

reviews

The Politics and Poetics of Listening

Nicholas Cook. *Music, Imagination, and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1990. 265 pp.

"Kant," wrote Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, "wanted to prove in a way that would dumbfound the common man that the common man was right; this was the secret joke of his soul."¹ Nicholas Cook's *Music, Imagination, and Culture* has little use for Kant, but what Nietzsche called Kant's joke is the centerpiece of this intelligent, meticulously argued, and profoundly retrogressive book.

Cook's topic is the relationship between musical experience—specifically the experience of Western art music since the mid-eighteenth century—and musicological discourse. His starting point is the fact that many people who know little or nothing about this music nonetheless take intense pleasure in it. He cites empirical studies suggesting that what might be called the listener's working ignorance of the music is no hindrance to such pleasure, and that working knowledge is no help. For many listeners, formal elements as simple as literal repetition and tonal closure go unrecognized, leaving dim hope for the recognition of large-scale tonal relations and complex structures like sonata form. Even musically knowledgeable listeners, one study suggests, tend to listen knowledgeably only when they have some explicit reason to do so.

All this untutored musical pleasure, whether founded on absent or absentee knowledge, spells trouble. As Cook observes, the practice of listening for pleasure is culture-specific, taking its impetus from the development of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Europe. Consistent with this origin, it operates on the basis of two cardinal assumptions: (1) that "the significance of music lies in what we perceive as we listen to it," and (2) that "to perceive something aesthetically is to perceive it as an integrated whole" (p. 5). But if a listener's aesthetic pleasure in music can arise without reference to the formal design of the music, then these two assumptions clash. Either the significance of music must lie in something not perceived, in which case it is not aesthetic, or the aesthetic value of the music has nothing to do with the perception of integrated wholes, in which case it makes no sense to base aesthetic judgments on the grounds of musical design. In the second case, the practical irrelevance of design may also constitute an epistemological irrelevance. For if design (form, structure) is of little or no aesthetic consequence, then it is hard to see in what sense understanding musical design constitutes understanding mu-

sic, or, for that matter, in what sense music can be understood at all.

There are several obvious solutions to this dilemma. One, sanctioned by figures like Hanslick, Schenker, and Adorno, is to regard untutored musical pleasure as something passive and sentimental, a kind of *Lumpen* pleasure that, if it cannot be eradicated, can at least be looked down on. Cook is rightly dismissive of this position, and has some trenchant things to say about its watered-down incarnation as "music appreciation." Surely the notion that listeners must distrust their responses to music unless some musicological Vergil appears to guide them through the underworld of formal design is both foolishly elitist and blandly question-begging.

A second solution is to contest Cook's claim that the formal design of music has little or no bearing on its aesthetic effect. Cook is certainly vulnerable to such contestation. His argument consistently turns on the fact that the elements of formal design go unrecognized by listeners. But I do not necessarily fail to perceive something just because I fail to recognize it, or, more exactly, just because I cannot give an explicit retrospective account of my perception of it. A host of human transactions, from seductions to political campaigns (assuming there's a difference) depend on the effectiveness of unrecognized or marginally recognized perceptions. Most movie-goers know nothing at all about film editing, yet it would be strange indeed to suggest that their responses have not been profoundly shaped and even manipulated by the way a movie has been edited. Sonata form may be no different; musical for musicians, it may work for most people in silence. And to the likelihood that formal design in the arts can work as well, or better, in hiding as in the open, we must add the possibility that some designs work unconsciously, in the psychoanalytic sense of being fended off, not simply overlooked, by the listener.

Yet Cook may still have a point. To show that formal patterns *can* shape aesthetic response is not to show that, in every case, they *do*, or that every formal pattern in a given work, or during a given performance, is aesthetically active. There is assuredly *some* degree of disparity between formal design and aesthetic pleasure, and we do need to confront the issues that this raises.

Cook confronts them by forthrightly endorsing the radical separation of formal design (or the knowledge of it) and aesthetic pleasure. The formal side of what he calls "the musical fabric," the side on which musicological knowledge is embroidered, he assigns to the culture of professional musicians engaged in the production, by which he primarily means the performance, of music. "Productional" knowledge enables professionals to imagine, and therefore to make decisions about or, in Roland Barthes's term, to "operate," the music they produce.² Although it may serve to enhance the listening pleasure of "connoisseurs," its more impor-

tant function is to enhance the effectiveness of performance. "A performer," writes Cook,

who has grasped an extended piece in Schenkerian terms may be able to bring to his performance a higher degree of large-scale rhythmic or dynamic shaping just because he has a reflective awareness of the music's structure that exceeds anything that is ordinarily experienced by the listener (p. 4).

As to the listener "himself" (Cook's sexist usage is consistent), he need be concerned only with the "receptional" side of the musical fabric; the arcana of production can take care of themselves. All the listener has to do is—just listen.

Cook's reception-production duality is correlated with two modes of listening that he calls the "musical" and the "musicological." These modes are not created equal. Musical listening is direct, immediate, unreflective, and pleasure-oriented; musicological listening is distanced, mediated, reflective, and knowledge-oriented. Musical listening is based on involvement with the music. Even if it at times incorporates an awareness of formal patterns or "extramusical" connections, such awareness cannot be "foundational" to it (pp. 158, 167). Musicological listening is tendentious. Its purpose is "the establishment of facts and the formulation of theories," and it usually finds exactly what it is looking for. To be sure, Cook reassures us that there is nothing wrong with musicological listening, and he obviously indulges in it himself; like his earlier book *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1987), this one is full of interesting formal observations that purely "musical" listeners will find hard to follow. But Cook clearly thinks that musicological listening does more harm than good unless it is firmly subordinated to musical listening on the one hand and to the culture of production on the other.

Cook's impatience with a kind of hard-core musical formalism will strike a sympathetic chord in many readers; certainly it strikes one in me. But if the hegemonic regime of musical formalism is a problem, so is Cook's solution to it. In fact, it is exactly the *same* problem. Irrationalism and hyperrationalism are merely two sides of the same coin; morphologically, a populist insistence on the spontaneous pleasures of just listening is no different from an elitist insistence on musical erudition as the prerequisite of true listening. The same binary hierarchy of emotion and thought, intuition and reason, spontaneity and mediation, underwrites each position; each position is made rigid and hyperbolic by the need to police the musical domain against its counterpart. The only difference concerns which end of the seesaw is up.

What Cook fails, crucially, to recognize is that the terms by which he opposes the regime of formalist aesthetics are themselves the historical product of formalist aesthetics. Only with the development of the normative concept of aesthetic pleasure—a higher pleasure structured by the formal design of an artwork—does the concept of a deviant, lower, unstructured pleasure become thinkable. Reversing the hierarchy, so that the unstructured pleasure is idealized as a primary, vital force and the structured pleasure demoted to a pedantic illusion, only perpetuates the regime that it means to oppose.

One sign of that perpetuation is the hectoring tone that surfaces in some of Cook's most forceful statements of his position:

What the listener is basically concerned with is not the meaning of the [musical] work but its effect; and this is something that requires no mediation and indeed brooks none (p. 173).

To think that one can understand music in some abstract, symbolical sense that can be separated from . . . aesthetic participation is simply to misunderstand the whole nature of the enterprise. . . . [T]here is only reading [music], memorizing it, performing it, composing it, and listening to it—in short, loving it. . . . [Thus testified] Igor Stravinsky . . . when he remarked, "I haven't understood a bar of music in my life; but I have felt it." Further comment seems superfluous (p. 186).

Rather than mediation, what well-placed people usually do not "brook" is opposition, and the unspoken term resonates harshly in Cook's first statement. (His occasional praise of F.R. Leavis, the vitalist literary critic who in 1948 announced that there had been five, and only five, great novelists in English, adds to the resonance.) As for the second statement, Stravinsky's calculatedly arrogant remark notwithstanding, further comment on the "musical-musicological" duality is anything but superfluous.

As Cook avows, this duality articulates a more basic hierarchical opposition between primary, unreflective experience and secondary, discursive reflection. The reflection both derives from the experience and inevitably falsifies it. In its aesthetic applications, including Cook's, this familiar post-Cartesian opposition is typically invoked to invest art with the power to overcome the alienating effects of reflection. Works of art, like Keats's Grecian urn, are expected to tease us out of thought. That they largely fail to do so, as Keats made a point of showing about the urn, has not done much to alter the expectation, nor has the inner logic we encountered with Cook's musical-musicological duality: the logic by which the "immedi-

ate" term appears only as a retrospective posit of the "mediated" term.

One thing, however, that *has* dented the expectation of a redemptory aesthetic immediacy is some twenty years of anti-foundationalist thinking by literary theorists, cultural theorists, and philosophers. Deconstruction, neopragmatism, Foucauldian theories of discourse, some versions of feminism, psychoanalysis, and ideology critique—all have radically questioned, not to say scourged, the binary opposition of immediacy and reflection. On the one hand, the immediacy of experience is understood from these new perspectives to be discursive and reflective through and through; immediacy, as Jacques Derrida once put it, is *derived*.³ On the other hand, this derivative character of experience presents no hindrance to pleasure, intensity, or even "spontaneity." Accordingly, the whole question of "experience" needs to be rethought. Or, more exactly, the weight of recent theorizing has done what nineteenth-century expressions of self-doubt like Keats's could not do, and made this re-thinking in some sense imperative.

To all of this, Cook is oblivious. And this deeply undermines his position, not because he fails to be obligingly postmodernist but because he fails to see that any credible defense of the duality on which he depends so much must take account of postmodernist critiques. The redemptory status of art may yet be redeemed (shades of *Parsifal!*) but only by someone who understands why it is in tatters.

In the meantime, one way out of the impasse between untutored musical pleasure and unanchored accounts of musical form might be to regard music in other than aesthetic terms. I am thinking particularly of recent efforts to understand music as one of the energies or agencies of culture, as both a means by which people are acculturated and a means by which culture is (trans)formed.⁴ For Cook, however, this possibility does not arise. He considers "reflective" forms of musical hermeneutics to be just another variety of the "musicological" and dismisses attempts to understand music in relation to "social or personal values" or "expressive or representational content" as "not very important" (p. 171). The rare works such as Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that "demand" an "interpretative stance" from the listener are relegated to a hybrid category that makes them "literary as well as musical" (p. 168). More broadly, no interpretative stance can be granted a "foundational" role in my experience as a listener (p. 166); a piece like the third movement of Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* will "make sense" whether, or not, I hear it as "night sounds" (p. 171).

This position is so dyed in the aesthetic wool that contesting it seems like a fool's errand. You either have to take it or leave it. Leaving it, however, might be easier for undecided readers if its full implications are spelled out, and luckily Cook goes far enough at one point to make that

possible. Contrasting literary with musical works, he argues that the former put substantial constraints on freedom of thought in the reader while the latter largely enfranchise that freedom in the listener. (The distinction is dubious on several grounds, but let that go.) "I can think," he continues,

of Till Eulenspiegel's merry pranks or listen to Strauss's symphonic poem as absolute music; I can track the evolution of the work's form or see shapes moving in space; I can listen to the E flat clarinet or listen to nothing in particular (p. 170).

For that matter, one might add, I can fall asleep or enjoy a train of sadomasochistic fantasies. But so what?

My answer is that I could do all of these things indifferently if my relationship to Strauss's music were purely private and appropriative. But I will simply not *want* to do most of them if I think of myself as living in history, as having a relationship to a past which is in some measure my own prehistory, and as being dialogically involved with persons and positions, past and present, that differ from me and mine. If Strauss's music means nothing to me but what I narcissistically want it to mean, then it means little more than nothing. Know-nothingism is know-nothingism, even if it is refined enough to notice the E flat clarinet. To be sure, I want to listen to music for pleasure, but I do not demand that my pleasure be ignorant or idealized, or that it be modeled exclusively on perception as opposed to, say, cultural, social, sexual, or discursive interaction.

Music, Imagination, and Culture is, as I said at the head of this review, an intelligent and meticulously argued book. Ironically, given its argument, it is at its best in discussing esoteric matters like fingering and notation; Kant's joke casts a long shadow. But taken as a whole, the book is, or should be, a source of consternation. It sets itself squarely against the malaise that increasingly bedevils the culture of Western art music, but is itself a symptom of that malaise. To paraphrase Karl Kraus's famous wise-crack about psychoanalysis, this book is the sickness of which it believes itself to be the cure.

—Lawrence Kramer

NOTES

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), Aphorism 193, pp. 205–6.

² Roland Barthes, "Musical Practica," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 265.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 157.

⁴ For an overview, with bibliography, see Joseph Kerman, "American Musicology in the 1990s," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 9 (1991): 131–44.