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Translating music

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I shall try to discuss this marvelous little book in its own language — English. Attempting to do so (with all the risks of clumsiness in a language that is not “mine”) raises a question, by analogy so to speak, that seems central to Nicholas Cook’s purpose: how can one speak *about* music — reflect on it, lay the empirical foundations for its criticism or comprehension — in a language that is *not* musical? What type of *translation* does such a simple and everyday operation imply?

The other side of this same question would be: *could music speak about music?* Could there be something like musical criticism in the strongest sense of the word? Literary critics, for example, write about literature in the very medium or language of the “objects” they analyse. Could musicians analyse music *in music* (see Szendy, 2000)? Put in these terms, my question very closely resembles the well known “formalist” positions, from Hanslick to Stravinsky and beyond (music does not say anything more than what it says, *i.e.* music...). But it only *resembles* these positions, since I would rather ask: could there be some sort of “non-coincidence” inherent to musical idioms or works, could they have a capacity to speak about themselves (and hence differ from themselves by deferring their “sense”), even *before* one starts to consider the relationships between music and politics, ethics, culture, society, and so on and so forth?

By analysing the way the word “bridge” functions in James Brown’s famous *Sex Machine* (see Szendy, 1997), I have tried to show that when words are put *on* a developing musical process (rather than put *to* music), when they grow *from the very making of the music*, in an almost simultaneous way, the most “technical” or “literal” expressions (“bridge” in the sense of modulating section) tend to be caught in a chain of secondary meanings (“the bridge of New York, of L. A.”, etc.), thereby deferring the musical phenomenon they were meant to announce, describe or promise.

Could something like this (let’s call it a “disappropriating metadiscourse”) take place *without words*? Or, to be more precise: could we have access to it? In other words: could we do away with the formalist closure of the musical text without postulating that no such thing as “music” exists? Without carefully surrounding it with quotation marks, indicating that “music” is first of all a *word*, defined in a given

cultural context? ("Music", says Nicholas Cook so convincingly, "doesn't just happen, it is what we make it, and what we make *of* it" [p. vi/unnumbered].)

To my eyes and ears, this is one of the main issues raised by *Music...* This book has so many far-reaching implications that it falls short, indeed, of being as "short" as its (sub)title claims (even if it remains one the most "readable" essays I have read). By restricting my discussion to the question clumsily outlined above, I am certainly unfair. I can only hope to have touched on one of the central nodes in a nexus that I would welcome translating in "my" language: no doubt it would strongly contribute to shake the rigid foundations of a rapidly aging "French musicology".

Let us start at the beginning, by the very first words. They seem obvious enough: *Music* (title), *A Very Short Introduction* (subtitle specifying the "genre"). Having once read through the book, why have I re-read these very first words as forming quite a different statement? Was it sheer clumsiness with English that led me to hear: 'Music (*is*) a very short introduction (*to...*)'? This reading may not be as out of place as it seems, since what *Music...* shows is that "music" introduces us to advertising, moral values, economics, social issues, gender politics, etc. (the list is open, like James Brown's list of "bridges").

Music, indeed, is a *short* introduction to all these fields, since, as the *Conclusion* states, it is "the artifice which disguises itself as nature" (p. 131/122). With music, one is always already "inside" value systems one does not even notice. In this sense, music — not Nicholas Cook's *Music...*, but music "itself" — might well be *too short* an introduction. Carrying us too quickly to the point, without even letting us time to *notice*. This would be the reason why it is so difficult to speak about it — and why it is so necessary to do so.

The immediate question I can imagine coming to the mind of most (French) musicologists reading this stimulating contextualization of their discipline, is: What is left of musicology? Has it (will it) become a mere cross-roads between sociology, anthropology, cultural studies...? We should not be afraid of answering positively, instead of watching over disciplinary customs and trade tariffs. But still, something *behind* these protectionist questions remains.

If one can account for music's "a-critical" aggregating force by recognizing its immediacy (one of the most widely shared values of music across cultures), how could one account for the very *critical urge* music can *also* stimulate, at least in our European culture (an urge to which *Music...* is a brilliant testimony)? I cannot even try to answer this question in the limited context of this *very short* discussion. But it seems to me that one should begin by examining aspects of the (German?) Romantic era, where the modern notion of criticism is born. Literature (as defined by the Iena circle of the "Athenaeum") started to be thought of as awaiting criticism for its very achievement (in an endless process similar to, but very different from Hegelian idealism). And some traces of this conception can certainly be found in Schumann's critical practice (he says somewhere that every work of art is "perfectible") as well as in Liszt's *transcriptions*. That is: in two ways of *translating*

music (the verbal one, and the musical one). Translation, be it intra- or extramusical, always implies displacement and critical interpretation.

Deconstructing music (or its implicit discourse) might not be too bad a *shorthand* for Nicholas Cook's purpose. But deconstruction should also involve the uncovering of the very forces that resist dominant values *from within* the tradition at stake. In this respect, *Music...* is perhaps a little bit unfair, with its focus on Beethoven (chapter 2). In our very desire to be critical about music (and *in* music), we are also heirs to what Romanticism has *invented*¹.

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