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Call for rectifications of current musicological practice

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A very short Introduction indeed. But is it to music, or, rather, to musicology, to new ways of conceiving of musical historiography? Cook's Introduction is, in fact, a call for a number of rectifications of current musicological practice; a proposal for a new musicology (not a "New Musicology", as that capitalized phrase, Cook notes, has already been appropriated by, a.o., Lawrence Kramer). Cook's discourse is on music as a (possibly causal) foundation of a musicology — and on musicology as a legitimate way of accumulating academic capital.

That is why it appears almost imperative to consider the present Introduction in its connection with the same author's introduction and contribution to "Rethinking Music", which he co-edited with Mark Everist (Oxford University Press, 1999). And that is exactly what I will be doing.

The "cultural work" that Cook wishes to accomplish is succinctly stated in the following declaration (p. vi/unnumbered): "I want to spread out a map that all music could in principle be put on to [...]". What Cook aims at is a "Theory for all music": a conceptual framework that would accommodate every(one's) music. Nevertheless, he remains cautious; he makes no false pretenses of universality, and acknowledges (only a few lines down) that a theory for all music must be a theory for all kinds of music: "Every music would need its own Very Short Introduction."

It is hard to position oneself, as a critical reader, *vis-à-vis* an author whose main positions you share and have been sharing for some time. (I refer mainly to Sabbe, 1996 and 1998). This is not a matter of chronology, of precedence, but of "mutual morphic resonance", of what is "in the air". I should start, therefore, by confessing that I can go along with Cook in many respects.

It is true that, beginning with the breakthrough of sound recordings, the disciplinary position of musicology has been thoroughly modified, that as a consequence musical historiography has (or should have) come into its own, as a historiography based on sounding sources.

It is also true that the discipline of musicology has been slow to register and adapt to the changed source situation.

It is no longer written, scored music that constitutes the exclusive historic source material; it is rather any and all registered sounds, any sonological information, whether already predicated “music” or not.

It is true that our musical experience (mine, yours) is also composed of all those musics which make up our sound environment, and which we, perhaps, do not listen to but which, all the same, enter our awareness. And inasmuch as it is from the perspective of the listener (hearer?) that musical experience needs to be studied — another proposal of Cook’s — one should not ignore that fact.

It is true that this sound environment of ours is variably composed — depending on personal and collective experiences — of, notably, 1) almost nothing short of the entire repertory of the history of our own (European-Western) music culture, which in addition is mostly present to us in (often many) different performed versions; 2) interculturally, many other worlds’ musics; 3) intraculturally, different, however variously labeled, (subcultural) musics.

It should be noted that the multiplicative effect in the constitution of this environment — our pool of music — is compounded by (even apart from purely economic motives and aspects): 1) a technological factor, the *electronic migration*: peoples of the world more and more establish cultural contact through electronic sound communications, that is, without and apart from actual physical migration, thus contributing to a *globalizing sonosphere* in an increasingly cabled and satellited world; 2) a changed aesthetic attitude factor, with music makers coming to deal with phonograms not just as musical products, but as production material for music: material for recycling, recombination, mixing, sampling, remixing (one consequence being that the entire music production of history is now available as material not in any way tied to a “most advanced historical stage” (Adorno) and so is not expected to exert any linearly orientating pressure on the music maker — a novel assumption considered by many to be a component of “postmodernity”); 3) a psychosocial factor, a chain of *distinctive reactions*: whenever a music (for whatever reason) appeals to ever larger groups of people, a subgroup will emerge to look for an alternative.

Part of this process of an ongoing production of difference (whether or not as a function of late capitalism must be left undecided here) is, at the level of argumentation, the “authenticity debate”, which Cook duly deals with. But whereas he contends that “the front line [of the ‘authenticity’ debate] lies in the first decades of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the “authentic” performances of Elgar’s symphonies...” (p. 99/92), I would suggest that perhaps that line lies even nearer to us, at the beginning of the “electronic age”: should the electronic compositions of the ‘50s be maintained in their original taped realizations (including the “impurities” due to the inevitable shortcomings of technology at the time) or be re-realized with contemporary digital means?

If all this is true, it should be clear that musicology’s *raison d’être* is not any longer a “declaration of class(icity)”: to warrant and secure the status of the “canon”.

If it is true that all these musics all of us hear, and all the ways we hear them should be taken into account, then any music history now will have to include a performance history (as advocated by Cook) and a reception history, in short: a history of interpretation.

(The prominence of the phonogram, that is of studio recording techniques, in the construction of our musical experience has created interrogations of its own, e.g. undermining (through The Beatles, Glenn Gould, Zappa a.o.) the belief in that other “authenticity”: music as a direct and sincere “expression” of affect.) (Aren't both “authenticity” and “non-authenticity”-in-function-of-technical-perfection-and-“purity” (trade)marks for marketing?).

The “canonization” of The Beatles and, though with some more reserve, of The Rolling Stones, has almost been fully achieved. (In 1997, in the books-on-music offering from Cambridge University Press, The Beatles' sacred album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* appeared between Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*).

The “classical” musicologist has had to acknowledge the existence of meaning ascription and discriminatory competence on the part of listeners in the sphere of popular music as much as in high-brow music culture. In all forms of music, “high” and “low”, there appear to be listeners who are highly knowledgeable and quite (even over? —) particular, establishing, through (possibly a chain of) distinctive reactions, their (changing) musical identities.

In short, the device of a new musicology would seem to be: to take the listener seriously. Classical, “philological” musicology — and the “historically informed performance” of the “authenticity” movement —, sometimes prolonged by authoritarian music(-analytic) theories which prescribe the one and only right interpretation, has univocally emphasized the authorial — or rather, more generally, as the “informed” performer and the “informing” theorist in turn become “authors” — the “sender's side” to the detriment of meaning attributions on the receiver's, the auditor's side. The time has come now for the “auditor in musica”, for attention focused on the auditor's performance. (A methodological framework for doing so has been offered by scholars in popular music studies (Tagg, a.o.)).

Concurrently, the focus of musicological attention should shift from the exclusive analysis of the finished product — based either on reading meaning off the score (classical analysis) or (more recently, and possibly alternately) on the sonological description of the sound recording — towards the study of musical activities, of music-in-action, viz. composition-performance-listening (as socially embedded) processes.

This, of course, entails a changed status for performance, too: “performance” (better perhaps: “performing”) as the activity of having sound sounding. We need, then, to consider performing from a score as being not so much a privileged, as an exceptional case of performing music.

(The new musicological paradigm that Cook, a.o., represents, might be one outcome of an already long evolving tradition, beginning, maybe, with Descartes,

who contributed to shifting the emphasis of philosophical reasoning from the abstracted generality of “musica” to music-as-sounding.)

Where I differ from Cook is in his equating (or, at any rate, I read him as equating) plurality with pluralism. Cook seems to be quite confident — much too confident, in my opinion — that we live in a “postcolonial”, a “multicultural” (p. 42/39) and “pluralist” society (p. 45/41). Therefore, he wonders how it can be that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, uncritically ethnocentric and elitist conceptions (about Western/non-Western, and high/low art) are still to be encountered. In fact, he is convinced that the availability of “all that music” should entail adhesion.

Reactions of Western listeners, however, especially when trained exclusively on either “classical” or “pop” music, offer ample evidence to the contrary. Western audiences familiar with westernized, technologized versions by the likes of Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon, often recoil when confronted with the “originals”, from Africa or elsewhere.

There is a clear distinction to be maintained here between the “fait social” that different kinds of music are part of our sound environment and possible individual and collective attitudes resulting from this fact: I (we) tolerate the different musics around; I (we) positively evaluate them *as differences*.

Moreover, when we (high-brow Westerners?) patronize popular or non-Western musics, we display a seemingly irresistible propensity to subject them to Western standards and traditional musicological approaches: we canonize (the Beatles, Balinese gamelan), we decontextualize, and we submit them to evaluation by the criteria of our Western aesthetics: we treat them as if they were musical (Master)Works and Expressions of Genius. (Has Cook himself inadvertently succumbed? He writes about “the masterpieces of rock” (p. 12/11), without inverted commas).

The “world music” market place with its multicultural awareness (not, I repeat, to be equated with multiculturalism) invites us to take a new look at the universality problem. The monstrous word “glocalization” may sum up the situation: localization (neo-national, neo-regional orientations at the service of a “world market”) balances globalization. The real other-world music (not “world beat”) is localizable, recognizable as ethnically situated: only the locally characterized can be said to be “universal”.

The internationalized, standardized pop music with its neutralized English and repertoire of sounds (Madonna, Jackson; *cf.* fast food and ready-made clothing), by contrast, is not “universal”: it is the local traded world-wide.

Another problem Cook has had to tackle is the creation of (added) meaning through writing about music: what do words on music do?

Verbal semanticizing of musical meaning and experience is indispensable, if a general discussion of music (that is, musicology) is to become possible at all. It speaks to the tendency, apparently typical of Western culture, to generalize, formalize, rationalize, in one word: to make accessible to discourse. The snag, however, resides in the need to make linguistic signs answerable to music, *i.e.* to what primarily involves physical-energetic and emotional responses; in other words (!): to get over

that so often lamented inarticulateness of words in the face of music, which the German Romantics managed so well to turn to their aesthetic advantage, ascribing to music the extraordinary capacity "das Unsagbare (the "unspeakable") zu sagen".

(Semanticizing the musical production itself, either through words attached to the music (sung text, "paratext") or through other forms of semanticization (such as Messiaen's "langage communicable") is not the question here: it is not what music is primarily about.) It is Kierkegaard who (in his musings on Don Juan) said that if ever Mozart's music were to become totally comprehensible to him (by which he meant: totally expressible in words), then, at the very same moment, it would have become utterly incomprehensible.

It is true that going "back to Beethoven" (as Cook does in ch. 2) allows us to reopen and continue the debate on the "autonomy" of music and on the excellence of the individual musical genius, thus firmly positing the historical foundations of musicology in the moment of Beethoven's canonization. (I would merely add: and in the moment when Wagner attributed to Beethoven precisely that place in history that made him the necessary prefiguration of Wagner himself.)

It seems to me that, in spite of the emphasis on Beethoven's historic role in the individualization of the compositional act, Cook might have linked this to its social context and mediation, to the tacit social contract between a composer and the expectations and assumptions of his listeners: the mutual adjustment of compositional habits and listening competence (or musical literacy) of the audience. If a composer builds cyclical complexities into his music, we may safely assume the existence on the side of that composing partner of at least some measure of confidence in at least some capacity on the listeners' side for tonal pattern recognition and recall.

On the other hand, I wonder why Cook did not pursue the Beethoven track into our own time: from Beethoven to Babbitt. (Was the "Very Short Introduction" too short, after all?, by the way, the mention of Babbitt would have presented him with one "B" more, alongside Bach, Beethoven and Brahms: "the role in music history played by the letter 'B' has never been satisfactorily explained", pp. 14-15/14...). Babbitt, author of the paper entitled "Who cares if you listen?" as the high point of "modernism" and of the purity and detachment ideology of absolute ("absolved") music: his social contract is with the academy: to deliver a composition as a logical, fitting application (implementation) of a (pseudo?-scientific) theory. Pure music — pure research.

THEORY AS VIOLENCE

Cook vehemently opposes the absolutist claims of theories, referring in particular to Schenker, Lerdahl, Narmour.

It is true that theories tend to be strongly reductive, that they tend not to admit the existence of anything that does not enter their framework: a power relationship of intolerance.

Certainly, the Schenker and Lerdahl doctrines, owing to their graphs which convert the temporal unfolding of music into spatial configurations (far more so than does the score), are particularly spectacular, and therefore may deserve the special treatment offered by Cook. On the other hand, however, they may also be considered merely as specially effective manifestations of a mentality representative of a wider culture, one that is characterized by strongly reductive and rationalizing tendencies.

One particular anecdote seems to me most revealing of the suggested mentality. One day, a score submitted by Schoenberg to a composition competition was returned to him "because a chord in it 'did not exist'". That is: because it could not be described in terms of tonal common-practice theory, it did not exist. Or, rather, it could not be allowed to exist; it could not be tolerated.

One other example of the same exclusionary attitude is of an even more comprehensive nature; it relates to the so-called "secondary parameters" — that they are called that is itself revealing; to the extent that timbre, pitch inflection, intensity cannot be represented in verbal analytic description, they are considered not relevant. And so, categories of music(s) to which these parameters are pertinent, are treated as inferior.

Such an attitude is dictated by a need to encompass experience within theory, to explain rationally and exhaustively, to decode and pretend to integrally re-encode musical experience, thus explaining away whatever "detail" would escape the method.

To Cook, music is clearly a cultural (as opposed to a natural) phenomenon, and therefore cannot be "explained" by naturalistic methods, which he represents as "supracultural". Does this sound like a distant echo of Wilhelm Dilthey, the father of "Geisteswissenschaften", who established a fundamental distinction between "explaining" ("Erklären") of naturalistic phenomena and "understanding" ("Verstehen") of historically relativistic social and cultural data?

Cultural relativism may be of assistance in "understanding" musical theories, including those which present naturalistic claims, as historically situated systemic constructs which are more or less apt to "explain" the constructedness of a repertory of historically situated musical productions (e.g. Schenker for unadulterated "tonal" music: *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, say, or ABBA).

IDEALISM - POSITIVISM

Musicology has been successively dominated by German and (in the second half of the 20th century) American scholars. Philosophically speaking: by idealism, resp. (neo-)positivism (philological — the type of positivism Kerman raged against — or music-theoretical positivism). With Schenker possibly in an intermediate position.

Common to both approaches is their ultimate purpose: to establish identity: a pre-existing identity in the case of idealism (fulfilling the ideological need to reduce

the object under examination to, and fix it on, its essence, its "idea") (and this is where Schenker and Schoenberg can be seen ultimately to agree...); an identity to be ultimately and empirically arrived at in the case of positivism.

Crucial to both methods of enquiry is the consideration that "the" music is out there, an object to be observed, and inert under observation. Whereas, especially when it comes to the observation of other-(sub-)culture music, the presence of the observer with his/her own enculturation should at least be factored into the observation results.

The "identity" to be established manifests itself as unity: the "organic" unity of the ("master"-)Work; the imaginative unity of "vision" which is assumed to preside over the moment of creation (see Cook's account, p. 65/60, of Mozart and Beethoven — to whom I would like to add a contemporary composer like György Ligeti); the unity of music history which, according to Adorno, unfolds chronologically what is, ideally, simultaneous. (In Adorno's idealist, Hegelian modernism, history was pre-synchronized; in postmodernism, one could say, it has been post-synchronized). (I myself have contributed as I could to the historical continuity paradigm, even introducing dynamic systems theory and in particular its "catastrophe" model in order to explain away apparent discontinuities in 20th c. music history: the passage to (?) atonality, the passage to open structure forms (see Sabbe, 1986).

But when all this is done, when unities-identities have been established, nothing has been said yet about the effective workings of the music — which cannot be treated reductively.

Theory-based analysis treats any musical entity as one-of-a-class; "differential" criticism ought to treat any musical entity as an instance of a class never to be. Hopefully, such differentiability might then contribute to the suppression of boundaries (not distinctions): not "my" music, not "our" music, but a music of the world.

And here Cook's pragmatism should be of the utmost assistance: not what music "represents" (a definite identity) is of the first importance, but "what it does" (to me, to any recipient).

Let us then inscribe our future papers as follows: "*The present interpretation is not meant to be final*"¹.

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