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Leonard B. Meyer. *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. xi, 376 pp.

In 1956, the year in which Leonard Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* appeared (it is now in its seventeenth printing), American musicology was dominated by historical or philological studies of music before 1750, which emanated from a few elite Eastern universities. Music theory as we now know it had hardly taken root, and there was precious little in the way of genuinely interdisciplinary work. Meyer's book represented a fresh wind blowing in from the west, from the University of Chicago, where it had earned the author a Ph.D. and where he was teaching. In *Emotion and Meaning*, Meyer drew on an impressively wide spectrum of sources, from psychology, aesthetics, music theory, music history, and even ethnomusicology, to elaborate an argument that a listener's musical experience is shaped by the frustration and/or fulfillment of expectation.

Throughout his career, and in the four books he has written or coauthored since *Emotion and Meaning*, Meyer has continued to range broadly among and between fields. *The Rhythmic Structure of Music* (1960), coauthored with Grosvenor Cooper, addressed a central problem that had been largely ignored by the European theoretical tradition (with the exception of Riemann) and its American followers. With *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (1967), Meyer tackled questions of style history and of what he called "cultural ideology." The topic here was contemporary art music, which he suggested was characterized less by progression or evolution than by a multiplicity of coexisting, nonevolving styles. With *Explaining Music* (1973), Meyer returned essentially to the problems set out in *Emotion and Meaning*, which were now placed in a more strictly analytical-compositional framework less oriented to aesthetics or the listener's perceptions. The more flexible notions of "expectation" in the earlier work became codified—and, to some

extent, ossified—into more rigid categories of melodic structure.

The solemn litany that comprises the title and subtitle of the new book—style, music, theory, history, and ideology—suggests that Meyer has now attempted to draw together in one grand fabric the various threads of his earlier work. And in this sense, *Style and Music* can indeed be taken as the most ambitious book in an ambitious career. Meyer divides the book into three parts. The first, entitled "Theory," presents a theory of style in general, then sets up certain paradigms for style analysis of music in particular. Part II, called "History, Innovation, and Choice," shifts the focus to issues of historiography and of determining motivation and choice within history, including music history. Part III, "Music and Ideology," constitutes what Meyer calls a "sketch-history" of nineteenth-century European art music; this is intended as an exploratory study using the methods or principles developed in the earlier part of the book.

In his preface, Meyer suggests that his book "presents neither an axiomatic account of the nature of style nor a philosophical theory of style change. Rather, its method is modestly empirical" (p. x). But, in fact, much of the book is spent calling for a systematic, rigorous approach to these problems. This search for apparently objective criteria, more or less latent in Meyer's earlier work, here becomes an obsession that rarely loosens its grip on the new book. Meyer's view of style and style change, as set out in part I of *Style and Music*, has hardened from its earlier formulation in chapter 7 of *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*. There he examined, with admirable flair, various models, including those by Schapiro, Kroeber, and Ackerman, to argue for the possibility of "fluctuating, yet dynamic, steady-state."¹ In the new study, Meyer seems hung up with the element of choice exercised by a composer (or any historical agent) as the crucial element of style. He defines style specifically as a patterning "that results from a series of choices made within some set of con-

¹Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (Chicago, 1967), p. 128.

straints" (p. 3). Most of part I is taken up with defining the kinds of constraints within which composers are said to operate ("laws," "rules," "strategies," "dialects," "genres," "idioms," "schemata"). These range from the very broadest cultural phenomena down to specific musical procedures or options.

The classificatory impulse apparent here is in fact symptomatic of the book as a whole. Meyer has had a taste—and a talent—for this kind of approach throughout his career. But the humane cast of his earlier work, which always set him apart from (and, for me, above) most other American music theorists, has given way in *Style and Music* to an almost totalitarian attitude toward the practice of musical analysis and history. Meyer now demands that the determination of style be "based on observed correlations and repeated concatenations of traits—that is, on statistical samplings. Thus far scholarly samplings have, for the most part, been ad hoc, informal, and unsystematic" (p. 57). As a result, the writing of music history has been largely "a collection of style analyses strung on the slender thread of chronology" (p. 101). Meyer calls instead for development of "objective and rigorous rules for defining and differentiating patterns above the level of the foreground" (p. 58). Elsewhere: "What are needed are . . . explicit and consistent translation codes that enable the historian to show that patterns, whether seemingly similar or dissimilar, are actualizations of some shared group of constraints" (p. 82).

The most forceful, indeed alarming, expression of these legislative sentiments is worth quoting at some length:

Since all classification and all generalization about stylistic traits are based on some estimate of relative frequency, statistics are inescapable. This being so, it seems prudent to gather, analyze, and interpret statistical data according to some coherent, even systematic, plan. That is, instead of employing informal impressions of the relative frequencies of casually defined traits . . . it would appear desirable to define as rigorously as possible what is to count as a given trait, to gather data about such traits systematically, and to collate and analyze it consistently and scrupulously—in short, to employ the highly refined methods and theories developed in the discipline of mathematical statistics and sampling

theory. I should add that I have no doubt about the value of employing computers in such studies, not merely because they can save enormous amounts of time, but equally important, because their use will force us to define terms and traits, classes and relationships with precision—something most of us seldom do (p. 64).

If this represents "modest" empiricism, one would hate to experience the extreme variety. With the kind of mandate laid down by Meyer here, the practice (and the reading) of music analysis, theory, and history would be about as pleasurable, and as illuminating, as sorting mail. One wonders why anyone—let alone a professed humanist like Meyer—would want to engage in it.

If part I of *Style and Music* sets out this rather depressing agenda for scholars, part II of the book does something similar for composers in constructing what comes to seem a veritable prison-house of constraints within which composers are said to operate. Meyer is particularly concerned with the sources or impetuses for stylistic innovation. "The question is *why*," he asks with the positivistic urgency that drives him in this book. "Why, for instance, did Haydn discern and develop more of the potential latent in the Classic style than Dittersdorf?" (p. 110).

Meyer suggests that the most common sources for innovation or novelty are "manipulation," "simulation," and "correlation," categories which are then further subdivided. Under manipulation, by which he means "ordering or modifying already existing stylistic means in new ways" (p. 123), Meyer distinguishes four subclasses: permutation, combination, displacement, and extrapolation. Under correlation we find metaphoric mimicry, analogic modeling, and metaphoric modeling.

These neologisms are the kind in which Meyer has always delighted. But do we really need this elaborate taxonomy to classify such traditional, easily comprehensible compositional practices? Thus permutation "might involve rearranging the pitches of a scale or the rhythms possible in a style to create new melodies, chords, or harmonic progressions" (p. 123). Combination involves "a novel ordering of two or more already existing stylistic compo-

nents," such as the use of fugal procedures in sonata-form expositions (p. 124). Displacement involves "a change in the placement of a pattern in pitch or time or both," as when "what is customarily a closing gesture is used to begin a work" (p. 124). In extrapolation, "some existing means or procedure is extended," as in the more extensive use of chromaticism in the nineteenth century (p. 125).

Meyer never suggests that a composer is at any given moment conscious of the almost paralyzing array of choices or options for innovation, and in this sense he is making no specific claims about the psychology or phenomenology of creation. But his more "objective" approach nevertheless seems to me (a noncomposer) ultimately wrongheaded. I am far from suggesting the creative process should remain a sacred mystery, closed to scholarly investigation. Musicologists and analysts are always fundamentally interested in the "choices" composers make. In this sense, Meyer is on the right path; but his approach to understanding this activity is too fragmented, and ultimately too superficial. Despite all the different clinical probes he sends down into the creative soul of the composer, the most important things at the center seem to remain untouched. Reading Meyer, one wonders whether it would be any more fun to be a composer than to be a music historian or analyst trying to understand what a composer has wrought.

The best portion of part II is the chapter "Thoughts About History," where Meyer relaxes his taxonomic muscles for a moment to explore the writing about and perception of historical events and movements. This chapter represents a new aspect of Meyer's work, where he shows (or at least satisfies) for the first time an appetite for fundamental issues of historiography. Here he examines different assumptions often made tacitly by historians about connections between culture and history, about the role of cause and effect, about synchronic vs. diachronic approaches, and much more. To be sure, Meyer's sources tend to be relatively traditional; we read nothing of the structuralists, *annalists*, or beyond. Yet the discussion is vintage Meyer in the best sense, ranging widely but cogently among a number of different historical writers and their models.

In the final segment of the chapter, he turns briefly to the topic "Explanation in Music History" and takes music historians to task:

Textbooks consisting of chronological successions of more or less thoughtful style-analytic frames, routinely foisted on innocent students, become models of what a history is supposed to be. Passive acceptance is possible because . . . lurking behind such chronologies, linking successive style frames to one another, are unexamined axioms and unacknowledged models (p. 101).

This sally should be taken to heart by many academics and journalists who regularly indulge in such casual "history." And it makes us turn with curiosity to the final part of *Style and Music*, a "sketch-history" which is offered as a corrective to such practices by accounting for how specific aspects of Romantic "cultural ideology" are embodied in its music. How well does Meyer's sketch-history measure up to the high standards he has set in the preceding 160 pages?

As in the earlier portions of the book, Meyer is at his best here when he is in a sense the least "systematic" or taxonomic, as in chapter 6, "Romanticism – The Ideology of Elite Egalitarianism," which elaborates a view of the period as one that was characterized by a devaluation of hierarchies, classes, and privilege. Related to egalitarianism is an ideological component Meyer calls "acontextualism," in which Romanticism "insisted on the irrelevance of *all* origins, lineages, and contextual connections whatsoever" (p. 167). Drawing on a broad range of citations from poets, philosophers, composers, aestheticians, and historians of art and music (but how systematic is the sample? and who cares?), Meyer sets out a persuasive account of Romantic culture in western Europe. Related themes that are brought in are: the value placed by Romantics on nature and natural processes; the prevalence of the metaphor of organicism, especially organic unity; the emphasis on Becoming rather than Being. Individually, none of these concepts offers a radically new image of the nineteenth century. But the synthetic picture Meyer builds in this chapter is clear, cogent, and helpful. One could imagine

assigning this chapter with profit to a class on Romantic music.

With chapter 7 comes the crunch, as Meyer tries to fit Romantic music into his broader cultural picture: "A crucial question for the history of music is how ideological values are transformed into musical constraints and specific compositional choices" (p. 218). Here he turns directly to the music, with a good number of analyses that cover a span of composers from Mozart to Mahler. Meyer knows this repertory well and writes about it sympathetically, comfortably. Yet his analyses fail to add up to a compelling picture of Romanticism. One problem is that, with the exception of a more extended analysis of Isolde's Transfiguration from *Tristan*, he tends to remain on the level of the individual melodic fragment, or cadential-harmonic pattern. As a result, we are left with too fragmented, low-level a view of musical Romanticism and with "translation codes" that are too simplistic.

Take, for example, Meyer's discussion of what he calls the "changing note" schema. This is essentially a circular or reflexive melodic pattern with the basic shape (in scale degrees) 1–7–2–1, or 3–2–4–3. Meyer speculates on why in the nineteenth century composers tended to "choose" the latter form of the pattern, oriented around the third degree rather than the tonic:

First of all, it generates a slight tension that is affective and expressive. This is so because the patterning, which involves a prolongation of the third rather than the tonic, is mildly equivocal. On the one hand, the melodic motion (3–2/4–3) produces a rising sequence implying continuation to the fifth; on the other hand, the third of the scale implies descending motion to the tonic. Second, the absence of the leading tone makes considerable harmonic variety possible—indeed, the schema can be realized without any use of dominant harmony, and as a result, closure can be attenuated. This leads to the third possible reason for the prevalence of this schema in the nineteenth century. Closure on the third is generally less decisive than closure on the tonic, and such openness is consonant with the general cultural valuing of continuousness, gradual transformation, and eternal Becoming associated with the organic metaphor (p. 234).

As far as it goes this explanation is clear and persuasive, but ultimately falls short of giving us any compelling code for relating ideology to the music itself. Do we really need the elaborate classificatory apparatus of ideology, choice, and "changing note schema" that Meyer has built, in order to yield this kind of modest insight? And does this kind of discussion really constitute the kind of "systematic," "rigorous" style analysis to which we should aspire?

If these analytical portions of part III are disappointing, Meyer plays to his own strengths again in the interesting epilogue, entitled "The Persistence of Romanticism." Here he sets aside specific schemata and the like to argue more broadly that much of twentieth-century music, even when it sounds nothing like that of the nineteenth century, is still dominated by the ideology of Romanticism. He suggests that the "acontextual formalism" propounded by Milton Babbitt (and attacked articulately by Meyer in *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*) is actually a remnant of Romantic thought. Although advanced academic music of the post-1945 era may seem elitist, it is in principle egalitarian, says Meyer. Egalitarianism "does not require that art be understood, appreciated, and loved by every person . . . only that listening competence not depend on privileged learning (whether formal or informal) of traditions, conventions, references, and the like" (p. 346).

Meyer thus sees the trends he identified in the mid-1960s in *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, as the continuation or fulfillment of nineteenth-century Romanticism:

The ideology of Romanticism, becomes, as it were, writ large in cultural manifestation; in being open and Becoming—an actively fluctuating steady state, a strenuous stasis; in being pluralistic—offering a plenitude of stylistic possibilities; and in being without a single, or even dominant, set of privileged compositional constraints (p. 351).

In this way, Meyer seeks to link up his earlier work with his present book. The gesture seems appropriate, but one wishes he had given some consideration to music written after the mid-1960s (the era of *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*), es-

pecially to the so-called New Romantics in the generation after Babbitt. The epilogue is in this sense characteristic of the whole of *Style and Music*, in that Meyer does not seem impelled to deal with more recent music or more recent intellectual trends.

In *Contemplating Music*, where Meyer's work gets a sizeable (six pages) and sensitive coverage appropriate for a figure of his standing, Joseph Kerman observes that Meyer seems ultimately "more interested in fishing up and facing up to all the problems, big and small, than in proving himself himself right."² This is certainly true of *Style and Music*, where he has tackled perhaps the most fundamental problem in musical scholarship: the connection between the aesthetic/technical and the historical dimensions of music. How can those notes sitting on the printed page, those sounds hanging in the air, be related in a concrete way to the context in which they were written down, or in which they are played today? How can we get beyond mere formalism, on the one hand (just the notes), and mere chronicling, on the other (just

²Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 107.

the facts)? It is this challenge Carl Dahlhaus has in mind when he proposes the dual goals of "aestheticizing the historical" and "historicizing the aesthetic."³

Most musical scholars seem content to remain on either side of the gulf: theorists and many analysts normally have little to do with history, and the work of so-called historical musicologists often eschews theory, analysis, and aesthetics (let alone history in a broader, deeper sense). Here, as throughout his career, Meyer deserves considerable credit for attempting to bridge the gap. My own feeling, however, is that despite all his industry and his inventiveness, he is trying to build that bridge with the wrong materials. Seeking out and somehow quantifying the ideological and musical "constraints" within which composers made their "choices" is not the most promising way of linking history and theory. Perhaps especially for a phenomenon as fluid as Romanticism, we will never have objective translation codes. If we did, much of our fascination with both the music and the culture that produced it would probably vanish.



³Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge, 1983), p. 71.