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What is This?

Constructivism in Nicholas Cook's introduction to music: tips for a "new" psychology of music

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Starting with a critique of current modes of thought about music, and an account of their embeddedness in nineteenth century culture, Cook argues that music history is not a journey from one masterwork to another (the "museum of musical works") but "changing [...] patterns of conception and perception" (p. 74/69). His *Music: A Very Short Introduction* is not just about music, but about thinking about music and about the social structures that condition thinking about music, because, according to Cook, ultimately that is what music is. In some senses, Cook is proposing a musicology that is both psychological and sociological, although his particular take on sociological and psychological issues is not that held by the mainstream. Cook's *Introduction* poses some questions for anyone wishing to study music in an academic setting — whether or not they see themselves as traditional or new musicologists, sociologists, or psychologists. In this essay we engage with his provocative book from a music-psychological standpoint.

While it would be possible to trace the implications of Cook's critique of musicology for music psychology, this is not the approach we take here. Instead, we focus on what we see as the crux of Cook's argument — his "constructivist" view of music:

> [...] the "constructivist" view of art [...] sees the primary role of art as to construct and communicate new modes of perception; that is where the historical process lies. Seen in this way, the history of art is really a history of the changing ways in which people have seen things. (p. 84/78-9)

It is this view of music and its ramifications for the psychological study of music that we address in this paper. First, however, it is necessary to outline his constructivist position in more detail.

Both the objectivising accounts of traditional musicology *and* those of the "new musicology" come under attack from Cook's constructivist perspective — because both turn out to be predicated on many of the same underlying assumptions. In

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Cook's eyes, musicology fails to grasp something fundamental about the way in which musical meaning both constructs and is constructed by our socio-cultural milieu. It is common to see traditional musicology criticised for its apparent acceptance of musical autonomy (see, for example, Kerman, 1985), but Cook goes further than this, arguing that the new musicology suffers from the same malaise. Cook's critique of McClary's feminist musicology is a good example of this: he argues that McClary's gendered readings of music are misguided because they are spoken with the mechanisms of "authority" of traditional musicology, as though she has special access to the music's "true" meanings. In other words, McClary presents the meanings she finds in music as though they reside *in* the music, rather than as an act of interpretation — a restatement of the traditional view that music has immanent properties. Whereas others have criticised her readings on the grounds that, for example, the repeated downbeats of Beethoven's music could just as well be about "aerobic dancing" as about pelvic thrusts and rape (van den Toorn, 1991), Cook argues that

> [...] the value of what McClary says lies not in its "truth", in the sense of correlation with an external reality [...] but in its persuasiveness — and that in turn reflects our willingness to be persuaded, how much it matters to us that music might function as an arena for gender politics. (p. 124/115)

In other words, McClary presents a reading of the music, rather than a reflection of music's truth to an external reality. Once this is recognised (and, as Cook points out, part of the difficulty is that McClary herself is unclear about this) disagreements as to whether music is "really about" sex become irrelevant. Cook is basically arguing that McClary's position makes much more sense if one rejects all traces of positivism and fully accepts a contingent, hermeneutic approach to meaning.

However, there are two lacunae in Cook's position. First, Cook's argument that the value of readings of music lies in their persuasiveness glosses over the fact that only some people, more specifically, only particular social groups, do have the power and authority even to attempt such persuasions. The implication of this socio-economic reality is that the meanings of an elite are, to a large extent, imposed on everyone else. Those outside this elite have two choices — they can either accept such dominant ideologies or begin to construct their own "subcultural" reality. The very fact that such pluralisms are termed *sub*-cultures (see *e.g.* Hebdige, 1979) reflects a reality which is implicit within hierarchical societies (such as our own) in which power (whether political, military, cultural or economic) is not evenly distributed. Hence, the persuasiveness of musicological pronouncements has been accepted historically, and continues to be accepted because the opinions of musical "experts" are accorded a special status. Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, when these experts come from a single socio-economic group then the dangers of imposed meanings become evident. The strength of feminist musicology

(such as McClary's) is that it brings a different voice to the interpretation of music, and one with a particular agenda (in this case gender). If in no other respect, the heated debate which arose around McClary's gendered readings was important in that it made visible the role of the interpreter (the musicologist as an individual) and the very fact that different kinds of agendas exist; the act of interpretation was made visible because a different set of values was brought to the music. Cook's dismissal of the "truth" of McClary's discourse as an echo of nineteenth century positivism devalues feminist approaches by showing how they are built on the persuasiveness of the expert. We will return to this below, since we will argue "truth" and the musical "object" (however constructed these concepts may be) are necessary evils if we are to do justice to Cook's constructivist vision.

What we see as the second lacuna in Cook's argument is related in part to this first one: by over-emphasising the subjective character of McClary's interpretation Cook is in danger of losing touch with the central premise of his argument, the idea that discourse about music *creates* meanings for music and that these meanings are shared by particular listening and compositional communities. An important step is missing: namely, how discourse comes to endow music with heard meaning. The implication of this idea (which Cook never fully explores) is that the meanings which are created through discourse take on material form to the extent that composers and listeners are influenced by these received ideas.

This lacuna is not specific to Cook, but a reflection of a more general issue to do with how meanings are shared and constructed within a particular community, and how one might study such processes. A hint at what such a research project might look like (albeit from a musicological perspecvtive) is given by John Spitzer's analysis of the music criticism of the *Sinfonia Concertante* for woodwind in E flat (1987). This piece of music is of disputed origin, having at various times been attributed to Mozart. Spitzer's analysis of the reviews and criticism of this composition reveal that the work receives more positive reviews when attributed to Mozart than when not, and furthermore, that whichever way critics are in agreement, they tend to use the same set of words, the same metaphors, and focus on the same passages of the music. Spitzer traces the lines of influence between musicological and journalistic writing about this work to argue that this discourse functions to stabilise the meanings of the work:

> This exchange of ideas and of vocabulary among critics in different genres and at different levels serves to unify criticism of the *Sinfonia Concertante* and to make the beliefs, opinions, and language of music critics homogenous and consistent. (Spitzer, 1987, p. 345)

In other words, Spitzer seems to be tracing the very process by which meanings are made, shared and sustained: it is an example of the "constructivist" view of music, *in action* as it were.

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We see Cook's direct engagement with the constructed nature of musical meaning as an important challenge. Few in the burgeoning area of music psychology have attempted to take on the idea that music is a socio-cultural construct rather than a material object and fewer still have attempted to reconcile music's materiality with its constructed dimension (although see *e.g.* Windsor (1997) for an exception to this). Attempts at forming a social psychology of music (see *e.g.* Hargreaves and North, 1997) have largely focused upon how music is perceived and used *in* society, rather than the way in which social forces construct musical meanings. Although we welcome the study of the social dimension which Hargreaves and North's book represents, there is a significant difference between looking at how our perception of musical events is affected by the social (or *vice versa*) and questioning the epistemic status of music as an object. Hence, we place briefly Cook's constructivism within the context of one kind of constructivist thinking in psychology to argue that constructivism need not imply a radical pluralism in which all meanings have the same status, and can avoid reliance on the persuasiveness of elite insights. This also, as a by-product, outlines a rather different view of what the study of music perception might involve than that of cognitive psychology.

It remains controversial to argue that reality is constructed by us rather than received — although there are many ways in which social constructivism has been proposed as a force in explaining reality (see *e.g.* Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Within the domain of music, sociological and ethnographic approaches have attempted in their different ways to identify either "homologies" or dialectical relationships between social and musical structures (Adorno, 1984; Shepherd, 1991) and have gone some way towards reminding us of the intimately active, dynamic and negotiated nature of musical systems (see *e.g.* Blacking, 1987). Our aim here is to try to relate Cook's version of this more socialised and contingent view of musical reality to "material" and "psychological" views of music. We will do this by focusing upon the paradoxical way in which admitting that our reality is contingent rather than fixed forces one to re-assess the idea of musical works as autonomous "things" with immanent properties. It would be conventional here to bring the work of Adorno to bear, since throughout his aesthetics (Adorno, 1984), Adorno constantly walks a tight-rope between subjective and objective, between society and the immanent. However, since we aim to relate Cook's work to current psychological thinking, we focus instead on the curious and paradoxical world of "realist" or "pragmatic" psychology, since its development shows how even for the most ardent constructivist reality is an important issue.

Whereas most contemporary psychologists share the view that our experiences are constructed through the action of mental processes upon sense data, a kind of ordering of the chaos of nature by a rational mind, there is an alternative tradition of psychological thinking which emphasises not the role of the mind, but the role of the environment and our actions within that environment in constructing meaning. There are many different takes on this approach: some emphasise the social nature

of the environment (*e.g.* Mead, 1934; Shotter, 1991), some the physical (*e.g.* Gibson, 1979; Shaw and Turvey, 1981), some attempt to include both (*e.g.* Noble, 1981), but all share an interest in the interaction between environment and individual. Rather than viewing perception as the passive imposition or absorption of structure such thinkers focus upon the way in which individual actions are both constrained by and called for by events in the world. Learning, for example, becomes a continual *negotiation* between the needs and demands of the infant and those of the adult world, rather than just the development of particular mental structures or an internalisation of external rules. Language becomes both constructed by our acts of speaking and writing, and constructive *of* our potential experiences. Society is viewed not as a force which *determines* individual action, but as both the product of individual actions and a constraint upon them. We both construct reality, and are constructed by it, — or rather by *a* reality. For Gibson (just like Adorno), an attempt to show that our behaviour and beliefs need not be *determined* by social forces (Gibson, 1939; Costall, 1989) led to a life-long attempt to show that perception was not slavishly conditioned by language and society. To accept a naïvely constructivist view risks also accepting the constraints of language, ideology, propaganda and advertising at face value. Within a realist psychology, reality is constantly being negotiated by individuals, despite the constraints imposed by our surroundings.

How then does this apply to musical reality? If we assume that such a reality is constructed, but that there are constraints upon such interpretative activity, what are these constraints? The first constraint, which is of direct relevance to Cook's discussion of constructivism, is that of the acoustic information that arrives at our ears (and indeed the visual information which may accompany it). The second constraint is provided by the nature of our bodies, including our perceptual systems. The third is provided by society, or more precisely the information which we can gain from our surroundings.

Taking these in turn, how might such constraints operate? Consider, for example, the acoustic differences between waltz-music and marching-music. An unsophisticated analysis of the rhythmic structure of these two kinds of music would reveal different hierarchical relationships between levels of pulsation. While metre is not a physical attribute of music, phenomenal accents are, nonetheless physical changes in the signal — for example, louder or longer events (see Lerdahl and Jackendoff, 1983). Changing these patterns of loudness or timing changes the information available. Put another way, these changes in phenomenal accentuation would make certain metrical interpretations more or less likely — they constrain our perception. Of course, such material changes only become information for metre when an act of perception takes place. A listener must be sensitive to such acoustic changes, must be sensitive to periodicity.

Just as our physical make-up (the structure of the auditory system) influences our sensitivity to acoustic information, so at a much larger physical scale our bodies constrain perception. It is no coincidence, we would argue, that it is easier to march

to music in a duple metre than that in a triple metre. We have two legs and two arms, and it would seem reasonable to expect that entraining these oscillatory systems to binary temporal patterns in a walking alternation would be more stable than entraining them to ternary ones which might encourage more complex patterns of whole-body movement (see *e.g.* Cutting, Proffit and Kozlowski, 1978; Todd, 1995; Clarke and Davidson, 1998).

How would the social realm fit into this picture? Remaining with our hypothetical "march" music it is clear that we are in contact with a considerable amount of socially mediated information about marching. We see particular kinds of people marching, wearing certain kinds of clothing, engaged in certain kinds of activities. It is not arbitrary that we might perceive marching as having something to do with warlike, regimented or even totalitarian behaviour, since soldiers are those that we see marching most. Of course, we may have seen other groups or individuals marching, which may temper our assumptions, but such social information must play a role in constraining our interpretation of march music. This is not to say we cannot claim that a march is graceful or peaceful, or that its "marchness" should be ignored in an analysis. It does suggest, however, that there might be good reasons for assuming that our interpretation will reflect some or all of these constraints if only through contrasting with them. Returning to McClary, it no longer seems quite so arbitrary to assume that certain passages in Beethoven afford interpretations of male aggressive behaviour. It is not her power as musicologist alone which persuades us, if we are persuaded, but the congruences between her view of the music and our own. We may disagree with her final interpretation, hearing the marching of the liberal Napoleonic revolution in Beethoven's more martial passages rather than the march of male musical hegemony. Indeed, if we were unaware of (or wished to subvert) any historical context we might indeed hear "aerobic dancing" (*cf.* van den Toorn, 1991), although such an interpretation relies on actively suppressing (or being unaware of) certain pieces of contextual information. What is clear is that we will not find it easy to hear a waltz, nor would we find it easy to convince someone that a march is "smooth and flowing" music unless their bodily or social context is radically different from our own.

The difficulty for Cook is that in embracing the idea of a constructed musical reality he leaves only the persuasiveness of the teacher (or dictator) — a reality in which anything goes, but what is actually regarded as reality is that which is expressed with the most power. Only by accepting that individual interpretative acts are merely constrained (rather than determined) by social convention, indeed that social conventions arise from such individual acts, is it possible to reconcile individual musical freedom with the social. Music *is* an object, but it is a constructed one, and will differ depending on the perspective of the perceiver. Such perspective will clearly be influenced by the social, the bodily and by the material, but not determined by them. Thinking in terms of constraints upon perception, rather than in terms of forces which cause belief in a particular reality is central here.

Interpretation of a particular configuration of sounds will be constrained by what the listener hears, what he or she has heard, been told, and what they have said. If a listener has always been told that Beethoven is a great composer because his music is organic, and has spent a lifetime exploring this organicism, this will constrain how he or she hears the music. It does not prevent a listener, however, from hearing how this music challenges an organic interpretation, nor from beginning to question its greatness. Freedom lies in the propensity for taking part in interpretative action — in acts of perceptual exploration (listening again) and attempts to generate fresh meanings through performing, analysing, discussing, composing, and dancing to music. We do not agree with the notion that the act of listening can be divorced from such processes. On the contrary, studying the reception of music must involve looking at the relationship between the individual, socio-cultural and sonic dimensions of music. The musical work is partly "constructed" by social forces, but the extent to which this is the case is tempered by individual actions and the acoustic features which arrive at the listeners' ears.

In many respects the psychology of music is ideally placed to address the kinds of issues Cook sensitively explores. But to do so it must rid itself of ideas so deeply embedded that they form part of its very language. Take, for example, the term music "perception" and its implicit notion of a passive "decoding" or "reception" of structures and meanings immanent to music — a view completely at odds with the constructed character of musical meaning. Against this, however, is a nascent psychology of music, which looks at listening and performing not only in their full social contexts, but as a constructive yet constrained process of interpretation. Failing to engage with the constructive aspect of musical meaning denies music's creativity, and we agree wholeheartedly with Cook's assertion that musical meaning is constructed. Nonetheless, the creativity of interpretation is not free — and to imagine that it is runs the risk of submitting to the tyranny of an intellectual elite, who prescribe and proscribe the meaning of the sounds we hear[1].

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