanding the same phenomena" (Newcomb 1984, 636); Treitler has written an entire article on the topic (Treitler 1997).

[34]Kivy 1993a, 316–17. For a more extended exposition of the following argument, see Cook & Dibben (forthcoming).

strate what he means through a comparative discussion of Haydn's symphonies "La Passione" and "La Poule," but all that really happens is that he substitutes expressive labels for technical ones: he speaks of "the passage from light to dark emotions" where the rest of us might speak of the passage from A major to F minor,[35] but otherwise little changes. And while Hatten's analyses are much more sophisticated, not least because of his concern to locate structural features within the context of historically grounded expressive codes, there is a prevailing impression that what is being put forward is a structural interpretation that is either being expressed in emotional vocabulary, like Kivy's, or else having expressive meaning grafted onto it at the last moment (his discussion of the first movement of Beethoven's op. 130 is a particular case in point).[36] It is telling that Hatten often begins with a stylistically informed expressive characterization and then refines it through structural analysis, but he never reassesses a formal analysis on the basis of his expressive interpretation; only sporadically, as in his discussion of the *Cavatina* from op. 130, do we get a sense of the expressive analysis genuinely counterpointing the structural one—for example, by demonstrating expressive coherence just where the music is structurally incoherent. Although Hatten refers to "the interaction of expressive and structural features" in this movement,[37] he does not really theorize the kind of oppositional relationship between them on which such an interaction might be based, and indeed it is difficult to see how he very well could, given the premise that musical meaning is inherently musical.[38] I shall return to this issue at the end of this article.

[35]Kivy 1993a, 322.

[36]Consider, for instance, his description of mm. 5–6 of the op. 130 *Cavatina:* "The 'willed' (basically stepwise) ascent takes on a hopeful character supported by the stepwise bass. (Note that the wedge-like expansion 'opens up' emotional as well as registral space, and overrides the potential 'lament' connotation of a stepwise descent in the bass.)" (Hatten 1994, 213–14).

[37]Hatten 1994, 320 (n. 8).

[38]A similar ambivalence may be found in Karl & Robinson 1997: on one page they say of the relationship between structure and expression that "we consider this dichotomy ill-conceived" (176), on the next, that "the formal function of particular passages can often be accurately described only in *expressive* terms." (The second statement reinscribes the very dichotomy that the first denied.) For further discussion of the extent to which writers like Karl & Robinson, Hatten, Maus, Fisk, and Guck address the "interaction" between structure and expression to which several of them refer, see Cook & Dibben (forthcoming).

It would be convenient if not entirely accurate to describe this approach to musical meaning as neo-Hanslickian;[39] at any rate, it is a position much closer to Hanslick's own views than those ascribed to him in the century after the publication of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen,* one that does not reject music's meaningfulness but rather inscribes meaning within the musical text. And, whether implicitly or explicitly, this intimate alignment of music and meaning is generally underwritten by an idea that Hanslick himself put forward,[40] and that has since then been taken up by philosophers and music theorists from Langer to Coker and from Meyer to Shepherd: the tensional or energetic patterns of music correspond in some manner to what Langer called the "logical expression" or "general forms of feeling,"[41] so evoking (in Shepherd's and Wicke's more convoluted formulation) "an order of human relationships mediated somatically and experienced as powerful and encompassing internal affective states."[42] Two points

[39]The inaccuracy is most evident in the areas in which Kivy and Hatten, in particular, disassociate themselves from Hanslickian formalism, although how far they are disassociating themselves from the real or the received Hanslick is a moot point.

[40]Hanslick 1986, 11; such thinking has an eighteenth-century prehistory, for instance, in the works of Johann Mattheson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

[41]Langer 1942, 218, 238.

[42]Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 113; for a closely related formulation see Sloboda 1998, 28. For general bibliographic references concerning this approach see Cook 1998, 79 (n. 62) and Davies 1994, 230. Shepherd & Wicke's mention of the "somatic" suggests the possibility of developing this model through linking it to the role of the body as the grounding metaphor of human conceptualization (Johnson 1992); see also the discussion of metaphor in Hatten 1994, 162–72.

need to be made about this idea, which I shall call, borrowing Kivy's term, the "contour" theory of musical expression.[43]

The first is that the relationship it posits between music and meaning is inherently mysterious. It is mysterious because of the impossibility of defining the "logical form" of human feelings except in terms of such behavioral expressions of them as music or dance, from which it follows, as Roger Scruton has pointed out, that the invocation of the concept is redundant:[44] one cannot coherently argue for a relationship between A and B if the only way to define B is A. (The mystery is as deep as that presented by Adorno's homologies between musical and social structure, and closely related: when Shepherd and Wicke write that "there may well exist a structural relationship between the internal characteristics of drum sounds and the logics and structures of 'militariness',"[45] it is hard to say whether music is being linked to affective or social structure, but in neither case is it remotely clear how you might set about defining the "logics and structures of 'militariness'.") The second point is that, through being understood in terms of such internal affective states, meaning is being implicitly imputed to an experiencing subject; much of the literature concerning musical meaning revolves around the issue of whether that experiencing subject is to be identified with the composer, the listener, or in some more or less obscure sense, the music itself.[46] One might accordingly object that the entire approach, while presenting itself as a general philosophy of music, is in reality predicated on nineteenth-century constructions of bourgeois subjectivity (not unreasonably, considering its origins in Hanslick), and therefore of limited historical, geographical, and perhaps even social application.

Part of Hanslick's legacy, then, has been a fragmentation of thinking about musical meaning. Nowhere in Davies's apparently exhaustive book *Musical Meaning and Expression* is there serious consideration of music having social meaning (Adorno, for instance, appears only once in the main text, forecasting that one day children will whistle dodecaphonic tunes as they deliver papers!).[47] Conversely, Shepherd and Wicke's more culturally oriented book, which the authors describe, in the very first sentence, as being "about processes of affect and meaning in music,"[48] manages to omit any reference whatsoever to Kivy, Davies, or Hatten (or for that matter Levinson, Robinson, Cone, Treitler, or Tarasti).

In saying this, I do not mean to imply that there should, or could, be a grand, unifying theory of musical meaning: as Francis Sparshott observes, "Perhaps we need to consider a lot of diverse phenomena, only vaguely connected."[49] But it does seem that there are important varieties of musical meaning (and, from the music theorist's perspective, possibly the most interesting) that fall into the gap between an approach that sees meaning as inherent in the music, as in the case of the neo-Hanslickians, and one that claims it to be a purely social construction (as in the case of the neo-Adornians). To take just one example, to which I shall return, it is everyday experience that the music of television commercials shapes and nuances the advertisers' messages; in such cases the semiotic process depends on the difference between

[43]As distinct from the "convention" theory (i.e., arbitrary signification): see Kivy 1980, Chapter 8.

[44]Scruton 1997, 147 (n. 7); for a further critique of Langer see Davies 1994, 132–3. Davies's concept of "emotion characteristics in appearances" (221–8), according to which the gestural properties of music are aligned with such observables as the "jauntiness" of a particular gait, overcomes some of these problems since it substitutes observable properties for hidden mental states.

[45]Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 156.

[46]The starting point for this debate is Cone 1974 but contributors include, among others, Newcomb, Kivy, Robinson, and Maus; for a recent formulation in the context of experimental psychology see Watt & Ash 1998, especially 49–50, while for a sophisticated analytical study centered on the construction of subjectivity, see Cumming 1997.

[47]Davies 1994, 359–60.

[48]Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 7.

[49]Sparshott 1998, 24; for a typology of musical meanings see Davies 1994, 29–36. Sparshott also comments that it is "hard to see what a *theory* in this area could be a theory of, or what purpose it might serve" (33–4), but Scruton, as usual, has the answer: "a theory of musical meaning is a theory of what we understand when we hear with understanding" (Scruton 1997, 169).

music and meaning (it clearly invokes worldly and not just "inherently musical" meaning), but at the same time there is an intimate binding between the unfolding of the music and the emergence of that meaning.

That we might often wish to see musical meaning in such a way is plain enough. Edward T. Cone asserts that "a piece of music allows a wide but not unrestricted range of possible expression";[50] more concretely (and again with reference to Haydn's "La Poule"), James Johnson argues that you might hear the oboe's dotted-note patterns as a hen, or equally as an expression of merriment, or even as "an essential thread in a web of indescribable content"—but what you cannot credibly do, he says, is argue "that it is a funeral dirge, or paints the storming of the Bastille, or promotes slavery."[51] Such formulations reflect a view of music and meaning as interacting with one another: as different, but linked. Again, Shepherd and Wicke speak of "the construction of meanings through music's sounds [that] can be understood as being socially negotiated but *not* arbitrary."[52] And, of course, there is in principle no reason why musical meaning cannot be at the same time both culturally constructed and conditioned by formal structure (as Martin says, social constructionism need not imply that "musical meanings . . . must be random, or that any pattern of sound is likely to represent any object or idea").[53] Indeed, critical commentaries on music frequently make this an implicit, common-sense assumption. But common-sense assumptions are insufficient to regulate critical discourse, and the ideologically inspired veering away from issues of the material grounding of meaning to which I referred has militated against the development of more principled approaches. For this reason the most telling formulation is Richard Middleton's: "it seems likely," he says, "that in practice there are . . . *limits* to the transmutation of meaning."[54] The phrase "it seems likely" simultaneously conveys the urge to believe this and the absence of any principled basis for doing so. The challenge for the theorist, then, is to find a third way, and so pass between the Scylla of inherent and the Charybdis of social constructed meaning.

[50]Cone 1974, 166.

[51]Johnson 1995, 2.

[52]Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 116.

[53]Martin 1995, 72 (see also 144–5). For Martin, this is entirely compatible with meanings being " 'arbitrary', in the technical sense," so it is necessary to view this particular word with caution; cf. Davies's comment that "there is an unfortunate tendency to treat 'conventional' as equivalent to 'arbitrary' and to regard all conventions as structuring symbol systems dedicated to generating semantic content" (Davies 1994, 39).

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

There is a general tendency for critical discussions of musical meaning to assimilate it to verbal signification. Miles argues that McClary "treats music as if it were almost linguistic in nature: witness the liberal use of verbs such as 'articulates' . . . McClary's metaphors effectively convey her insights into the social meanings of music but at times they obscure the distinction between music and language."[55] Particularly revealing in this context is a prevailing suspicion, particularly evident in Kramer's writings, of the associated ideas of immediacy and ineffability. The grounds for suspicion are plain enough: meaning that lies beyond the range of critical discourse will by definition present itself as immanent and indeed natural, thereby contravening the social-constructionist principles to which I have referred. And since Kramer's background is in literary studies, it is hardly surprising if he identifies meaning with language and thinks in terms of the mutual permeability of text and commentary.[56] But music is not language, at

[54]Middleton 1990, 154.

[55]Miles 1995, 26.

[56]Kramer asserts that the work "resists fully disclosing itself, that in certain important respects it is mute, and that we ourselves understand it at first in terms we must work to articulate" (Kramer 1990, 5). This looks at first sight like a defence of ineffability but in reality is not, for the premise of Kramer's criticism is that music "must be *made* to yield to understanding" (6, my italics), in other words that it can be made to talk.

least in more than a partial and analogical sense, and if we are to draw on other cultural practices for models of musical meaning, then it would make equally good sense to turn to the study of material culture, where issues of ineffability cannot be airily waved away.[57]

In his book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption,* Daniel Miller writes of

> the inadequacies and crudity of language when faced with objects in everyday interaction . . . Imagine for a moment attempting to describe in detail the difference in shape between a milk bottle and a sherry bottle, or the taste of cod as against haddock, or the design of some wallpaper. Clearly, compared with our ability to make fine discriminations of perceptual qualities and immediately to recognize and discriminate amidst a profusion of ordinary objects, linguistic description may appear slow and clumsy.[58]

And in a similar vein, in his essay on some Eisenstein stills, Barthes spoke of the "obtuse" meaning of visual images, a meaning that is "evident, erratic, obstinate," and that defies explicit formulation or representation: as he says, it is "theoretically locatable but not describable."[59] Such views run parallel with the widespread intuition that music, too, resists comprehensive verbal formulation—views hard to shrug off as just lingering Romantic ideology (in the case of Scott Burnham, for instance, for whom "we hear music speak . . . not by reducing it to some other set of circumstances but by allowing it the opacity of its own voice"[60]). It follows that the interpretation of material culture might provide a useful model for musical meaning to complement the widespread, though often tacit, appropriation of models derived from language or from literary texts.

How, then, do objects signify? Through the social construction of meaning, to be sure. Like a literary or musical text, a pot or a picture does not simply have meaning built into it, just waiting to be discovered. Accordingly, Miller rejects "the idea of physicality as some 'ultimate constraint' or final determining factor," instead emphasizing that

> even a cursory examination of artefacts as actually employed within different societies reveals the extreme diversity of uses and connotations among physically similar forms . . . Societies have an extraordinary capacity either to consider objects as having attributes which may not appear as evident to outsiders, or else to ignore attributes which would have appeared to those same outsiders as being inextricably part of that object.[61]

But in saying that the meaning of the object is socially constructed, he is not saying that it is simply or exclusively arbitrary. And it is the idea of the *attribute* that enables him to find a way between these two positions. The argument is in essence a simple one: any pot or picture has an indefinite, though not infinite, number of physical attributes, and each society makes its own selection from and interpretation of those attributes. (It is perhaps easiest to see what this might mean in terms of the different ways certain paintings have been seen at different times: Hans van Meegeren's Vermeer forgeries, for example, originally fooled the experts but look quite different from the originals now. The shift in the way they are seen reflects a different selection of attributes, and their price has changed accordingly.) The meaning that the object acquires within a particular culture is thus supported by—

[57]It is a curious fact that so many musicologists and theorists have embraced Goehr's image of the "imaginary museum of musical works" without really considering the implied parallel between musical works and what real museums contain, that is to say material artefacts. To pursue this observation would take me beyond the bounds of this article, but I have in mind the possibility that the most appropriate models of narrativity in music might be drawn not from literature but from the manner in which turn-of-the-century museology conveyed social-evolutionary and diffusionist paradigms through the collocation of material artefacts (Miller 1987, 110–11).

[58]Miller 1987, 98.

[59]Barthes 1977, 53, 65.

[60]Burnham 1997, 326.

[61]Miller 1987, 105, 109.

and at the same time helps to stabilize—the specific selection of attributes which that culture has made; it helps to make the object what it *is* for that culture. In this way, while meaning is socially constructed, it is both enabled and constrained by the available attributes of the object.

Before we can confidently apply a model drawn from material culture to the analysis of musical meaning, however, we need to address a very obvious distinction between the two forms of cultural practice. Material objects are, in Goodman's terminology,[62] autographic; they may be replicated, but each object has its own independent existence. Musical objects, by contrast, are allographic, instanced equally by scores, performances, or sound recordings. In this way the notational trace represented by the score—or, frequently, by a number of more or less diverging scores—is supplemented or substituted by the multiple acoustic traces of performances and recordings, each of which manifests its own forms of empirical resistance in both the semiotic process and its analysis; what we think of as "a piece" of music should really be conceived as an indefinitely extended series of traces (and when I speak of the musical trace in this article, it is a shorthand for the entire series).[63] But this is only part of a larger issue: the extent to which one can usefully draw analogies between the autographic and the performing arts. And for this reason it is helpful to complement the material culture analogy I have put forward with a further one drawn from theatre studies.

In her book *A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text,* Susan Melrose is concerned with the way in which dramatic meaning is negotiated between theatrical performers, rather than inhering in the text and being reproduced in performance. (This approach is equally relevant to musical performance, but I shall explore that on another occasion.) Where a modernist critic might have looked for coherence and unity, Melrose invokes the decentered concept of a "bundle of . . . semiotic potential, held together by the differing energetic input of group members faced with the demands for immediate concrete work" and "ceaselessly negotiated" between them, resulting in "a cluster of different contributions which produce, even 'in the moment' of what looks like 'a single action,' a tension and a certain semiotic heterogeneity."[64] As constructed in performance, then, meaning is emergent: it is not reproduced in but created through the act of performance. And it is this emergent quality, together with the idea of a bundle or cluster of semiotic potential, that I want to invoke in the analysis of musical meaning. For, like physical objects, the material traces of music support a range of possible meanings, and like Melrose's image of performance interaction, they can be thought of as bundles comprised of an indefinite number of attributes from which different selections will be made within different cultural traditions, or on different occasions of interpretation. We might speak of differential semantic parsing, and this is one source for the cultural variability of musical meaning, one way in which there is an articulation—a degree of play—in the relationship between music and its meanings.

But there is also another source, which will take longer to explain. As I have suggested, one of the problems with the "contour" theory of musical expression is that it binds meaning so closely to music as to become, to all intents and purposes, immanent; it doesn't, in other words, recognize the articulation to which I have just referred. And because of this, and in order to accommodate empirical evidence that listeners do not exactly agree on what emotions a given piece of music expresses, neo-Hanslickian philosophers like Kivy and Davies have argued that music can express only gross emotional qualities, such as happiness or sadness, but not more nuanced emotions such as joy, elation, delight, and high spirits on the one hand, or grief, despondency, dejection, depression, gloom, moping, and broken-heartedness on the other (regrettably, there are more words for "sad" than "happy").[65] This argument is based on the premise that these more nuanced or

[62]Goodman 1969.

[63]For further discussion, see Cook 1999.

[64]Melrose 1994, 221–2.

[65]See Davies 1994, 226, where this argument is set out in detail.

"higher" emotions require a formal (intentional) object, in the sense that one cannot just be proud or envious, one has to be proud or envious *of* someone or something; music cannot supply formal objects, or so the argument goes, and hence it is restricted to simple, objectless emotions or moods, like happiness and sadness.[66] In short, music can only express unnuanced emotion.

I have observed in another context that this conclusion is hardly calculated to satisfy musicologists (hence the prolonged but inconclusive exchange of essays between Kivy and Anthony Newcomb) and that, perhaps unexpectedly, it is Hanslick who suggests the way forward.[67] In an early formulation of what has since become known as the cognitive theory of the emotions,[68] Hanslick argued that emotions like longing, hope, or love depend on a formal object, in the absence of which, as he puts it, "all that remains is an unspecific stirring, perhaps the awareness of a general state of well-being or distress."[69] (This is not so different from what Kivy and Davies claim that music *is* capable of expressing.) But Hanslick pursues his thought in a different direction:

> Love cannot be thought without the representation of a beloved person, without desire and striving after felicity, glorification and possession of a particular object. Not some kind of mere mental agitation, but its conceptual core, its real, historical content, specifies this feeling of love. Accordingly, its dynamic can appear as readily gentle as stormy, as readily joyful as sorrowful, and yet still be love . . . Music can only express the various accompanying adjectives and never the substantive, e.g., love itself.

In short, then, Hanslick is arguing that music is highly ineffective as a means of conveying emotion, but what it *does* convey is nuance.[70] Or even more succinctly: music conveys not unnuanced emotion but emotionless nuance.

And that, I suggest, provides the key to a model of musical meaning that understands it as neither immanent nor arbitrary, but rather negotiated and emergent, just as Melrose sees dramatic meaning. I can make the point very simply by referring to a television commercial, about which I have written elsewhere, in which shots of a Citroën ZX 16v powering its way up twisting country lanes are aligned with extracts from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* overture.[71] Heard in this context, the energetic and expressive attributes of Mozart's music—in other words, its nuances—cluster themselves around the car, transferring to it the qualities of power and verve and grace associated with them, and at the same time endowing it with connotations of prestige and high culture. (I shall go into this process in a bit more detail below.) The music, so to speak, seeks out the qualities of the car, and conversely the image of the speeding Citroën might be said to interpret the music. And so a composite meaning emerges, one which was immanent in neither the overture nor the car. That, of course, is an example of multimedia, not of "music alone," to borrow Kivy's phrase (which he in turn seems to have borrowed from Hanslick).[72] But it is central to my argument that music never *is* "alone," that it is always received in a discursive context, and that it is through the interaction of music and interpreter, text and context, that meaning is constructed, as a result of which the meaning attributed to any given material trace will vary according to the circumstances of its reception. In this way it is wrong to speak of music *having* particular meanings; rather it has the potential for specific meanings to emerge under specific circumstances. Or to borrow a

[66]This argument is widely but not universally accepted: for exceptions see the contrasting accounts of the complex emotion of hope offered by Levinson 1990 and Karl & Robinson 1997.

[67]See Cook 1998, 86–97.

[68]Kivy 1993b, 284.

[69]Hanslick 1986, 9.

[70]In Cook 1998, 94, I suggested that precisely this is implied by Hanslick's admittedly undeveloped analogy with silhouettes (see Hanslick 1986, 18). I have previously advanced the same general argument in Cook 1996, 121–2.

[71]Cook 1998, 4–8.

[72]Kivy 1990; Hanslick 1986, 2 (but Kivy would probably have referred to Gustav Cohen's translation, where the phrase appears more prominently: Hanslick 1974, 17).

term from J. J. Gibson,[73] music does not have specific meanings, but it *affords* sentiments of love, grace, prestige, desire, whatever. And that is a second way in which there is an articulation in the relationship between music and meaning, and hence another source of the cultural variability of musical meaning.

CONSTRUCTING MEANING: A CASE STUDY

In speaking of the "material trace" of music I am borrowing from Jean-Jacques Nattiez, who in his *Music and Discourse* substitutes this term for what (following Molino) he had previously called the "neutral level."[74] Although it still looks uncomfortably like the score in drag, the later term at least avoids some of the patent difficulties of the earlier one: there is after all something paradoxical about the idea of the neutral level, in that it is hard to see how it can be conceived in terms that do not invoke either the poietic or the esthesic, if not both. In other words (those of a famous Oxford limerick about Berkeley's philosophy), the neutral level is the opposite of the tree in the quad: it is only there when you are not thinking about it.

But that there is a need for some such conception can again be illustrated through the comparison with material culture. Objects do not present themselves as separable from the meanings they support. Instead, they appear to us as meaningful through and through, as if meaning was immanent within them. In just the same way, the double articulation between music and meaning to which I have referred is imperceptible. And so, when McClary describes the point of recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony as an expression of "murderous rage and yet a kind of pleasure in its fulfillment of formal demands,"[75] it may come to be heard that way by her readers in just the same, self-evident manner that a generation of British critics and listeners heard it as a representation of cosmic catastrophe. Where Tovey, writing in the 1930s, said that "we see the heavens on fire," Robert Simpson, writing after the war, spoke of "the sky . . . blazing from horizon to horizon," and Basil Lam of a "flame of incandescent terror." Each writer gives the impression of not being engaged in a hermeneutic exercise but simply saying how the music is.[76] In this way, the plurality of music's meanings is not a phenomenological given but has to be deduced from the study of its reception.

At this point, it is helpful to develop in greater detail the parallel I have already invoked between the experiencing of music and that of such mixed genres as the television commercial, film, or music video, where words, pictures, and music are typically experienced not as separate or even separable components, but as combined with one another and replete with meaning. In my book on analyzing musical multimedia, I developed a model for the analysis of such combinations based on George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's concept of metaphor, more recently developed by Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier under the title "conceptual blending."[77] The model has two basic elements. First, there is what I call an "enabling similarity":[78] there must be common attributes presented by the various media in question (music and moving image, say), in the absence of which there would be no perceptual interaction between them. Second, there is what Turner and Fauconnier term the "blended space," in which the attributes unique to each medium are combined, resulting in the emergence of new meaning. The Citroën commercial to which I have referred

[73]Moore has also applied Gibson's concept of affordance, originally developed in the context of visual perception, to musical meaning (Moore 1993, 6; see also Cook 1998, 96).

[74]Nattiez 1990, 15.

[75]McClary 1991, 128.

[76]Tovey 1935–9, vol 2, 100; Simpson 1970, 60; Lam 1966, 161. See Cook 1993, 66–7.

[77]Cook 1998, Chapters 2–3; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Turner 1996; Turner & Fauconnier 1995. A major element of the original theory, not incorporated within my adaptation of it, is the hypothesis that all metaphors are ultimately grounded in body schemata, creating a potential link with "contour" theory (see n. 42 above).

[78]Cook 1998, 70.

provides a convenient illustration. The alignment of music and moving image works, obviously, around the representation of the car that is being promoted (see the top square of Example 1).[79] In the left- and right-hand squares (film and music spaces), we have some of the corresponding attributes of the two media (no doubt there are others, but it is the framework rather than the detail of the analysis that I want to convey). And at the bottom, we have the blended space in which the meaning of the commercial emerges: the qualities of agility, precision, style, and prestige associated with Mozart's music are drawn from it, so to speak, and transferred to or predicated of the ZX 16v. In that predication lies the advertiser's message.

My point is that we can model an interpretation of the recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony in just the same way. Example 2 is a representation of the Tovey/Simpson/Lam interpretation, which is based mainly on the quality of sustained, glaring brilliance shared by Beethoven's music and the image of the sky on fire. The result is to transfer to the music the qualities encoded within the image: on the one hand a sense of the remote and the inhuman, and on the other connotations of catastrophe and terror. (Though the Tovey passage predates the Second World War, I cannot imagine Simpson writing of the sky "blazing from horizon to horizon" or Lam of a "flame of incandescent terror" without evoking the memory of the devastating bombing raids on British cities from 1940 on—and so we have come back to a war-like interpretation of the Ninth after all). We might even think of this as a discovery within the music of these qualities, in the sense that the interpretation builds upon the music's semantic potential. And it does so by virtue of a number of specific attributes of the musical trace, as shown by the "music space" box in Example 2. There is the sheer, sustained stasis of the D-major chord; the fortissimo brass tones heighten its perceptual brightness, and the effect is underlined by the emphatic first-inversion voicing. There is also the very fact of the major mode, wholly unanticipated in the preceding measures, of which Tovey remarks that "there is something very terrible about this triumphant major tonic, and it is almost a relief when it turns into the minor as the orchestra crashes into the main theme."[80] These particular attributes, then, are foregrounded by the image of the sky on fire, so illustrating what I mean by the selection of attributes from the musical trace.

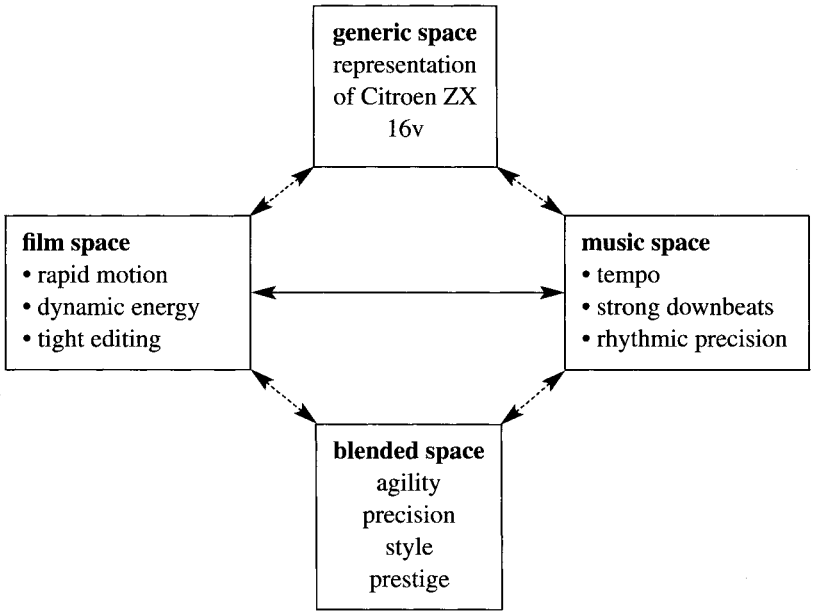
By contrast, McClary's interpretation involves a quite different selection of attributes. At this point it is worth recalling what McClary actually says.[81] It all turns on a kind of sustained *double entendre* around the word "subject," which she uses simultaneously in a traditional analytical sense (interchangeable with "theme") and in the sense of the putative subject whose experiences the music expresses. The first part of the movement, she says, has seen the arduous individuation of the subject from the "womblike void" of the opening, the construction of an identity maintained "only by virtue of the subject's constant violent self-assertion"—a self-assertion that takes the form of resisting the desire for cadential closure built into the generic narrative of the symphony. This means that the point of recapitulation carries with it a double threat: loss of identity through regression to the undifferentiated state of the opening, and the irresistible demand for cadence into the tonic towards which, as she puts it, "the whole background structure of the movement has inexorably driven." The image of the sexual killer emerges quite logically from these premises: in McClary's words, "the desire for cadential arrival that has built up over the course of the development finally erupts, as the subject necessarily (because of the narrative tradition) finds itself in the throes of the initial void while refusing to relent: the entire first key area in the recapitulation is pockmarked with explosions. It is the consequent juxtaposition of desire and unspeakable violence in this moment that creates its unparalleled

[79]The graphic representation is adapted from Zbikowski 1999; in Turner & Fauconnier's (1995) terminology it is a conceptual integration network (CIN).

[80]Tovey 1935–9, vol. 2, 100.

[81]McClary 1991, 128, where the following quotations will all be found.

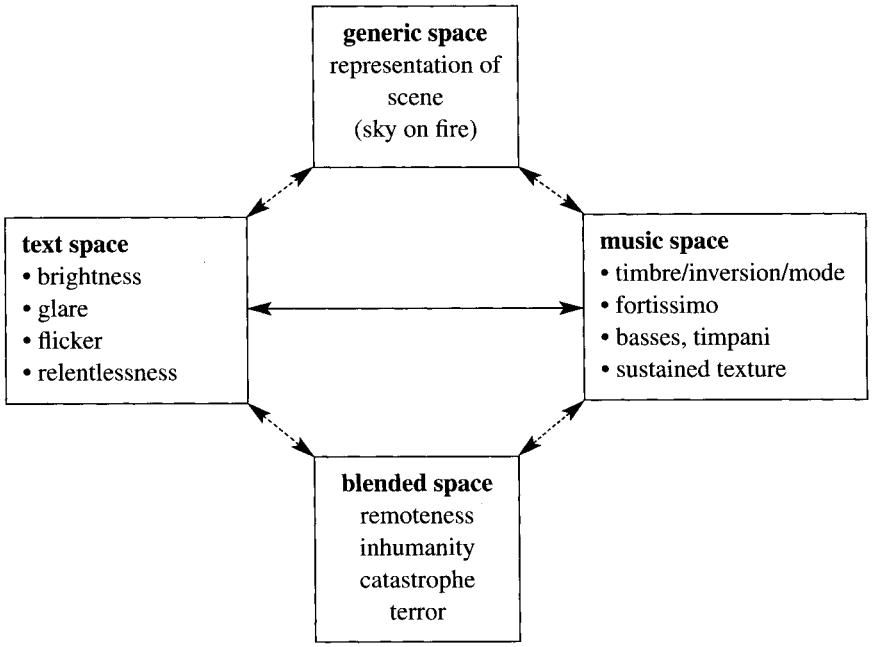
Example 1. Conceptual integration network for a car commercial



fusion of murderous rage and yet a kind of pleasure in its fulfillment of formal demands" (and there, of course, are the words I previously quoted).

Here, then, the blending of music and image results in a quite different set of semantic properties from the Tovey/Lam/Simpson interpretation; instead of a remote, inhuman terror, we have an all-too-human menace, a mixture of repression and oppression, the imminent invasion of personal space or worse. As Example 3 shows, this interpretation is articulated around not the sustained glare of the music, but rather its inner tension, its eruptive qualities. And that in turn is based on, and hence foregrounds, a quite different selection of attributes from the musical trace: the obliteration of thematic identity (instead of stasis); the effectively arrhythmic, eruptive sixteenth-note upbeats; and the transgressive, almost twisted progression through which the music lurches from the first-inversion D-major triad to a root-position B♭-major one (particularly striking is the incoherence, in terms of contemporary norms, of the F♯–F♮–B♭ bass line in m. 312). In this way, and despite its historical implausibility, McClary's sexual interpretation does the same as Tovey's war-like one: it builds on the objective properties of the musical trace in such a way as to construct and communicate a quite distinctive way of experiencing the passage. (This means that, *pace* Treitler, it can justifiably be seen as driven by the music and not just the need to interpret it.) And again as in Taylor's interpretation, the blend of music and image results in a new, which is to say emergent, meaning; there could hardly be a

Example 2. Conceptual integration network for Tovey's interpretation of Beethoven, op. 125, I, mm. 301 ff.



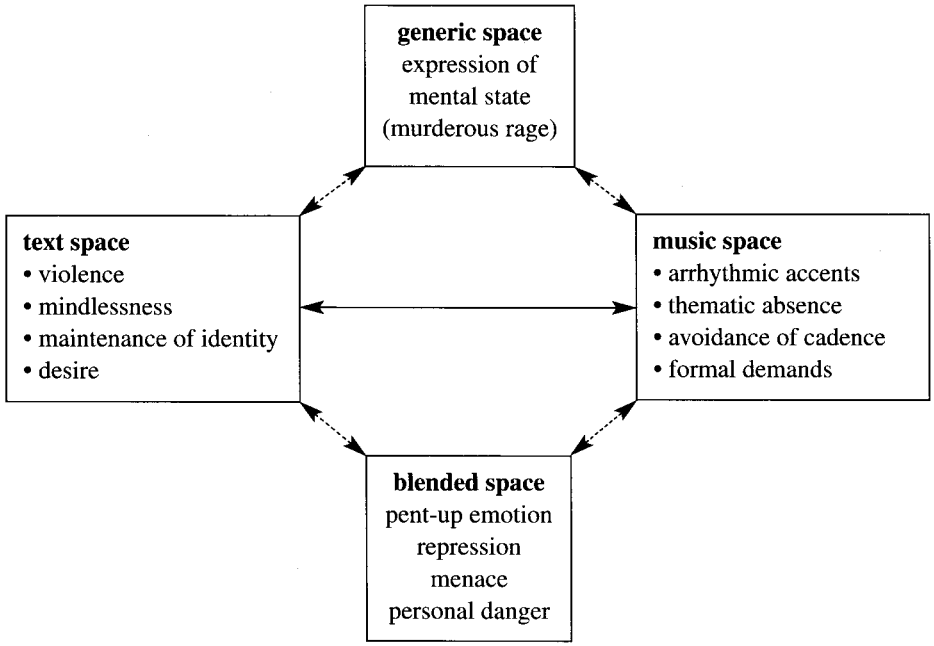
clearer illustration of the way in which the critical and analytical discourse that surrounds music is engaged in the very act of creating meaning.[82] We shall never be able to shake our experience free from this powerful interpretation—that is, until the next one comes along.

[82]This is discussed at length in Rabinowitz 1992; see also, for instance, Kingsbury 1988, 201 ("musicological discourse is not simply talking and writing 'about music,' but is also constitutive of music") and Bohlman 1993. In a sense this entire section has been an illustration of Burnham's (1995, 31) succinct claim that Beethoven's music "is not so much *about* anything in a directly referential sense but acts as a disembodied yet compelling force that attracts whatever is at hand as long as it is remotely commensurable."

REHABILITATING THE INEFFABLE

I have outlined a way in which we can understand musical meanings as afforded (and hence constrained) by the properties of the musical trace while at the same time recognizing their cultural constructedness, and suggested that this provides a way of passing between Scylla and Charybdis. As I shall now argue, it also gives

Example 3. Conceptual integration network for McClary's interpretation of Beethoven, op. 125, I, mm. 301 ff.



rise to a distinction between what I shall call "potential" and "actualized" meaning, and the fact that we apply the same word—meaning—to two quite distinct things is responsible for a good deal of the confusion that surrounds issues of musical meaning.[83]

[83]The distinction I am drawing is related to Coker's (1972, 151–2) contrast between "pre-linguistic" and "linguistic" meaning, though it is not clear to me that Coker's "instinctual, affective response" (152) is the same as what I refer to as the experience of meaningfulness. Compare also Coker's further distinction between "acquaintance" and "discursive" meaning (171–81), and that which Lucy Green (1998) makes between "inherent" and "delineated" meaning, itself echoing Meyer's (1956) "embodied" and "designative" meaning. A parallel distinction is sometimes drawn between "meaning" and "interpretation," generally with the aim of setting limits on the latter (see below, n. 93).

When I spoke earlier of "semantic potential," I was referring to something more than a merely theoretical potential for meaning. The tensional or energetic qualities on which the "contour" theory is based are given in perception, and I would maintain that they are *experienced* as a potential for meaning as yet undefined;[84] it was just this experience I had in mind when I spoke of music conveying emotionless nuance. (Perhaps the best analogy is hearing conversation in a language you do not know: you do not grasp the meaning, but you do sense its meaningfulness.) But there is a

[84]For Green, by contrast, "we can only ever experience music when its inherent materials temporally reach consciousness as meanings in terms of their status as a historically defined, delineated musical unity" (Green 1998, 33).

further component of this experience, and that is an urge to create the kind of explicit meaning that depends on words for its formulation and communication; I have elsewhere likened this interpretive desire to the compulsion to tell a secret.[85] And interpretation means transforming potential meaning into actualized meaning in the manner I described in the previous section. This is what happens every time a writer in the neo-Hanslickian tradition identifies an expressive characteristic in the music. (In fact, it would be possible to reformulate the "contour" theory in terms of a conceptual integration network defined by tensional or energetic attributes.) It is for this reason that there is a kind of sleight of hand in the impression these writers give of simply describing how the music is, when in reality they are in the business of proposing interpretations and so constructing actualized meaning.

And that brings me back to some of the issues I raised at the beginning of this article. We can see that the disturbing impression McClary gives of discovering meanings just "waiting to be read," as DeNora put it, derives not from the interpretations themselves but rather from the way that McClary appears to draw them directly from the music: the double articulation between musical trace and actualized meaning (in the selection of attributes, and in their incorporation within a critical interpretation) is disguised behind an account that gives every indication of simply telling it how it is. But there is a more general issue here. The social constructionism which underwrote the culturally oriented musicology of the 1990s entailed a denial that there could be such a thing as unmediated access to musical meaning (along with a thoroughgoing suspicion of theory as a discipline allegedly dedicated to interpreting music directly, in and for itself, without reference to the mediating role of social and cultural knowledge). But not all the writers associated with the "New" musicology would have signed on to this creed—not Philip Brett, for example, who has called music "an enclave in our society—a sisterhood or brotherhood of lovers, music lovers, united by an unmediated form of communication that is only by imperfect analogy called a language, 'the' language of feeling."[86] What is at issue here is not just Brett's explicit description of music as "unmediated" communication: it is his optimistic invocation of music as a means of bridging cultural difference and creating a sense of shared identity. This position contrasts starkly with Gary Tomlinson's strictures concerning the colonizing qualities of aesthetic appreciation and the necessity of maintaining cultural distance, strictures that themselves developed out of a protracted controversy between Tomlinson and Kramer, during the course of which Kramer accused Tomlinson of wanting a "musicology without music."[87]

This tangled pattern of dissent even between those more or less within the "New" musicological orbit reflects, I think, not so much a healthy variety of opinion as a confusion between the different senses in which music may be described as meaningful. As I have suggested, musical meanings are actualized through processes of critical interpretation that are culturally and historically contingent; in this sense meaning is indeed a cultural construction, and it is this that justifies Tomlinson's warnings against the danger of too easy an understanding of the music of other times and places, along with the illusory sense of communality which it creates. But the same does not apply to the more pre-reflective level at which music is experienced as potential meaning, as "pure" nuance, so to speak. Of course, "pre-reflective" is not the same as "pre-cultural," and even the musical attributes on which

[85]Cook 1998, 267. It might be objected that the desire to interpret music is not restricted to verbal expression but also encompasses, for instance, dance, film, and even musical performance. While this is true, none of these involve the kind of complementation, based on the opposed values of connotation and denotation, that is created by the alignment of music with words; one might speak in such cases of a process of triangulation, a progressive refinement of connotation resulting from the blend, but that is not the same thing.

[86]Brett 1994, 18. Treitler similarly speaks of the "unmediated" experience of foreboding in music (Treitler 1997, 44).

[87]See Tomlinson 1993a, Kramer 1993 (the reference to "musicology without music" is on p. 27), and Tomlinson 1993b.

the "contour" theory is based may involve culture-specific patterns of implication and realization.[88] But there are also attributes for which this may not be the case; there is empirical evidence of consistent cross-cultural associations between sonic and visual brightness, for instance,[89] and the same might be predicated of associations of dynamics, tempo, and perceived energy. And if we think of music as a succession of such attributes presented through time, then there is at least a theoretical possibility of the sharing of musical experiences across cultural boundaries.[90] However limited such an experience might be as compared to that of fully enculturated or informed listeners, and whether or not it could possibly justify calling music " 'the' language of feeling," it would provide sufficient basis for the communality that Brett is invoking—and of course that in itself constitutes a form of musical meaning, constructed performatively through the very acts of playing and listening together. In this way, it turns out that there is no contradiction in agreeing with both Tomlinson and Brett, just so long as we realize that they are talking about different things.

A rather similar argument might be pursued concerning the issue of music's ineffability. I have already cited Kramer's suspicion of claims that musical meaning lies beyond words, which he sees as masking a belief in its unmediated nature. And I have been at pains to emphasize the role of verbal interpretation in actualizing musical meaning. But the situation is quite different when it comes to the experience of music as potential meaning, as in the case of emotionless nuance.[91] In *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen,* Hanslick makes the famous observation that Gluck's music in the aria "Che farò senza Euridice" from *Orfeo ed Euridice,* long admired for "the feeling of intense grief which it expresses in conjunction with those words," would be at least equally effective if the aria instead expressed Orfeo's joy at recovering Euridice.[92] Hanslick's immediate purpose is to argue that music is emotionally unspecific, but, as in the case of his discussion of love, the implication is that the music's specificity lies in its nuancing of expression. However, one cannot even begin to describe these nuances by means of a vocabulary of the emotions until one has decided whether the music expresses sadness or happiness. It follows that the experience of music as emotionless nuance is one that cannot be translated, even approximately, into words, because the necessary interpretive decisions are not contained within it. One can use words to exemplify possible actualized meanings emerging out of such an experience, but then one is no longer describing the original experience.[93] And so we are driven to what looks like a paradoxical conclusion: music depends for its meaning on critical interpretation but is at the same time ineffable. But again there is in reality no contradiction between these claims, because they refer to different kinds of musical meaning.

What I have been referring to as the experience of music as potential meaning corresponds to what Melrose calls "an energetic

[88]For a discussion of the relationship between "contour" theory and convention see Davies 1994, 241–3; more generally compare Umberto Eco's critique of the concept of iconicity (Eco 1979, 191).

[89]Marks 1978, 89–91.

[90]I mention from the relative sanctuary of a footnote the idea that such a cross-cultural "core" might be located at the concatenationist level of experience which Levinson (1997) refers to as "basic musical understanding," underlying the level at which culture-specific (non-concatenationist) listening strategies are individuated. To be sure, Levinson's model, which is frankly oriented towards Western "art" music, would need considerable refinement if it were to be used this way.

[91]Raffmann 1993 outlines a partially similar concept of "nuance ineffability" (focussed around issues of pitch).

[92]Hanslick 1986, 17–18, citing a certain "Boyé, a contemporary of Rousseau"; for further discussion see Kivy 1980, 73–7 and 1993c, Davies 1994, 208–9, and Hatten 1994, 216.

[93]Cf. Green's (1988, 33) observation that "no inherent meanings are understandable without delineations." In the same way, the distinction between "meaning" and "interpretation" to which I have already referred (see n. 83 above) makes "meaning" incorrigibly mysterious (as soon as you articulate it, it is no longer "meaning"), which is why this is an effective rhetorical device for constraining interpretive debate. It is for this reason that, in Cook 1998, 96 (n. 125), I argued that the term "meaning" is better reserved for what I am here calling actualized meaning.

potential *not already semanticized* . . . but made available for different semiotising," and she emphasizes the extent to which this energetic potential is viscerally engaged, somatic, grounded in what she terms "the feel of the words in the mouth."[94] This locates a source of ineffability in the theatrical experience (words surely cannot articulate the feel of themselves in the mouth), and Melrose develops this into a critique of theoretical marginalization of the somatic at the expense of the categorical, the written, the seen. As she puts it, "through acquiescence to *literature's* dictates . . . *we have learnt to neglect habitually the bite and taste of the words in the mouth in theatre*. . . . We have learnt compulsorily to *see* what we in fact experience elsewhere."[95] This argument transfers readily to music (we might speak of the feel of the sounds in the fingers or the gut), and once again it contains a hint of what it might mean to theorize music as performance.

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the disjunction between the somatically engaged experience of music's meaningfulness on the one hand, and the terms in which as musicologists—that is to say, as musical word-smiths—we engage with it on the other. I have suggested that, in terms of the semiotic process, musical works are to be understood as bundles or collocations of attributes that may be variously selected, combined, and incorporated within any given actualization of the music's meaning. In other words, regarded as agents of meaning, musical works are unstable aggregates of potential signification. But this is an understanding of "musical works" very different from that constructed through musicology and represented in scores, recordings, stemmata, and middleground sketches: in those interpretive contexts, works emerge as relatively stable, hierarchically structured, culturally privileged—in a word, *authorized* wholes. And I suggest that this disjunction between the instability of music as an agent of meaning and the fixed manner of its cultural representation lies behind the strangely garrulous inarticulacy that so easily seizes us when we talk about music.

I can clarify this issue through a final reference to material culture. Miller speaks of the "extreme visibility" of the material object, and also of its "extreme invisibility."[96] By this he means the divergence to which I previously referred between the physical presence of the object on the one hand—its immediate disclosure of itself as a totality—and on the other, the hidden and fragmented manner of its signification. One sees the object, but one does not see its operation as an agent of meaning, resulting in, as Miller says, its quality of ineffability, its resistance to verbal articulation—a resistance so strong that he is driven to conclude that objects speak directly to the unconscious mind. As he puts it, "the massive gulf between perceptual ability and linguistic competence of conscious articulation . . . provides evidence in day to day experience of the power of an unconscious oriented towards objects rather than language."[97] Translate this to music and we might speak of the inaudibility of its operation as an agent of meaning, and the resonance between this and the title of Claudia Gorbman's well-known book on film music, *Unheard Melodies,* is entirely apposite.[98] The basic message of Gorbman's book is that, by "masking its own insistence and sawing away in the background of consciousness,"[99] music disguises its participation in the diegetic

[94]Melrose 1994, 207, 202 (emphases Melrose's). A comparison might be made with the "tears, shivers down the spine and gooseflesh" which Sloboda has shown to be significantly correlated with structural features of Western music from classical to jazz and pop, and of which he writes that "these sensations or feelings are not specific emotions, although they may easily give rise to specific emotions if appropriate contexts or associations are to hand" (Sloboda 1998, 27).

[95]Melrose 1994, 218 (emphases Melrose's).

[96]Miller 1987, 108. Shepherd & Wicke make a similar point: "The sound-image experienced as a musical sound cannot easily be distinguished from the affective experience that *has* to occur if the sound-image is, indeed, recognized as musical" (Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 139).

[97]Miller 1987, 100.

[98]Gorbman 1987; her psychoanalytically influenced theory of the unconscious working of film music is highly consistent with Miller's interpretation of material culture.

[99]Gorbman 1987, 1.

illusion of the cinema; the aim of a critical theory of film music is therefore to uncover its disguise, to reveal its participation, to render the music, in a word, *audible.* In the same way, a critical theory of musical meaning would entail the attempt to hear works of music not (or not only) as authorized wholes stabilized by dominant interpretations such as Tovey's or McClary's, but also as fugitive amalgams of the potentially meaningful attributes that underlie such interpretations. Or to put it another way, it would mean recognizing the music's otherness and so allowing it the opacity of its own voice, as Burnham put it, and then (as he continues) "engaging that voice in ways that reflect both its presence and our own, much as we allow others a voice when we converse with them."[100] And that gives me the cue to make good on my earlier promise and sketch a possible role for a theoretical project that builds upon the "New" musicological challenge.

CONCLUSION: THEORY, ANALYSIS, AND MEANING

As far as fully actualized meanings articulated through critical interpretation are concerned, I have at least provided some clues about how theory might be invested in such approaches through my comparative analysis of Tovey and McClary: a variety of analytical tools might contribute to an understanding of how a particular interpretation not only emerges from the properties of the musical trace, but also moulds the manner in which they are experienced. In this way, theory might be understood as taking on something of the regulative function that I suggested with reference to nineteenth-century hermeneutics and formalism, thereby opening up questions such as, Just how tight is the fit between musical trace and meaning, and how variable is it as between compositions, repertories, or cultures? At what level of detail does it make sense to interpret music in terms of fully actualized meaning?[101] How far do the attributes that support meaning coincide with existing analytical categories, or might the interrogation of music as meaning lead to new ones? (Implicit in these questions are the beginnings of what might be called a "meaning-to-music" approach to analysis.)

Given what I have said about ineffability, however, it is hardly surprising that some authors have proclaimed the entire domain of a somatically engaged experience of music as potential meaning to lie beyond the grasp of theory and analysis as conventionally conceived. For Shepherd and Wicke,

> the problem, ultimately, is that music theory and music analysis are based on the description of sounds as physical events occurring *in* time and space and *are constructed as linguistic discourses.* As linguistic discourses, music theory and music analysis are quite different and distinct in the character of their *thinking* from the character of musical *experience.* They cannot "reach out" to musical experience in any convincing or useful manner.[102]

One problem with this formulation is the overgeneralized or simply uninformed claim (which the authors repeat more explicitly elsewhere[103]) that theorists and analysts do not care how music is experienced. Behind it, however, there seems to be a more basic

[100]Burnham 1997, 326–7; Miles (1995, 28–9) offers a similar argument concerning music's ability to resist interpretation and the consequent need for dialectical engagement with it. Stephen Blum makes a related claim: "What we can gain from acts of close reading and close listening is, above all, the possibility of rereading and rehearing, increasing our recognition of the limitations of paradigms, 'ideal types,' and other constructs" (Blum 1993, 50).

[101]For instance, it seems to me that, in ascribing actualized meanings to the details of moment-to-moment unfolding, Hatten is describing an analytically constructed mode of listening rather than the everyday experience of music as meaningful (i.e., describing a form of "musicological" rather than "musical" listening, as I put it in Cook 1990).

[102]Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 143. They also offer a further argument against analysis: musical meaning is to be understood in terms of traditions of signifying practice, not individual instances or artefacts of music (4).

[103]"Music theory and music analysis have taken as their starting point not musical experience, but the production of music. They have in other words been more concerned with how the notes are 'placed' than with their effect once placed" (Shepherd & Wicke 1997, 139).

failure to understand what Charles Seeger called the musicological juncture: the manner in which as musicologists or theorists we use words to grasp and worry at what lies beyond words, rather than restricting our disciplinary purview to what can be translated into words without leaving any residue. And what this implies for the analysis of musical meaning is that the aim should not be to translate meaning into words, but rather to attend to the conditions of its emergence.[104] As a form of interpretive criticism, then, discussing as Levinson does whether or not Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* Overture expresses hope might be thought a distinctly thin exercise,[105] and even Hatten's readings of Beethoven could be criticized along similar lines (if only because the emotion expressed so frequently turns out to be abnegation or some other variant of Romain Rolland's slogan "Joy through suffering"). But of course this would be a bit like complaining that Schenker reduced everything to "Three Blind Mice": the focus of Hatten's analyses is not on the emotional identification as such,[106] but on the manner in which expressive qualities are constructed, supported, undercut, or negated by the music. In other words, what matters is not so much the expressive vocabulary as the structural analysis that regulates its application—analysis, that is, of the material trace and of the expressive codes that inform it. It is in this sense that Hatten might claim that, if meaning is inherently musical, then in analyzing music one is always already engaged in analyzing meaning.

[104]Martin offers a similar rationale for what he sees as a more genuinely sociological and ethnographic account of musical meaning than homology-based approaches: "attention shifts from a concern with the production of an authoritative reading of a text to the process by which readings are produced and sustained—and to the grounds on which 'authority' is claimed" (Martin 1995, 157).

[105]Levinson 1990; it is only fair to note that this is not so much a free-standing exercise in criticism as an approach to the issue of whether music can express complex emotions (see n. 66 above).

[106]At one point Hatten refers to his preference for labelling musical meanings "more naturally in terms of correlations with cultural units" rather than in terms of specific emotions (Hatten 1994, 242), but in practice, emotional identifications play a major role in his vocabulary.

But at this point I come back to my earlier complaint that Hatten's interpretations look too much like structural analyses onto which a semantic dimension has been grafted, in effect absorbing meaning back into structure and so reinscribing traditional theoretical assumptions regarding the autonomy of music. If, as I have been suggesting in this article, analysis of musical meaning might be profitably modeled after that of musical multimedia, then there is a particular approach to meaning—or more accurately, perhaps, an approach to a particular kind of meaning—that I would like to mention in closing. Classical film theory insists that the various contributing elements of the moving image (such as diegetic action, camera motion, or editing rhythm) should cohere within a single hierarchy, with none of the components obtruding in its own right, and with relationships between media—moving images, music, and the rest—being restricted to the global level. But in reality, it is common to find subordinate elements within each hierarchy interacting with elements of other hierarchies (for instance, coincidences of cutting rhythms and musical rhythms, which are taboo according to traditional film theory but commonplace in music videos). And the effect of this interaction is to subvert, disrupt, or shatter the hierarchy of the individual media[107]—an effect that may be purely perceptual (as when existing concert music is used for a film soundtrack) or composed into the medium in question, as in, for example, the case of traditional Hollywood underscore music.

In his discussion of the musicological juncture, Seeger suggested that "gaps found in our speech thinking about music may be suspected of being areas of music thinking."[108] The same principle can also be applied the other way around: in *Analysing Musical Multimedia,* I put forward a number of analyses, some of them using Schenkerian graphing, the aim of which was to locate points of musical incoherence, breakdowns of hierarchical organization, which I saw as reflecting or performing the intrusion upon

[107]For a fuller account, see Cook 1998, 144–5.

[108]Seeger 1997, 49.

music of words, images, or other media.[109] What I am suggesting here is that, in the absence of words, images, or other media, such discontinuities might be seen as reflecting or performing the intrusion of meaning, now seen as a kind of ghost in the machine (one might call this a "music-to-meaning" approach).[110] The principle is not unlike the one I have elsewhere described, with reference to the reception of the Ninth Symphony, as "creating meaning out of incoherence": apparent contradictions in Beethoven's music—its generic heterogeneity, its disjointed orchestration, even its deficiencies in text setting—were seized upon by sympathetic commentators as interpretive opportunities, with meaning being, as it were, squeezed into the gaps left by the composer.[111] Through the application of established (and other) analytical methods, it becomes possible to extend this principle to the details of the music's unfolding through time. Advertisers insert their messages into the interstices of the music in television commercials, relying on its directed motion to create the logic, consequentiality, or causality that the messages would otherwise lack.[112] If this is true of the miniaturized art of the commercial, then the far more complexly articulated unfoldings of extended compositions carry correspondingly enlarged possibilities for the shaping and transformation of meaning, and it is precisely this kind of complex articulation that analytical tools are designed to locate and explicate.

In this way, tools conceived under the formalist regime as means of demonstrating music's unity and autonomy may just as well be pressed into service as means of measuring degrees of unity, charting the limits of music's autonomy, and locating aporias and points of slippage; they then become the instruments of what I referred to as a critical theory of musical meaning. And the autonomy of music becomes not the presupposition or dogma as the "New" musicologists saw it, underwriting the disciplinary identity of music theory and so consigning it to cultural irrelevance, but instead a hypothesis, a fragile and provisional construction negotiated within specific contexts of musical production and reception. No longer seen as just a dimension of autonomously musical structure (as "inherently musical," to borrow Hatten's words once again), meaning emerges as an autonomous agent, an independent principle in the construction and interpretation of music. I take this to be consistent with the kind of dialogical relationship which Burnham enjoined when he wrote, in the passage which I quoted earlier,[113] of engaging the voice of music "in ways that reflect both its presence and our own, much as we allow others a voice when we converse with them."

But I also take it to be consistent with something else, and here I am initiating some unfinished business of my own. Wrapped up with music theory's traditional identification with issues of unity is the search for fundamental structures. By this I do not mean the Schenkerian *Ursatz* as such, though it is certainly a prime example; I mean the idea that unity subsists in uniquely privileged structural elements, from which all other aspects of musical organization are to be derived (and there we have the traditional work

[109]See the analyses of extracts from Lully's opera "Armide," as used in Godard's contribution to the collaborative film "Aria," in Cook 1998, Chapter 6. These analyses might be compared with Example 8.3 in Hatten 1994, 213, a modified Schenkerian graph which Hatten describes as representing the interaction of expressive and structural features through its unorthodox mixing of elements from different voice-leading levels (319–20 [n. 8]). But the result is essentially an orthodox expression of linear-harmonic coherence with an overlay of expressive characterization (and with the voice-leading level being adjusted to fit the latter), and in this way might be seen as representing the fusion of—rather than an interaction between—structure and expression.

[110]As explained in Cook & Dibben (forthcoming), there are sporadic suggestions of a similar conception in the work of, for instance, Hatten, Karl & Robinson, Maus, and Guck; my aim in the remainder of this article is to suggest the kind of theoretical framework that more sustained development of this idea might entail. There is also a link with the tradition of criticism that understands (mainly) nineteenth-century music as an interaction of opposed narrative and "purely musical" impulses; for a recent overview, see Micznik, forthcoming.

[111]Cook 1993, 67–71.

[112]Cook 1998, 16.

[113]See n. 100 above.

of analysis). It is these other aspects of organization that are embraced within the Schenkerian concept of "design," a catch-all term defined as that which expresses or projects the fundamental structure (in other words, given the predicate of unity, as everything except the fundamental structure itself). This is the background against which Agawu remarks, in *Playing with Signs,* that themes, topics, and other phenomena of the musical surface should not be relegated to the function of design.[114] But if we are not to think of them that way, what is the alternative? The answer, clearly, is to think of them as autonomous structural agents, interacting with the fundamental structure through some kind of dialogical relationship. In other words, we would seek to make sense of such phenomena not simply to the extent that they conform to or concretize an underlying, abstract structure, but equally in terms of how they oppose, contradict, or otherwise interact with that structure (and with one another). Follow this through and we end up with an image of music that looks "less like a closed entity," in Kevin Korsyn's words—and, in particular, less like the hierarchies that result from the fundamental structure/projection model—than like "networks or relational events"[115] (and it is no coincidence that Korsyn directly links this idea to Bakhtin's concept of dialogic). In other words, one ends up seeing even Kivy's "music alone" as an interaction of autonomous agents, as emergent—in short, as structured in much the same way as multimedia.

And at this point a perhaps unexpected reversal takes place. For if we look upon musical structure this way, meaning becomes just another autonomous agent. It becomes, in other words, an integral element of the music after all—but only because we have started thinking about music differently. Perhaps, then, we should not be theorizing musical meaning after all, but rather looking for ways of understanding music that are fully attuned to its emergent properties, of which meaning is just one.

[114]Agawu 1991, 113. His call for attention to be given to surface detail in its own right is of course reflected by writers such as Subotnik and in particular Fink, whose argument tends in the same direction as mine (Subotnik 1981, 84–5; Fink 1999).

[115]Korsyn 1999, 56.

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a model of musical meaning that allows for the cultural construction of musical meaning, while at the same time acknowledging the existence of constraints upon the meanings any given music may support under any given circumstances; in this way it aims to fill the void between existing approaches that understand musical meaning as *either* inherent *or* socially constructed. I illustrate the argument through Tovey's and McClary's contrasting readings of the recapitulation in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and suggest some ways in which theory and analysis may enter into a constructive relationship with the broadened critical agenda of contemporary musicology.