

Textual Realignment:

Literary Theory and the New Musicology¹

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The Critical Divide

Since the late 'eighties in particular, there has been a growing questioning of and resistance to the traditional methodological and metaphysical assumptions which are seen to have held sway over the discipline of musicology more or less since its rather nebulous inception. These traditional assumptions have been characterized by various critics as, for example, formalist, positivist, or empiricist, depending upon which critic and which strain of traditional musicology is in question. There has been an increasing tendency to see musicology as one of the critical fields within the humanities which has failed to engage with the main currents of contemporary thought, a situation which, it is claimed, has isolated musicology from disciplines such as literary theory, cultural studies, art history, or contemporary philosophy.

According to the cultural critic, Edward Said, musicology is marked by a number of 'generally cloistral and reverential, not to say deeply insular, habits in writing about music.'² From 'within' musicology as such, Peter Franklin has criticized the traditions of what he calls 'anti-intellectual English-speaking musicology',³ while, across the Atlantic, Ruth Solie has complained of musicology's 'customary methodological behindhandedness [sic]',⁴ and Susan McClary has lamented that the crucial critical debates present in most other humanities disciplines are 'almost entirely absent from traditional musicology.'⁵

Various routes away from the supposed methodological backwaters have been suggested. For instance, in a conference paper in 1984, Richard Middleton defined a twofold approach which appears to combine aspects of structuralism and Marxism. Middleton called firstly for a move into:

semiology, broadly defined and stressing the social situation of signifying practise: this should take over from traditional formal analysis.⁶

¹ This paper was originally delivered to the Oxford University Arts Society in March 1996. It derives from the author's PhD thesis, *The Sonorous Body: Music, Enlightenment & Deconstruction* (Edinburgh, 1994), which is available on the Internet at the following url: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/music/DeptInfo/Staff/SST/PhD/contents.html>

² Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London: Vintage, 1992), p.58

³ Peter Franklin, 'An Open and Shut Case', in *The Musical Times*, September 1994, p.564.

⁴ Ruth Solie, 'Introduction: On "Difference"', in ed. Solie, *Musicology & Difference: Gender & Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.3

⁵ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.54.

⁶ Richard Middleton, quoted in John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.209.

Secondly, this semiological-cum-sociological approach should be supplemented with an:

historical sociology of the whole musical field, stressing critical comparison of divergent sub-codes of the ‘common musical competence’: this should take over from liberal social histories of music.⁷

As a method for introducing this new musicological mode, Middleton recommends the inclusion of popular music as a field of study (taking a cue, no doubt, from the theorization of the popular within Cultural Studies). Indeed, his implication is that such a challenge to the classical hegemony would inevitably entail a move towards this twofold approach, and would by itself open up what he has called ‘a golden opportunity to develop a *critical* musicology’.⁸ In a parallel manner, Susan McClary has suggested that:

The project of a critical musicology... would be to examine the ways in which different musics articulate the priorities and values of various communities.⁹

As an example of how to move into this field with a *critical* awareness, she also cites the work of Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, and Antonio Gramsci. For McClary, the critical epithet also entails the self-critique of a discipline, an interrogation of ‘how various discourses operate to structure, reproduce, or transform social reality.’¹⁰

The various proposals for a critical musicology,¹¹ despite their slightly differing accents, all imply certain paradigmatic inadequacies in the traditional (if not current) state of the discipline. Significantly, there also appears to be a general consensus that whichever route is taken out of our present methodological impasse, the cue is likely to come from the incorporation of the critical strategies of other humanities disciplines within the framework of musicology.

It is particularly significant, however, that structuralists such as Middleton are calling for a *semiological* approach at the same time that post-structuralists such as McClary are calling for this to be advanced towards a more fully-fledged *semiotic* approach. In this context, a brief historical sojourn with some well-worn arguments around musical *semiosis* in general may be instrumental in charting out the terrain of such current arguments.

The Conceptual Divide

The debate over music and meaning is by no means new. Indeed, it has been raging between rival factions for several centuries, and has often been staged within the context of the relationship between music and language, and by extension, music and literature. In gradually moving towards a semiotics of what,

⁷ *ibid.*, p.209.

⁸ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p.123.

⁹ McClary, *op.cit.*, p.26.

¹⁰ McClary, *op.cit.*, p.29.

¹¹ A recent English development is the Critical Musicology Group, which at time of writing is still highly formative (cf. *Critical Musicology Newsletter*).

for now, we could call acoustic phenomena, it may be instrumental to map out this terrain with recourse to two ancient Greek concepts. The English word ‘sound’ shares an etymological link with the Greek *sónos*, meaning:

*noise... of one thing striking against another... or of insects, which produce a sound, but not by the larynx... of rolling stones... of footsteps... also of musical instruments... 2. mere sound, noise...*¹²

Hence, *sónos*, as ‘mere noise’, tends to be linked with sounds which are non-vocal - the kinds of sounds which are made by musical instruments, or ambient noise-producing phenomena. As such, *sónos* tends to be associated with the mechanical, rather than the organic production of sound, and by various extensions through the Enlightenment in particular, it also becomes associated with materiality rather than any concept of Spirit.

On the other hand, we have the Greek word *phonè*, which overtly implies sounds produced by the voice. *Phonè* is described as being ‘of men’, and means to:

*speak loud or clearly, or simply, speak, give utterance... of a singer... as a law-term, affirm, testify in court...*¹³

Hence, *phonè* is linked to sounds which have some form of linguistic meaning, often tied to concepts of law, power or persuasion, and as such, it partakes of the same metaphysical investments as the word *logos* - the ‘rational spoken word’, which is also the origin of the universe in Christian theology. Hence, particularly since the Enlightenment, *phonè* has become associated with concepts of Spirit (and this intimate connection between *phonè* and *logos* will be of particular importance towards the end of this paper when we deal with deconstruction).

But if *phonè* is associated, like *logos*, with the idea of sound as a meaningful communication, *sónos* presents us with the idea of a sound which has no communicative content as such. And by extension, if *sónos* has associations with the mechanical production of sound, then *phonè* - as voice - has associations with the production of sound by biological organisms.

From the distinction between these two terms, we can talk of sonic acoustic phenomena on the one hand, and phonic phenomena on the other. And by extension, this opposition is also linked into that between instrumental music (as a sonic medium), and vocal music, or song (as a phonic medium). Reading through the history of music aesthetics from the perspective of these oppositions, it is perhaps surprising to see how prevalent they actually are throughout almost all of the crucial shifts in that history.

Phonic Signification

In the C18th, for example, much of the debate over music and language centred on the concepts of the affect and rhetoric, often within the context of rival readings of ancient Greek music and music aesthetics. And of course, since rhetoric was in some senses the Classical fore-runner of contemporary literary

¹² Liddell & Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), Vol.II, p.2025.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.1967.

theory, C18th music aesthetics can be seen as a field in which certain connections between music and literature were already being made to a high degree.

At that time, it was widely assumed that music had some kind of affective influence over the passions, whether direct or indirect. Specifically, many theories tended to assume that this question was grounded in the distinction between instrumental music and vocal music - in other words, between sonic and phonic signification. At the basis of much of this thought was the idea that while instrumental music in and of itself could not directly move the passions as such, when it was connected to the phonic power of the singing voice (and thus to language), it had access to a higher power of affective influence - in other words, a *literary* power.

Indeed, the idea that instrumental music's affective power derived from its formal imitation of vocal melody was widespread. For example, the Ulster Scots philosopher, Francis Hutcheson (whose influence was acknowledged by Kant) claimed in 1725 that:

The human voice is obviously varied by all the stronger passions: now when our ear discerns any resemblance between the air of a tune... to the sound of the human voice in any passion, we shall be touched by it in a very sensible manner.¹⁴

In this, we find Hutcheson proposing that it is specifically through an association with the passions represented through vocal communication that music, instrumental or otherwise, gains its affective power.

More extreme in phonically connecting music to poetry was James Beattie's later *Essay on Poetry and Music as they Affect the Mind* (1776). Here, Beattie stated unequivocally that:

music is not an imitative art... [but] by its power of raising a variety of agreeable emotions in the hearer it proves its relation to poetry, and that it never appears to the best advantage but with poetry for its interpreter...¹⁵

Here we have an image of one art as the hermeneutic interpreter of another, with language acting as the means by which the musical sign can be read. However, for both Hutcheson and Beattie, this works in terms of music having a linguistic content within its own structure - a content which remains obscure unless it is united with poetry and thus brought to the surface. In this, musical signification is determined as a kind of deformed type of linguistic signification, registering at a lower level of affective capability unless re-connected to the form which it effectively aspires to, and perhaps even derives from.

In one sense, this idea of music as a semi-mute supplement to language pervades all Enlightenment thought, and perhaps Rousseau was its most famous exponent in his objections to what he saw as the sonicisation of music proposed by Rameau. Certainly, when it came to compositional theory, the affective powers of

¹⁴ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London: 1725), abridged in *Philosophical Writings* (London: Dent, 1994), p.37.

¹⁵ James Beattie, *An Essay on Poetry and Music as they Affect the Mind*, abridged in le Huray & Day, ed.s, *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.151-152.

music were often codified into an idea of a *musical rhetoric* as such, building musical signification into a kind of codified language which, while not necessarily a 'natural' language, could nevertheless be learned and used to communicate affectively.

While the idea of a musical rhetoric had been around for some time, the most rigorous example of this from the C18th perhaps comes from the writings of Johann Mattheson. In his *Der vollkommene Capellmeister (The Perfect Kappellmeister)* from 1739, Mattheson transposed into musical discourse a whole range of rhetorical terms traditionally associated with the phonic art of oratory.¹⁶ For example, in his prescriptions for the composition of a well-balanced aria, he used various rhetorical terms such as *exordium* (the introduction of a melody) and *peroratio* (its conclusion). The latter he defined as follows:

The Peroratio finally is the End or Conclusion of our Sound-Oration [*Klang-Rede*], which, above all other Sections, must be made particularly and emphatically expressive... It is customary that the Aria concludes with the same material as it began; so that our Exordium also serves in the Place of a Peroratio.¹⁷

Here, we see not only the Classical principles of balance through repetition and formal closure, but also the idea of a 'sound-rhetoric' - *klang-rede* - or 'musical oration' as such, referring not merely to the idea of an aria as a vocal and therefore potentially narrative form, but also to the idea of a rhetorical musical form as such. Indeed, Mattheson codified the Doctrine of the Affections into a thorough-going rhetorical system which designated specific affections to a wide variety of musical parameters, from form and even genre, through to intervallic structures themselves.

According to Mattheson, the link between the sonic and the phonic is practically unbreakable:

no one can doubt the close Relationship between Music and Rhetoric [*Ton- und Rede-Kunst*]. The ancient Orators took their best Rules from Music, in considering the Gestures as well as the Raising and the Lowering of the Voice.¹⁸

Note in particular how, in the original German, the lexical space between music and rhetoric, as *Ton- und Rede-Kunst*, is much reduced. However, it is also worth noting that Mattheson here appears to claim that in order of priority, it is actually rhetoric which is derived from music. It would thus appear that the apparent ease by which rhetorical theory is applied to music is due, in fact, to this very musicality of rhetoric. For Mattheson, then, unlike Hutcheson or Beattie, the 'close relationship' actually prioritizes music, rather than language.¹⁹ This shift in emphasis to the origin of signification in the sonic rather than the phonic is a significant one, which we will come back to later - again, when we come to look at deconstruction.

¹⁶ Such as *inventio* (the invention of an idea), *decoratio* (the decoration or elaboration of ideas), *dispositio* (the disposition of parts within the whole), and so forth.

¹⁷ Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg: 1739), p.236.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.35.

¹⁹ A position which is actually close to Adams Smith's in his 'Essay on the Imitative Arts', in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (London: 1795).

Sonic Signification

The post-Renaissance proliferation in theoretical connections between music and literature (which, of course, can be seen to have its high-point in the Wagnerian music-drama), was not to last, however. By 1854, the backlash had set in, with Eduard Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*On The Musically Beautiful*). Here, Hanslick attempted to establish music as an aesthetically autonomous art which has, at best, a highly problematic relationship with language - indeed, with the whole question of meaning as such. Here was an idea of music as an art which was radically, fundamentally, and essentially different to representational arts such as figurative painting and literature.

For Hanslick, music cannot achieve the pseudo-literary representational mode which the theorists of the affect claimed for it:

To what absurdities this false principle leads, to discover in each piece of music the representation of a specific feeling, and the still falser principle that for each specific musical form there is a specific feeling as its necessary content - all this one can learn from the works of such ingenious people as Mattheson.²⁰

And since music is not a representational art, it must be seen as an essentially sonic, rather than phonic art. This, of course, would tend to suggest a move away from the vocal and towards the instrumental - a shift which Hanslick is at pains to stress: '*only instrumental music is music purely and absolutely.*'²¹ This, of course, has very precise ramifications for the way in which Hanslick assembles his theory of musical signification. Most cogently, he makes the following distinction:

The essential difference is that in speech the sound is only a sign, that is, a means to an end which is entirely distinct from that means, while in music the sound is an object, ie., it appears to us as an end in itself. The autonomous beauty of tone-forms in music and the absolute supremacy of thought over sound as merely a means of expression in spoken language are so exclusively opposed that a combination of the two is a logical impossibility.²²

Phonic speech, then, is a *sign* which points to a referent in the real world. The word 'apple' signifies to us the idea of a real apple in the real world, even if the sign and the referent are, as Hanslick puts it 'quite distinct'. Music, however, operates a fundamentally different order of semiosis - sonic signification puts the sign in the place of the referent itself. Effectively, sonic signification represents the death of a certain form of the sign. For Hanslick, the sonic is pure referent, literally, an 'end in itself', an end to the movement and play of referential semiosis; music signifies nothing beyond itself. And in this, Hanslick carves out an aesthetic of music which is based on the idea of a purely sonorous mode of semiosis,

²⁰ Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p.21.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.15 (emphasis added).

²² *ibid.*, p.42.

completely opposed to the form of signification which literary theory claims to be the condition of literature. Of course, this idea (although not invented by Hanslick) is known as the idea of *Absolute Music* - music which has, in Hanslick's terms, 'autonomous beauty', music which is absolute in its aesthetic autonomy from the field of social signification.

Narratology and the Return of the Phonic

Although at first sight, this distinction between a phonically-determined vocal music from the C18th and a sonically-determined instrumental music from the C19th might seem somewhat irrelevant to contemporary concerns, nothing could be farther from the truth. Amongst those musicologists who wish to bring some form of *social* agenda to bear in their analyses - in other words, *critical* musicologists - the idea of Absolute Music is often held up as an example of the very root of traditional musicology's flaws. As a theory which sets itself up expressly in opposition to the idea of music having any kind of pseudo-literary meaning beyond its own structures, the idea of Absolute Music has had the effect of cutting music off from any kind of signifiatory activity within the social field. Music, we were told (first by aesthetics, but soon by formalist and structuralist analysis) was above, beyond, or at least outside of the political or the social. According to Susan McClary:

Of all the sacrosanct preserves of art music today, the most prestigious, the most carefully protected is a domain known as "Absolute Music": music purported to operate on the basis of pure configurations, untainted by words, stories, or even affect.²³

Yet, on close analysis of the idea of Absolute Music, one soon begins to realize that the attempt to make music aesthetically autonomous did not result in the production of a discourse written beyond the influences of societal structures. This question has become particularly important with the rise of feminist musicology. As with so many other recent developments within the discipline, feminism was, compared with its rise in the other humanities (particularly literature), an extremely late developer. No doubt, this can be ascribed to the force with which the Absolute Music hegemony held musicology within its grip, since, if music (unlike literature) is autonomous from the social field, then it is, one assumes, gender-neutral and capable of subscribing to the notion of universality. Yet, as feminism and gender studies continue to grow within musicology and gradually assemble a critical challenge to this idea, the falseness of this presumed gender-neutrality is gradually exposed - not least since, throughout even the period of the supposed Absolute Music hegemony, even instrumental music was indeed continually referred to in gendered terms.

²³ Susan McClary, 'Narrative Agendas in "Absolute" Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms's Third Symphony', in ed. Ruth Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), p.326.

In fact, Hanslick himself managed to bring gender into the very heart of his argument when he describes the interval of a tenth as ‘coquettish’,²⁴ and on a more aesthetic level, when he states bluntly that the reason why women could not compose Absolute Music was precisely because of their subjectivity of feeling - the same sin which Hanslick accuses the C18th theorists of. Much more manly, he thought, was the idea of the ‘spiritual ardour’ required to compose aesthetically autonomous music.²⁵ It seems that the spiritual is once more inscribed as decisively masculine, while the affective is irresolutely feminine. In this, Hanslick gives away the gendered ideology *at the very centre* of his entire argument against the Enlightenment - Absolute Music as a Gentleman’s Club, to which the C18th ‘man of feeling’, and, moreover, his good lady-wife, are most assuredly not invited.

This is certainly the line of thinking which marks the work of feminist critical musicologists such as McClary. With specific references to theoretical precedents from the Enlightenment such as Mattheson, McClary hooks into the concepts of affectivity and rhetoric, arguing that within music, certain codes can indeed be identified which have specific meanings which point outside of its ‘purely’ sonorous structure.²⁶ Indeed, she overtly engages with exactly the same kind of theories of a phonically-generated meaning within music which we have already considered:

The viability of apparently autonomous instrumental music depends on the powerful affective codes that have developed within the referential domains of vocal music. Familiarity with this network of cultural associations permits us to recognize even in textless music traditional signs for grief, joy, or the heroic. But signification extends far beyond the surface in instrumental music: its formal conventions - often held to be neutral with respect to meaning - are likewise socially encoded.²⁷

Here, we have distinct echoes of figures such as Hutcheson, Beattie, and Mattheson. Not only is it a question of affectivity, but of a rhetoric operating at the centre of even Absolute Music - Hanslick, it seems, has failed to cut out the phonic origin of music, since the sonic music of the C19th which came in its wake is nevertheless completely rooted, historically and aesthetically (perhaps even metaphysically), in the rhetorical codes of the previous age. And along with Mattheson, McClary cites even the formal level as one in which this social signification occurs. Indeed, her particular programme begins with an attempt to interrogate the idea of Absolute Music by concentrating on certain gendered concepts within its formal corpus - not least, the idea of the distinction between masculine and feminine themes within the C19th symphonic genres.

The concept of the symphonic tradition as one which was built on the pseudo-dialectical contrast between strong, masculine themes and gentle, feminine

²⁴ Hanslick, p.50.

²⁵ Hanslick, op.cit., p.46.

²⁶ *Feminine Endings*, p.20, but also p.187: ‘Eighteenth-century theorists such as Johann Mattheson were concerned with codifying the elements of musical semiotics in what we now call the *Affektenlehre*, for music at the time was recognized as a social discourse.’

²⁷ McClary, ‘Narrative Agendas’, op.cit., p.329.

themes is indubitably based in the concept of a musical rhetoric. When theorists from the C19th use these concepts, they are undeniably hooking into the semiotics of gender and sexuality which were generally operative at the time. However, McClary's main interest in this is the way in which these two categories of thematic material ('masculine' and 'feminine') react with each other, and in this, she adds a further dimension to the C18th ideas of affect and rhetoric. Just as Mattheson *et al* refer to musical oration, McClary brings in the contemporary literary theory field of narratology. Her main cue for this move comes from figures such as Vladimir Propp, whose *Morphology of the Folktale*²⁸ provides the means with which to analyze the structural function of elements within a narrative form.

According to structuralist narratology, each character within a literary narrative has a specific function expressed as a series of relationships to the other characters in terms of their intercourses with each other throughout the development of the plot. McClary's transposition of this literary theory into a musicological register develops an analogy between the gendered functions of characters within a narrative and the masculine and feminine themes of the C19th symphonic tradition. Normatively, within the various forms which operate under these codes, a piece begins with a first thematic field characterized by conventionally 'masculine' traits, which is then followed by a second thematic field characterized by conventionally 'feminine' traits. The two then undergo a series of interchanges - often as if in some kind of struggle - until the first, 'masculine' field finally wins out at the close of the piece. In this, we have a certain notion of musical form based in ideas of pseudo-dialectical intercourse, teleological repetition and closure. According to McClary:

The reason, then, that Absolute Music appears to make itself up without reference to the outside social world is that it adheres so thoroughly to the most common plot outline and the most fundamental ideological tensions available within Western culture: the story of a hero who ventures forth, encounters an Other, fights it out, and finally reestablishes secure identity. So long as composers agreed to stick to the standard narrative, they and their audiences could pretend to be listening in on the utterances of Hegel's *Geist* or Schopenhauer's Will: an illusion always heavily circumscribed by convention, always ideologically saturated.²⁹

In her application of the literary theory of narratology to music, McClary's strategy is to claim that Absolute Music could not but be caught up in precisely the history which it attempted to rupture - the history of the affect within musical discourse, determined as a rhetorical system deriving in the main from the formal analogies between the sonic and the phonic which vocal music had already set in place in the Enlightenment or before. Further, Absolute Music, despite its claim to avoid the narrativity of literature, nevertheless continues to relate the narrative of Spirit or of Will, albeit at an allegedly 'higher' aesthetic level. At this point, her critique then comes into play by exposing the gendered assumptions which lie

²⁸ McClary always works from the Louis Wagner edition (Austin: 1968).

²⁹ McClary, op.cit., p.333.

behind that rhetorical system and that transcendental narrative. This point is extremely important, since, in a way, her strategy is to subpoena Mattheson as an ally against Hanslick. The problem is, of course, that, underlying her critique of Hanslick, there is an implicit critique of Mattheson, who, after all, if we follow her argument that Absolute Music depended unconsciously on a rhetoric, was as much - if not more - party to the ideological gendering of the very codes which she at once utilizes and denounces.

This problematic of remaining immanent to that which one critiques is not McClary's alone, however, and is well-recognized as a problematic inherent in the field of deconstruction. Indeed, this is of no passing significance, since McClary overtly declares her feminist allegiance to deconstruction in the closing paragraphs of the introduction to her epochal text, *Feminine Endings*, where she claims that the female composers she discusses there 'accomplish within the music itself *the kinds of deconstructions I present throughout this book in analytical prose*'.³⁰ In this, she evidently aligns her feminism with the deconstructive field. More particularly, she aligns her deconstructive methodology with that of Jacques Derrida when, in a telling endnote, she specifically refers the reader to that very source *and* a secondary text which is utterly Derridean to the 'core' (and the significance of this reference is intensified when one realizes that it is her only indexed citation of Derrida's name or of a source for deconstruction):

For deconstruction, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). A useful guide to this complex terrain is Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982).³¹

However, as we proceed, the exact genealogy of McClary's interest in deconstruction will also come under interrogation - specifically, the question of whether it comes 'directly' from philosophical discourse as such (which she appears to claim in *Feminine Endings*), or, indeed, whether it comes mediated via the *literary theory* reading of the philosophical text.³²

³⁰ *Feminine Endings*, p.34 (emphasis added).

³¹ *op.cit.*, p.202.

³² When this paper was read to the Oxford University Arts Society in March 1996, its critique of McClary's reading of deconstruction was deemed by a certain Oxford don (who has expressed a desire to remain anonymous) to be wholly irrelevant and 'a waste of time'. In subsequent correspondence, he has stated that this passage from p.34 of *Feminine Endings* does not make McClary 'answerable' to Derrida, and further, that McClary is using the word 'deconstruction' loosely, and not technically or philosophically. The implication, then, was that my paper's 'irrelevance' is due to its emphasis on the evidently chimeric relationship between McClary's musicology and Derrida's philosophy. Indubitably, it is true that not all contemporary deconstructionists are Derridean - particularly within literary theory - and it is also true, as I have stated myself on innumerable occasions, that the use of the term 'deconstruction' is extremely imprecise and tends to associate it with a flabby postmodernity. However, the facts remain that McClary does indeed claim her book to be deconstructive, and that when she refers the reader to a source for deconstruction, it is unambiguously Derrida. Given this evidence, it appears that McClary is indeed at least subject to scrutiny on the issue of her reading of Derrida. Equally, the further charge which was levelled at this paper, that McClary, as feminist, cannot be approached as

Deconstruction and the Question of the Sonic

When thinking of deconstruction, it is extremely important that we acknowledge the fact that, despite its popular associations with literary theory, it in fact stems from the work of a philosopher, and not a literary theorist. That philosopher, Jacques Derrida, describes deconstruction as (more-or-less) a three stage method of engaging with an extant text:

First, one engages with the oppositions operating within a text;

Second, one reverses the order of priority which operates between the terms of that opposition;

Thirdly, one uses the instability created by that reversal to effect a full displacement of the hierarchical relationship between the terms of the opposition.³³

Basically, what this means is that deconstruction is not a *speculative* method - not a way of inventing something new as such, but a way of critiquing something which already exists. As Derrida claims:

[one] borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself.³⁴

However, this critique is effected from within the body of the very terms which are undergoing critique, and as a result, the detractors of deconstruction have often accused it of being a parasitic form of discourse. Indeed, musicologist Leo Treitler has specifically accused Susan McClary of 'adopt[ing] the very stereotypes that she has deplored'.³⁵ However, this critique of deconstruction sorely misses the point that deconstructionists are, themselves, more than aware of the ramifications of their own methods. As Derrida realizes, it is a method fraught with a series of problematics:

To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic [...] one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating [...] that which one allegedly deconstructs.³⁶

McClary, too, has acknowledged the problem when discussing what she sees as Madonna's deconstruction of pornography in the video for *Open Your Heart*:

This is, of course, always the peril of attempting to deconstruct pornographic images: it becomes necessary to invoke the image in order to perform the deconstruction; but, once presented, the image is in fact there in all its glory.³⁷

(..continued)

deconstructionist, seems to sorely miss the point that much feminism is indeed deconstructive (particularly in Paris!), and that the two are in no way necessarily mutually exclusive!

³³ For a fuller account of this process, cf. Steve Sweeney-Turner, 'Speaking Without Tongues: Deconstruction for Musicians', in *The Musical Times*, April 1995.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), p.282.

³⁵ Leo Treitler, 'Gender and Other Dualities of Music History', in ed. Ruth Solie, op.cit., p.37.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p.135.

³⁷ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, op.cit, p.162.

In this, of course, one attempts to solve the problem, as Derrida says, through strategy. In McClary's case, when using Mattheson to deconstruct Hanslick, this is to effectively use one aspect of patriarchal musicological discourse against another. In this, Hanslick is shown to be no more or less patriarchal than Mattheson - in effect, McClary uses her alliance with Mattheson as if she were a fifth-columnist working behind enemy lines.

Nonetheless, there is a problem - albeit a different one - which relates to the question of the two sides of musical signification, the phonic and the sonic. As we have seen, McClary argues against the purely sonic signification which Hanslick claims for Absolute music, and attempts to return us - even if only for strategic reasons - to the Enlightenment idea of a phonically-derived music. In this, she specifically states that 'the viability of apparently autonomous instrumental music depends on the powerful affective codes that have developed within the referential domains of vocal music.'³⁸ And amongst those few musicologists who have engaged with Derridean deconstruction, she is not alone in this appeal to the phonic power of music. Indeed, considering the relationship between the literary and the musical aspects of song-writing, Lawrence Kramer has stated, in a chapter entitled "As If a Voice Were in Them": Music, Narrative, and Deconstruction', that:

textuality in general presumes (even where it conceals) the possibility of narrative. But what kind of narrative effects, intrusive or otherwise, are possible in a piece of textless instrumental music? The answer to this question... clearly depends on the larger question of whether instrumental music presumes narrative possibilities of its own.³⁹

Reading this passage closely, we find that Kramer, despite his avowedly Derridean stance,⁴⁰ hooks into a less than deconstructed notion of *textuality*. The phrase '*textless instrumental music*' is particularly problematic. Further, in *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, in a chapter on "Musical Narratology" (no less), Kramer can be found giving the following formulation:

music enters the narrative situation only in relation to textuality, even when the music itself overtly lacks a text.⁴¹

Here, interestingly, Kramer risks siding with Hanslick (who remains unreferenced in this particular text) on the issue of the primarily sonic nature of music. However, it is clear that, for Kramer, '*the music itself*' (an interesting usage) has no textuality of its own: music '*lacks a text*'. Perhaps we could excuse these instances as momentary lexical blindspots, if it were not for the fact that, in a

³⁸ McClary, 'Narrative Agendas', op.cit., p.329.

³⁹ Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p.184.

⁴⁰ Kramer often refers his deconstruction back to Derridean concepts such as supplementarity and doubling - indeed, the first mention of Derrida in *Music as Cultural Practice* (fn.4, p.24) refers the reader to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, just as McClary does in her first mention of Derrida in *Feminine Endings*.

⁴¹ Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.101.

passage by McClary already cited, we have a similar formulation: ‘*textless music*’, again, with reference to instrumental rather than vocal music.

These three phrases (‘textless music’; ‘textless instrumental music’; ‘the music itself overtly lacks a text’) matter because, within contemporary literary theory, and critical theory in general, the concept of *textuality* is crucial. As Roland Barthes points out in his essay ‘From Work to Text’, we should not think of the term ‘text’ in the traditional sense of, for example, ‘text-book’. On the contrary, the term ‘text’ should not even be limited to the field of literature. But the implication of McClary and Kramer’s phrases is precisely that textuality is a *literary* condition which does not naturally exist within music. Indeed, this implication is very much part and parcel of their reliance on the notion of vocal music, and phonic signification in general. But doesn’t this notion of textuality go against one of the most crucial tenets of contemporary critical theory?

Certainly, many literary theorists do fall into the trap of reading the term ‘text’ as a purely literary concept, and no doubt, given the importance of textuality in contemporary thought, this gives them the rather shaky illusion that, if all is text, then all is literature, with literary theory standing in as the preeminent meta-discourse of the late C20th (no doubt, in the place of philosophy’s now deconstructed claim to be the meta-discourse). But this literary megalomania is unfounded. Indeed, when we get down to attentively reading the post-structuralist notion of textuality, we find that it is actually seriously subverts any notion of meta-discursive practice.

When we look at Barthes’s essay ‘From Work to Text’, we find, in fact, that the notion of textuality does not support the idea of phonic signification at all. As we have noted above, there is a split in musical signification between the phonic, imaged as an organic semiosis, and the sonic, imaged as a machinic one. According to Barthes, the concept of the Work is organic, while the concept of the text is fractured, multiple and multiplying. The image of the text is that of the *network*, that is, the condition of the text is *intertextual*, engaging in a potentially limitless series of non-organic connections with other texts. In this, we can begin to see a vague alignment of the concept of the text and the notion of the sonic within music. Further, we find that one of Barthes’s main examples of a text is the field of Modernist music of the kind written by John Cage or Pierre Boulez in the ‘50’s - music with no narrative formal agenda at all.⁴²

Of course, the notion of the text goes hand in hand with the Derridean concept of *writing* - another badly misconstrued concept within literary theory’s prevalent misappropriations of philosophy. And just as Barthes associates non-narrative, aleatoric music with textuality, Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, associates the concept of writing with that of instrumental music in general, but also, writing more metaphysically than metaphorically, he claims there (even more in line with Barthes) that ‘writing is always atonal’.⁴³

⁴² For further connections between Derrida and instances of musical praxis, cf. Steve Sweeney-Turner, ‘Intervals and Closures: Deconstruction, Music Theory, and the Swerve from Dialectics’, in *Imprimatur*, April 1996; and ‘Resurrecting the Antichrist: Maxwell Davies and Parody - Dialectics or Deconstruction?’, in *Tempo*, Winter 1994.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.315.

Further, it turns out that, for Derrida, writing is sonic, and not phonic. This particular aspect of Derridean theory reappears over and over. In his famous essay *Différance*, his whole agenda is to deconstruct the notion of the phonic within writing:

contrary to a very widespread prejudice, there is no phonetic writing... [and] if there is no purely phonetic writing, it is that there is no purely phonetic *phóné*.⁴⁴

So Derrida's deconstructive programme is in fact highly sceptical of the idea of phonic writing, but this also extends into a full critique of the whole metaphysical system which has surrounded the idea of the phonic voice in general. As he has said in interview with Julia Kristeva:

Grammatology must deconstruct everything that ties the concept and norms of [thought] to onto-theology, logocentrism, phonologism... Grammatology must pursue and consolidate whatever... has always already begun to exceed the logocentric closure.⁴⁵

And in 'consolidating' everything which, within a phonological system, has always worked to exceed that system, Derrida's work is aimed specifically at interrogating what he has called 'the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism'.⁴⁶ In the place of the phonic, then, Derrida subscribes to a notion of writing which questions the entire tradition of thought which surrounds the idea of the literary text:

I am also interested in words, paradoxically, to the extent that they are nondiscursive, for that's how they can be used to explode discourse... [it] probably has something to do with a nondiscursive sonority...⁴⁷

So in the place of the phonic, we find the *nondiscursive sonic*. But wait a minute - if Derridean deconstruction is designed as an unpacking of the entire metaphysical tradition which surrounds the image of the voice within the history of Western Culture, to the extent that he uses the idea of the sonic to deconstruct the phonic, what are musicologists such as McClary and Kramer doing by turning deconstruction on its head and apparently privileging the idea of phonic signification within music? Why is it that, in their work, we have the notion of a 'textless instrumental music', when in Derrida, we have the idea of nondiscursive, sonic semiosis as a model for writing in general, whether literary or musical? Why do McClary and Kramer appear to have such a logocentric view of textuality, and of musical affectivity?

All of this should be giving a certain amount of grief to musicologists such as McClary and Kramer, who claim that they deconstruct the musical canon with recourse to the idea of music having a phonic power. And surely, by deconstructing the patriarchal codes of the musicological canon, they see themselves as deconstructing the logocentrism by which it operates? And yet, they attempt to

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p.5.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Semiology and Grammatology', in *Positions* (London: Athlone, 1987), pp.35-6.

⁴⁶ *Of Grammatology*, p.11.

⁴⁷ Derrida, interviewed in ed.s Brunette & Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, p.21.

deconstruct logocentrism whilst falling into the very selfsame logocentric trap which Derrida calls the phonocentric?

So what's going on here? Earlier, we considered how deconstruction is always a question of strategy, and certainly, it is always hedged around by endless series of conditionals and qualifiers, since, as a process rather than a theory, it is inevitably always only provisional. But on the other hand, does this let McClary and Kramer off the hook in any way? If there is a single constant in Derrida's work, it is his single-minded interrogation of phonocentrism. Indeed, as the preeminent metaphysical system which promotes stasis and rigidly-defined hierarchical structures, phonocentrism is always that which deconstruction surely *must* attempt to interrogate - if there is a single imperative within deconstruction, it is this.

In(-)conclusion

If critical musicology is to engage with the field which is set out here - one which is negotiated between two other fields, literature and philosophy - some of these questions need to be more fully explored at the theoretical level.⁴⁸

As we have seen, theories of literature are not new as an influence within thought on music. But the idea of the literary and the idea of the musical have not always been fully understood on the other side of the divide. Equally, when, today, critical musicologists have swallowed certain literary readings of the philosophical text wholesale, it is possible that they have *uncritically* accepted some literary *misreadings* of philosophy - specifically in areas where philosophy itself would actually appear to privilege the musical rather than the literary. As critical musicologists, by cutting the literary 'middle man' out and engaging with the philosophical text *per se*, we may find that contemporary critical theory is more comprehensible for the musician than literary theory would have us believe.

As a final question, I'd like to pose an idea which there is no space to cover here, but which, to an extent, represents much of my own work within this field *per se*. While Hanslick sets up an idea of the sonic which effectively is reduced to a logocentrism at a higher register (the narrative of Spirit, rather than affect), and thus actually fails to achieve a purely anti-logocentric theory, it is also the case that Mattheson's theory of musical rhetoric not only drew from literary rhetoric, but claimed that literary rhetoric was in and of itself based on musical influences. In this, perhaps, we can see the possibility of a sonic, rather than a purely phonic, basis for the theory of the affect. Equally, might this not tie in with Derrida's idea of language itself as forever invaded by the sonic? And in this, might we not be able to go back to Hanslick's text, much as Derrida has done with Heidegger's, and fully

⁴⁸ Since writing, Rose Rosengard's *Deconstructive Variations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) has engaged Derridean deconstruction in a much more convincing and theoretically open-handed manner than McClary's *Feminine Endings* or Kramer's *Music as Cultural Practice* or even his *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*. However, as Subotnik points out in several places, her text is not designed as a theoretical discussion as such, but as an extended series of 'applications' of Derridean theory to various musical texts.

complete the deconstructive turn which the idea of the sonic initiated within the idea of Absolute Music, prior to its dialectical re-absorption into the body of logocentric thought? In this context, we might sensibly ask the question if, from a deconstructive point of view, the problem with Hanslick's idea of Absolute Music is not that it went too far, but that it never went far enough. Critical musicology may yet, in a gloriously unholy union, meet up with its nemesis on the 'far side' of theory.