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On answering music

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*"You can never leave me/
Will you please complete me/
Never be enough/
To fill me up"*
Trent Reznor

When *Music: A Very Short Introduction* appeared I devoured it quickly and filed it away. I did not have time to consider it at length, so I left it at that, remembering it as another eminently readable publication by the people's musicologist — or something like that. Over time, though, it has returned to haunt me. I do not know why. Maybe I find Cook's mediation between the generation reared on the "muzakal experience" and the culture bred on the musical experience slightly unnerving. It may also be that the book completes a paradigm shift in musicology from passive to active approaches, from music "appreciation" through the musical "experience" to the musical "act". And it may be that I am unused to its lively sense of creativity. For there is a real sense of engagement with the act of writing. Cook seems to develop points in real time, rather than expound a ready-made position: issues unfold almost haphazardly over several pages, and what initially seem like digressions tie in at the ninth hour. At the end, as Cook returns to his opening topic, the power of music, there is a powerful open-endedness that is not merely rhetorical but existential: What do we — I — think?

To answer this question, I should lay my cards on the table. I agree with most of what Cook says. I stand wholeheartedly behind his insistence on the necessity both of approaching music as performance and of acknowledging that the study of music is itself a vicarious performance. Hence, I shall not expound a point-by-point commentary here. Instead, I shall endeavour to place Cook's central argument — that music is an "act" — into a broader context. I begin with some general remarks.

One of the triumphs of twentieth-century thought has been the overcoming of metaphysics. Many grand philosophical systems have collapsed in the face of an increasingly blunt awareness of what it means — to you and me — to be human.

In the wake of enormous scientific and political upheaval, ethics has assumed a more human face and focused on the singular and unrepeatable. The individual act has been re-examined in its own right, and what it means to be human and to participate in existence and make sense of others has been rethought in terms of what the individual does and experiences. A number of ways have been offered for integrating the individual (back) into the larger whole from which he/she had been isolated ever since the Cartesian *cogito*, and for dealing with the prosaic reality of his experience, his act, as it is presented to him.

The Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin essayed one way. In essays before the book on Dostoevsky and long before his doctoral dissertation on Carnival, Bakhtin challenged the Kantian legacy and its Hegelian reification (as he saw it). Face to face with Kant, Bakhtin attempted to humanise the categorical imperative by dissolving the “as if” clause and returning agency and the responsibility for its product to the individual *qua* individual. Of particular importance here is that Bakhtin’s approach was part of an attempt to rethink the relation between ethics and aesthetics and to suggest new ways of understanding Art and artistic activity.

Central to Bakhtin’s early thought was the concept of an “act”. For Bakhtin, this is not the realisation or substantiation of an abstract metaphysical principle. It is not a transcendental category. In fact, as a concept it is both much simpler (phenomenological) and much more fragile (theological). An act is a unique creative event. Mediating between the three domains of human culture (science, art, life), it brings something genuinely and absolutely new into being. The locus for all we do, the ground of all meaning, value, and significance in our lives, an act cannot be tied down by theoretical discourse “about” it, for it is precisely something that is done, rather than described. It always embodies activity, a consciously active agency or intention. It is a step that is taken — and as such, it arises prior to discourse. Imbuing its physical content or material with an “intonation”¹, an answerable act embodies an irreversible decision: “The performed act constitutes a going out *once and for all* from within possibility as such into what is *once-occurrent*” (TPA, p. 29).

At one remove from the act is the “event”. This is a second-order phenomenon: the description of an act is itself an act, but not the one it describes (TPA, p. 14). An outsider lacks access to what makes an act truly *my* act. Although he himself acts, he does not experience my act: however, we come together in a larger event that encompasses our acts alongside each other. The role of the outsider in the event is as important as the role of the individual whose act the outsider experiences (as part of *his* own act), though the nature and limits of their two roles are quite different. What the outsider experiences is the “product” of my act; what I experience is my self-activity directed towards the accomplishment of an act (similarly, all I experience of the outsider is the product of *his* act). The fact that we come together

(1) Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press (1993), 32-3. Further references in the text to TPA.

in the same event raises the question of what role the outsider plays in my act: Who is responsible for it?

Bakhtin argues in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (quite differently to his later thought) that nobody else is responsible for my act, theoretically or practically. Nobody else can commit the act I commit. To describe how I take responsibility for an act, Bakhtin uses the term “answerability” (TPA, pp. 2-3). This describes the relation between art and life and how each “answers” for the other. Answerability, or more accurately my answerable act, enables me both to value the role Art plays in my life and to value my life in broadly artistic terms. Answerability is a central element of the act: it impresses what I do with the mark of my personality and individual presence. Indeed, without it an act is not a unique, unrepeatabe, and actual act (the proper subject of ethics, according to Bakhtin). Answerability brings the act to life, into my life; it makes the act *my* act. I place my “signature” beneath the act (TPA, p. 38) and acknowledge that it is singularly and uniquely mine.

These, according to Bakhtin, are the conditions that make an ethical act possible. The most important is its answerability, my acknowledgement of “its totally unpredetermined, concrete, unique, and compelling oughtness” (TPA, p. 46). How does Cook’s newest book relate to this approach? The answer lies in Cook’s conception of the *musical* act and of its role in the practices that both contribute to individual human life and constitute a musical culture. As he notes, “Music doesn’t just happen, it is what we make it, and what we make *of* it”².

Cook is interested in what happens when we “do” (p. 119/110) music. This encompasses reading, memorising, performing, composing, listening, *and* thinking about music. Music is always an act, and is done by somebody. Insofar as it is “done” (p. 80/74), it has two faces: the act and its product. In Cook’s words, the musical act is “understood,” while its product is “manipulated” (p. 72/67). The musical act is broadly equivalent, not to a sentence contained in the dictionary, but to its utterance; it is unrepeatabe and unique because it depends on who does it, and in what context they do it. The product of the musical act can be manipulated at one remove away from the actual musical act, as part of an event that includes the “new” act of manipulation. This is where the musical act is treated *as if* it were an object or text (sometimes a score). This is not to say that physical and material aspects of the musical object such as the visual layout of notation are unimportant, only that these are antecedently related to the musical act proper, which takes such elements beyond their physicality into an aesthetic domain, and gives them value. Of central importance, then, is the idea that music is only secondarily an object: it is the trace left by an act (p. 52/48). We often confuse the product of an act with the act itself, mistaking a “performance of” a piece of music with “performance” (p. 82-3/77);

(2) Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998), vi. Further references in the text.

indeed, part of Beethoven's legacy and "abiding presence" (p. 39/36) is the assumption that a musical culture can survive only on the former (the mere realisation of the product of an act).

Cook emphasises that music is primarily an act because this has consequences for how we ought to approach music. One is that *what* we understand and *how* we understand it are inextricably related; how we understand the musical act differs from how we understand its product. For Cook, understanding music involves thinking about what it means to "think about music". It also means knowing its meaning: "We use words to say what music cannot say, to say what we *mean* by music, what music means to us. And in the end, it is largely words that determine what music *does* mean to us" (vii/unnumbered, p. 14/14). In a pregnant phrase, Cook describes language as "music's midwife" (p. 125/116). In short, we can understand music by thinking about it at one remove through language; writing about music is one way of doing so. In fact, Cook goes further, arguing that words not only explain but "determine" (p. 14/14) musical practice, and that "The paradox lies in the fact that if music needs to be explained through words, then it must stand in need of explanation, must be in some sense incomplete without it" (p. 39/36).

Consider the two ideas within this last assertion: that the musical act "needs" completion, and that language does the job and determines what music means. Although language may seem to add something to music, that in itself does not mean that without language music is incomplete. Cook's claim requires qualification: music is completed or explained not by language but by an act. For if there is any sense to the idea, it is that music "in itself" is not so much incomplete as *invisible, becoming visible to me only through a musical act that brings me into a relation with it*. Language cannot "complete" music because in itself it lacks significance. As part of an answerable act, though, it becomes replete with the "light" of human value (TPA, p. 29) and transformed from possibility into reality. This act, however, does not have to use language: in fact, as an act it is transgredient to language.

Nevertheless, despite this caveat about its precise role in the musical act *qua* act, language *can* have a role in understanding music. It can be used to "transcribe" (TPA, p. 27) the musical act into a new event that embodies two moments: the product of the musical act and the act of writing. In the conventional sense of the word, only the first of these is "musical" [Cook (1999, pp. 250-251) has made a similar point recently, distinguishing between "playing" and "writing"]³. This "transcription" is not transparent. It creates a new set of values that change the musical object. Like music notation, it "simplifies" (p. 61/57) and omits as much as

(3) The quotation does not appear in the 2000 edition of *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, where this passage has been rewritten.

it explains and includes. Thinking about music is like writing one's autobiography — never complete and inherently inaccurate.

This makes it difficult to distinguish between understanding and misunderstanding music (p. 130/121), not least because of the inherent fragility of the musical act, what Heisenberg would have called its "uncertainty". Cook seems to sense this, for he advocates an act that "knowingly positions the interpreter in relation to [the music]" (p. 127/118). Although I support the necessity of articulating a position conscious of its own contingency, it is important to remember that the attempt to position the interpreter is more important than its success *per se* (after all, all is possible when one's position is totally determined, for there is no resistance to any act). An element of scepticism (Cook advocates "cautious optimism" [p. 130/121]), balanced by a certain humility (more about this below), ought to form part of an answerable musical act.

On a general level, Cook seems to rule out the possibility that understanding music may require something more than the cognitive capacity to manipulate language (or any other system of "representation, whether notational, gestural, or otherwise" [p. 72/67]). For "understanding music" is in its own right the point of departure for a new ethical act: "The performed act/deed of aesthetic seeing arises above any aesthetic being — a product of that act — and is part of a different world: it enters into the actual unity of Being-as-event, bringing the aesthetic world as well into communion with Being in the capacity of a constituent moment" (TPA, p. 17). Such "communion" reconciles the musical act with the event, the musical act with its product, and playing with writing, in an answerable act.

This is a difficult but not impossible task. Cook describes his solution as a "balance" (p. 85/79) between "constructivist" and "picture" approaches, an "inclusive" pluralism (p. 80/74) that encompasses all types of musical practice. To me this seems insufficient as an antidote to the current "crisis" (p. 50/46). It needs a further step acknowledging that the relation between a musical act and its product ought to be more than merely an inclusive balance, however dialogic — it ought to be answerable. This should be clear: we value certain musical acts above others because they seem to be motivated from within — to be "authentic" (p. 14/14). Yet we justify a great number of musical practices by recourse to the knowledge of others, as the authenticity movement, the cult of the virtuoso, and the appreciation racket attest. By "justification" I do not mean that in itself there is a problem with our material reliance upon others, but rather that when faced with committing the act immediately in front of us, we — I — ought to acknowledge knowledge as mine. The musical text is only the beginning of an act, not the end, and what matters is less its product (though there are, of course, conventions) than the manner in which I commit the act. While Cook wants to draw attention to the authenticity of my musical act, its fidelity to a "value system" (p. 14/14), I prefer to emphasise my personal responsibility for it. These are certainly similar, but their divergence is important. Bypassing the conventional musical debate about authenticity,

answerability requires that justification for an act come from within me, not from without. In an answerable act, what Cook describes as the “value system [...] which places innovation above tradition, creation above reproduction, personal expression above the market-place” (p. 14/14) becomes considerably more fluid (p. 12/11-12), allowing music to be approached in a less categorical manner.

The “value system” of “authenticity” is nevertheless important in determining the role of music in human life. For Cook, the matter is clear. Music is “a significant part of deciding and announcing to people not just who you “want to be” [...] but who you *are*” (p. 6/5). It is a matter of personal “identity” (p. 5/5, p. 80-3/74-8), and is “one of the means by which we *make* ourselves who we are” (p. 119/110). Moreover, “to study music is to study your own participation in it — to study yourself” (p. 85/80). Studying music necessarily involves acknowledging that it is a performance art, and this has distinct consequences for “the way in which we position ourselves in relation to it” (p. 79/73). All this is true.

Yet although what we do certainly relates to who we become, the precise nature of the “relation” is less clear. Treating music as the inanimate object of human desire, Cook seems to take a rather deterministic approach to the role of music in human life (what about the role of the human in music?), and appears unaware of the possibility of relating it to the opposite approach (which he mentions only in passing), namely that music “ravishes” us (p. 111/102) — that we are objectified in the musical event. This is a fundamental human experience, and a recurrent, though often suppressed, topic in musical thought: music “matters” to us (p. 4/4) precisely because the encounter with it takes us out of our way.

This means that we are charged with a responsibility towards music, for “Each type of music comes with its own way of thinking about music, as if it were the *only* way of thinking about music (and the only music to think about)” (v/unnumbered). Not only ought we to seek nominally “authentic” (p. 14/14) ways of thinking about each type of musical practice that are true to our individual “musical needs, desires, and aspirations” (p. 85/79), as Cook suggests; we also ought to make these answerable, which is to say, approach the musical act in such a way that it can retain its own freedom — however difficult it is for us to experience its freedom as *its* freedom. This involves acknowledging the fragile relation between the musical act and its product, between its inside and outside.

How am I to maintain such a fragile balance? How am I to act answerably, and not merely theoretically or intuitively? Bakhtin suggests one way: “Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute. Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive; only in correlation with the loved is fullness of the manifold possible” (TPA, p. 64). Cook (1990, p. 186) mentioned love in a similar capacity in *Music, Imagination, and Culture*, though in *Music: A Very Short Introduction* his emphasis seems to have shifted to the

more straightforward “doing” of music. This is a small but significant transformation, for although loving music may be easy, it is laden with ethical obligations. There are no *a priori* answers to how we might create an answerable relation with music, and acknowledge, without covering up, the difference between an act and its product; the answerable act demanding my signature is “risk-fraught, and open” (TPA, p. 9).

We have just stumbled across the heart of Bakhtin’s rethinking of the categorical imperative. A brief digression is in order, for this rests on an apparent paradox. Unlike Kant, who accepted at least the *possibility* of an answer to the question, How ought I to act?, Bakhtin says that there is no answer. Anything proposing itself as an answer is unsatisfactory and purely theoretical unless it is acknowledged by an act — in which case, the act answers for itself: “There *is* no acknowledged self-equivalent and universally valid value, for its acknowledged validity is conditioned *not* by its content, taken in abstraction, but by its being *correlated* with the unique place of a participant. It is from this unique place that all values and any other human being with all his values can be acknowledged, but he must be actually *acknowledged*” (TPA, p. 48). In short, by virtue of my radical difference to everybody else, I can rely only on myself. The “moral law within me” is not answerable to “the starry heavens above me”: it is not even answerable to itself, but to something prior to law. Imperatives that impress themselves upon me demand “*correlation*” and “*acknowledgement*” not by thought but *before* thought. As Bakhtin writes, “There *are* no *moral* norms that are determinate and valid in themselves as moral norms, but there is a moral *subiectum* with a determinate structure (not a psychological or physical structure, of course), and it is upon him that we have to rely: he will know what is marked by the moral ought and when, or to be exact: by the ought as such (for there *is* no specifically moral ought)” (TPA, p. 6). This is certainly an unusual conception of the responsibility attendant on an act; like physics after Einstein, it does not attempt to equate your response with mine. Its advantage, especially for musical performance, is that it both demands individual responsibility and demands that it transpire in real time, in an act both temporal *and* temporary. There is no falling back on pre-prepared strategies. Moreover, replacing the categorical imperative, “*my non-alibi in Being*” (TPA, p. 40) or answerability obligates me in a peculiarly straightforward manner. I am answerable in person because there is a “fundamental and essential architectonic difference in significance between my own once-occurrent uniqueness and the uniqueness of any other — both aesthetic and actual — human being, between the concrete experiencing of myself and my experiencing of another. The concretely affirmed value of a human being and my own value-for-myself are radically different” (TPA, p. 73).

In this light, consider what Cook says about musical practice: “Situations like this led ethnomusicologists to reflect on and evaluate their own position in a way that musicologists and music theorists, and even historical performers, did not. It led them not just to be critical, but to be *self-critical*. They were engaged with the

music that they studied not just in an aesthetic sense (the kind of critical appreciation that Kerman had in mind), but politically; [...] musicology gave them the power not just to represent things but to *do* them, and they had to take responsibility for what they did" (p. 103-43). Elsewhere Cook describes the "interventionist quality" (p. 106/98) of such thinking. I would say, however, that Kerman and the younger scholars in fact share an underlying sense of responsibility or answerability to their material, and that it is merely in the products of their acts that they differ, in the precise intonation they give their material. This may not be immediately apparent, for Cook couches his arguments in terms that conflate the "political" and the "social" with the ethical. Although, for example, he usefully notes that "we are on much firmer ground when we try to understand the social transactions that are taking place within the practice of music — what is being *done*, in other words — than when we construct unverifiable hypotheses about what might be being represented" (p. 80/74), I would prefer to substitute ethical for "social" and keep the two apart, emphasising that the central element of any musical act, *including* thinking about music, ought to be the fact that it is done by a particular person who is responsible for their act: "One has to develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person" (TPA, p. 52). To be fair, Cook does mention music's role in both "personal and social transformation" (p. 119/110, p. 128/119), though to my mind he emphasises the latter at the expense of the former, and treats the former as simply a means by which the latter comes into being.

Of course, music *does* have a social and political function. Nevertheless, this is always grounded in something more fundamentally personal and individual: an ethical order. By this I mean that the architectonic forms of the musical act, its product, and the larger musical event are based on specific historical, cultural, and personal conceptions of "order" (strictly speaking, a relation between order and disorder — an index of human freedom). This order varies over time and between cultures, but it is always inescapably ethical (in Bakhtin's rather than Kant's sense), for it responds artistically to the way we conceive our immediate, personal relations to one another. That this order is "personal" does not make it "solipsistic" (p. 128/119), however, because it is grounded not in how the self sees itself but how it sees others *as others*. The order we "create" in our musical acts, though fixed artificially and temporarily, has a parallel in how we relate to others in (real) life as we seek to "make" our lives.

If there is a lesson here, it is that under certain conditions (an answerable "*movement of consciousness*" [TPA, p. 36] in response to a musical act), understanding music becomes aesthetic *and* ethical. This is the power of music. It has, as Cook says, an ability to mould, transform, rethink — in short, create — the values that are central to our lives as we actually live them. But it also teaches us the relation between act and event, which in answerable terms means the relation between me and you.

Perhaps I have spent too long talking about Cook talking about talking about music. If so, it confirms Simon Frith's claim that music exists to generate discourse about itself. Nevertheless, I hope to have suggested that Cook's claim about the social power of music is a little extravagant unless it is grounded in the smaller, yet more personal and individual terms on which the musical act operates. As with the ethical life, there is a point within the musical act beyond which language (the great social lever) cannot venture. Indeed, the idea that a musical act ought to be answerable places a question mark over recent musicological appropriations of the "dialogic" and "carnavalesque" Bakhtin, with their logocentric belief in the semiotic transparency of music.

As Cook affirms, we are certainly social, dialogic animals. Nevertheless, before the collective there is the individual, and before the individual there is the other. And, as Bakhtin reminds us, before the other (t)here is — you⁴.

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