

AN INCOMPLETE PROJECT: MODERNISM, FORMALISM AND THE 'MUSIC ITSELF'

Analytical practice is too often discussed only by those who are instinctively critical of it or insufficiently familiar with it. This may seem a big claim, yet if the external assault on analytical practice has achieved something like critical mass within the last two decades, too frequently it has remained at the level of the general, the undifferentiated, even the caricature. More than twenty years after its original publication, one can still sense the impact of Joseph Kerman's intervention, and not least his claim that 'analysts have avoided value judgments and adapted their work to a format of strictly corrigible propositions, mathematical equations, set-theory formulations, and the like – all this, apparently, in an effort to achieve objective status and hence the authority of scientific inquiry'.¹ Certainly analysis has always met with a degree of suspicion among those who remain wary of its alleged quasi-scientific pretensions or who dislike its propensity for adopting prohibitively complex modes of presentation. In a lecture given in 1969, Theodor Adorno observed that 'the word "analysis" easily associates itself in music with the idea of all that is dead, sterile and farthest removed from the living work of art. One can well say that the general underlying feeling towards musical analysis is not exactly friendly.'² Yet more recently we have witnessed a series of further critical incursions stemming mainly from debates central to, and initiated by, the 'new' or 'critical' musicologies.³

Whether directly or indirectly, analysis stands accused not only of an 'unmusical' quasi-scientism, but also formalism, organicism, aestheticism, essentialism, transcendentalism, elitism, Eurocentricism and even phallogocentrism – all of which are often depicted as subsidiary components within an encompassing 'modernism', itself usually compared unfavourably with an alleged 'postmodern' overcoming. This is not to imply that all such indictments are entirely inaccurate. Nevertheless, attacks on analytical formalism can appear to be driven as much by broader ideological commitments as by a desire critically to engage with what remains a sophisticated and highly variegated field of musical enquiry. As a result, those who value analytical practice may feel pushed into a defensive position, compelled to pursue such debate within a frame of reference determined by those whose primary objective is to purge musicological enquiry of any lingering formalism. While, in itself, this would clearly represent an imposition as unnecessary as it is unjustified, it is precisely

in such a meta-discursive context that analysis can actually learn from the new or critical musicologies. Whatever the utility of inter-disciplinary imports, and irrespective of the success (or otherwise) with which they have been applied in an interpretative or historical context, such appropriations – often unhelpfully labelled ‘postmodern’ or ‘poststructuralist’ – have served a useful function in focusing attention on the very nature of discursive practices themselves. It is in this quite specific sense that analysis, so often the object of external critique, must itself continue to promote a rigorous interrogation of its own philosophical and methodological presuppositions.⁴

With this in mind, this article represents an attempt both to delineate one part of that meta-discursive space in which analytical practice might continue to develop a robust self-reflective capacity, as well as to challenge some of the misrepresentations and misconceptions that are fast approaching orthodoxy in a number of circles. In particular, it takes issue with the simplistic, albeit pervasive, conflation of ‘formalism’ with ‘modernism’ and the correlative association of analytical practice with a ‘modernist’ musicology. Indeed, it questions whether, from a historical and philosophical perspective, one can coherently describe a musicology as ‘modernist’. To this end, and as the title implies, the argument developed here will have reason to draw on the work of the German philosopher and critical theorist, Jürgen Habermas, the leading proponent of what is often referred to as ‘second-generation’ Frankfurt Critical Theory.⁵ Although recourse to his work will vary in its intensity and in accordance with the specific matter at hand, I hope to demonstrate that Habermas’s philosophical-theoretical writings offer a promising critical apparatus with which to interrogate a number of issues relevant to contemporary musicological and analytical enquiry. As abstract as some of these might initially appear, at least in relation to musicological concerns, it is not unreasonable to suppose that meta-discursive debate, increasingly occupied with issues of methodology and epistemology, might have something to gain from philosophical debate in which those issues have long been addressed with a notable level of sophistication.⁶ Conversely, it is also worth emphasising that I am certainly not promoting Habermas’s thought as somehow *uniquely* suited to the task, nor am I seeking to appropriate the work of yet another theorist for the purpose of interpreting or understanding music in yet another way – if not carefully marshalled, such strategies can actually serve to obscure or impoverish our musical understanding. However, I will suggest that Habermas’s guarded defence of the ‘project of modernity’, his insistence on the centrality and normative power of reason and rationality, and his constructive engagement with American pragmatism and Anglo-American analytical philosophy can provide useful counterweights to what remains, in many areas, a rather precipitous and uncritical acceptance of ostensibly ‘postmodern’ doctrine(s); the rigour with which the latter are debated and judged in their own terms has

not always matched the zeal with which they are readily appropriated for deployment elsewhere. In what follows, the underlying aim is both to develop a more nuanced conception of 'formalism', 'objectivism' and 'modernism' – in so far as they relate to analytical practice – and, in order to counter some of the more obvious misrepresentations that one typically encounters, to examine the complex interconnections that can be seen to exist between each of them. The first section focuses on, and challenges, the often simplistic association of formalism with modernism. The second section, drawing on Habermas's conception of knowledge and discursive practices, examines the difficult issue of the 'music itself'. The final section, alluding to Habermas's theoretical distinction between 'system' and 'life-world', considers the broader relationship between analytical practice and musicological enquiry in general. The article concludes by claiming that the challenge facing analytical practice actually has rather less to do with the distracting vicissitudes of 'postmodern' theory than is suggested by much contemporary debate.

Modernism and Formalism

Nearly all deconstructive criticisms directed at analytical practice tend to include, explicitly or otherwise, a challenge to 'modernism' and its associated conceptual vocabulary. Although writing almost a decade ago, Leo Treitler's pointed comments retain a contemporary prescience:

One of the root points of contention in the current discussions . . . concerns the conception of the autonomous and epistemologically self-contained character of the musical experience. Cling to that and you will never extricate yourself from the web of modernism. . . . You will be committed to the aestheticist, transcendentalist, internalist, essentialist, and, yes, *formalist* . . . beliefs that raged under *modernism*.⁷

In many ways, the kind of argument that Treitler had in mind here – the desire to escape the sins of an encompassing modernism and its various constitutive '-isms' – can be viewed as the connective thread binding together the otherwise myriad disparate trajectories that make up the new or critical musicologies. Such a thread was clearly present, for example, in Gary Tomlinson's attempt to develop, and promote, a kind of 'thick contextualism'. In an oft-cited exchange with Lawrence Kramer, which saw the two protagonists locking horns over the future direction of what was then a still embryonic postmodern turn in musicological enquiry, the two were clearly in agreement when it came to locating 'the origins of what we may call *modernist* musicology in *nineteenth-century* views of the signifying distance between music and words'.⁸ Crucially, for Tomlinson and for many others, the origins of a 'modernist' musicology are not strictly concomitant either with aesthetic

'modernism' or for that matter with European 'modernity', but are identified with elements internal to, or coincidental with, nineteenth-century aesthetics. However, while there are some compelling reasons for viewing modernism, especially in its earlier expressionist guise, as a kind of intense, self-negating extension of late romantic sensibility – as exemplified in, say, Schoenberg's *Erwartung* or his Op. 11 piano pieces – it is questionable whether one can simply transfer such a schema onto a theoretical, historical, socio-cultural, or an institutional or disciplinary level, without enacting a rather crude and potentially debilitating conflation of what are complex and contradictory patterns of intellectual and artistic development.

The partial derivation of *formalist* presumption from certain aspects of nineteenth-century thought is widely discussed and relatively uncontroversial. Lydia Goehr, for example, has traced the development of the 'work-concept' – the view of music as a delimited, objective 'in and for itself' on which depends much formalist presupposition – both to a number of strands within nineteenth-century romantic thought as well as to particular social and cultural developments peculiar to that period of (bourgeois) European history.⁹ Yet it is this easy association of formalism, not with romanticism or with elements of nineteenth-century thought, but with 'modernism' *per se* or, in particular, with a purportedly 'modernist' musicology that remains fundamentally problematic. This can be illustrated by turning to one idea in particular: the concept of 'organicism'. The assumption of, or the search for, underlying, autotelic unity in a musical work is often closely associated with formalism. Its subterranean traces are still deeply rooted in contemporary analytical presupposition; and it is doubtful they could ever be entirely expunged, even if that were desirable. Analytical 'organicism', so often a key target for critical rebuke, may well now have been partially cleansed of its (explicit) metaphysical or biological trappings, such that it has mutated into a kind of paradoxical 'inorganic organicism', a structuralist functionalism predicated on techniques of hierarchical reduction. However, the concept of organic unity, closely bound up as it was with the development of German idealist thought, represents not so much an analogical *counterpart* either to the modern enlightenment project or to aesthetic modernism, but rather can be understood to be derived from a romantic *aversion to*, and desire to transcend, the social anomie unleashed by precisely that industrial, urbanised, technocratic instrumentalism with which modernity is typically associated. As an underlying aesthetic conception, it is part of a tradition leading from Goethe, through Hoffmann and Hegel, to Schenker himself¹⁰ – a tradition, moreover, which itself lies quite some way from the objectifying, quasi-scientific methodology with which (late) twentieth-century analytical formalism is typically equated.

Hence, in their critique of formalist presupposition, many advocates of a contemporary 'postmodern' musicology seek to fuse together two

contradictory, albeit dialectically entwined conceptions of the 'modern': on the one hand, an alienating and inappropriate 'modern' attachment to the quasi-scientific, empirical, objectifying strategies and faux-rigour of systematic theoretical-analytical practice; on the other hand, the notion of music as something autonomous 'in and for itself', which, while described as an ultimately 'modernist' conception, is then attributed to strands that originate in a nineteenth-century aesthetic sensibility that was, at least in part, 'anti-modern'. Hence, if formalism has *multiple* roots, in the procedural disinterestedness of Kant or the wavering absolutism of Hanslick, in the transcendent idealism of nineteenth-century romantic expressionism, and in the presumed methodological objectivism of an institutionally arrayed research discipline, then it is wholly inaccurate simply to frame, and then dismiss it and its key presupposition, the 'music itself', as the products of an outmoded 'modernist ideology'. Tomlinson, indeed, speaks of categories which are 'darkly tinted for us with modernist ideology' and, on a number of occasions, accuses Kramer of betraying or revealing his underlying 'modernism'.¹¹ As has already been suggested, some of the principal concepts targeted by much contemporary postmodern musicological discourse – among them, transcendentalism, internalism and organicism – were in part reactions *against* early cultural and social modernity, while historically *prior* to aesthetic modernism proper.

In this light, the very notion of a 'modernist musicology' is rendered problematic. Does a musicology become 'modernist' by accepting the underlying epistemological convictions of enlightenment modernity or by subscribing to the sensibilities of aesthetic modernism? By operating with a conception of music that is actually neither modern nor modernist but instead represents a complex concatenation of overlapping historical and aesthetic currents, is it not rather the case that formalist presupposition defies the kind of simple binary taxonomy that allows one to label it clearly 'modern(ist)'? It is only with quite specific post-war developments, common to both composition and theory, that, on the one hand, the normative-aesthetic aspect of compositional practice (the 'high modernism' of integral serialism) and, on the other, the systematic aspect of analytical theory (the 'neutralisation' of Schenker, the development of pitch-class theory and the appearance of structuralist semiotics) can be said to converge in such a way that they might be located appropriately within the ambit of an objective and recognisably modern(ist) form of reason. This takes place primarily at the level of methodological sensibility. In that sense, formalism represents a complex amalgam of, among other things, nineteenth-century romantic transcendentalism *and* internalism *and* an aesthetics of procedural disinterestedness *and* a methodological objectivism *and* the development of an institutional context in which it was able to establish a recognisable disciplinary and pedagogical identity. In its

various guises it is likely that a greater or lesser emphasis will be placed on any one of these.

Epistemology and the 'Music Itself'

As the previous section implied, the issue of the 'music itself' remains at the heart of many of those debates that most preoccupy contemporary musicologists. It is here, especially, that Habermas's sophisticated philosophical-theoretical framework may be of some use. Before turning to specifically musicological matters, it is necessary to provide an introductory context.

Despite his wide-ranging interdisciplinary interests, Habermas is probably best known for his theory of 'communicative action'. After his early publication, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, in which he first attempted to derive the quasi-transcendental conditions of human knowledge from the particular ways in which individuals interact with both the world and one another, Habermas proceeded to develop a pragmatic theory of communicative action that seeks to provide both a theoretical model of, and a normative justification for, the rational basis of linguistically or symbolically mediated interaction.¹² Although a remarkable level of holistic integrity serves to bind together much of Habermas's work, the bulk of it is generally weighted more towards his theory of communicative action and its substantive social and political consequences, than towards what one might term 'theoretical philosophy' proper. Nevertheless, his more systematic thought is clearly underpinned by a distinct set of epistemological assumptions that have themselves found more direct articulation in recent times.¹³ So far as the issues discussed in this section are concerned, there are two key aspects to his position that are worth emphasising.

Firstly, Habermas operates within a recognisably 'post-metaphysical' paradigm, one that has absorbed the implications of the so-called 'linguistic turn'. In necessarily abbreviated terms, such a framework attempts to move beyond an instrumental 'subject-object' model of cognition – language as a transparent medium of representation and truth as a simple correspondence between propositional 'statement' and ontological 'fact' – and recognises instead the world-disclosing capacity of linguistically mediated 'subject-subject' interaction and the necessary fallibility of knowledge: 'according to the linguistic turn we are denied an immediate linguistic access to an inner or outer reality'.¹⁴ So far, so apparently 'postmodern'. Secondly, and in marked contradistinction to a number of hermeneutic, poststructuralist and other 'postmodern' positions,¹⁵ his Kantian inheritance, his engagement with Anglo-American analytical philosophy and speech-act theory, and his qualified defence of 'modernity' have all contributed to his conceiving truth as the rational outcome of an ideally conceived participatory discourse, itself centred

upon the appropriate redemption of claims to propositional, normative and aesthetic validity, and operating in conjunction with the necessary presupposition of an objective, 'third-person' world:

Reaching understanding cannot function unless the participants refer to a single objective world, thereby stabilising the intersubjectively shared public space with which everything that is merely subjective can be contrasted. *This supposition of an objective world that is independent of our description fulfils a functional requirement of our processes of cooperation and communication.*¹⁶

While disputing the possibility of truth, both in the traditional metaphysical sense of its mirroring the essence underlying appearance and also in the positivistic sense of a methodologically secured objectivity (which Habermas generally refers to as 'scientism'), he nevertheless seeks to counter the various species of relativism implicit in certain postmodern lines of thought. It is precisely the viability of this pragmatic transcendentalism, or 'weak naturalism' [*schwacher Naturalismus*] as he sometimes refers to it,¹⁷ which may have important ramifications for our understanding of the epistemological presuppositions underlying contemporary musicological study and its purported object(s) of enquiry.

This is best encapsulated in those arguments which centre on the concept of the 'music itself'. It is no exaggeration to claim that this has become one of the most problematic and 'problematised' concepts in recent musicological discourse. In a sense, it represents the point around which revolve many of the most prescient methodological questions facing musicologists today. However, it is important to recognise two distinct strands which are themselves sometimes confused. The first concerns the *normative* methodological decision to treat music as an autonomous manifestation of ideal structural relations; it asks how and why we should seek to understand and interpret a given musical object in a given way. The second is a genuinely *epistemological* undertaking that attempts to establish the complex relationship between any object of enquiry, including music, and the discourse which seeks to know it. Despite the fact that these two issues are sometimes run together, it is clear that a fundamental distinction must be drawn between a) arguments which claim that music is, and therefore should be interpreted as, a thoroughly 'mediated' phenomenon; and b) the assertion that music is inextricably bound up with, and therefore figured in and by, the conceptual framework which seeks to articulate it.

The key *normative* issue concerns the utility or desirability of framing and interpreting music as an autonomous manifestation of ideal structural relations. In itself, this is not a matter that can or should be resolved by appealing to the 'actual' ontological condition of music or to the nature of our epistemological access to it. That music is multiply mediated does not commit us, exclusively

and *a fortiori*, to the adoption of those modes of interpretation oriented towards articulating it as such; one can readily acknowledge that the production, reproduction and reception of music are shaped by myriad material or ideological contingencies, while still placing a normative importance on investigating the internal properties of a given musical object or utterance. Likewise, the fact that the notion of music as something autonomous 'in and for itself' is itself a historically and culturally specific construct does not oblige us to abandon those interpretative strategies which depend upon such a conception. One can discern, at times, a kind of 'begging the question' fallacy in those arguments that appear to rest on the fact that formal analysis, and the notion of the 'music itself' on which it depends, can both be shown to stem from various transcendental, aestheticist, romanticist, modernist or (quasi-) scientific presuppositions – as though the argument were thereby won. The performative contradiction of a supposedly *post-ideological* discourse will always return to haunt those who claim to have unmasked the *ideology* of this or that essentialism.

The key *epistemological* issue, however, has to do with the extent to which the 'music itself' can refer to an object that pre-exists its discursive appropriation. Andrew Edgar, for example, has observed that 'the task of analysis is presented in terms of the identification of the inherent properties of the *work itself*, presupposing that these properties *existed independently of the act of analysis*'.¹⁸ Martin Scherzinger appears to make a similar claim when he asserts that 'any analysis that configures its object of study as *autonomous*, or its findings as internally unified, is thus an ideological fiction predicated on the notion that knowledge is *objective, impartial and detached*'.¹⁹ These are not uncommon representations of analytical presupposition, especially among those who aim to subject such a position to some form of sustained critique. I would contend, however, that it is incorrect to assume that a formalist mode of analysis *necessarily* implies a quasi-scientific insistence on the possibility of achieving a single, objective representation of the musical object. Indeed, it is not without a certain irony that accusations of 'quasi-scientism' tend to assume models of scientific enquiry that have been largely discredited, or at least made significantly problematic, by post-empirical philosophies of science.

In the first place, a formalist emphasis on aesthetic or structural autonomy, based on a *normative* decision to exclude contextual or hermeneutic concerns, need not presuppose an objective, pre-discursive independence for the musical object – just as acknowledging the constructive role played by a 'theory-laden' analytical practice need not imply a kind of 'anything goes' interpretative relativism. Though Andrew Edgar's (Kerman-inspired) understanding of analytical methodology may be a little wayward, he is nonetheless right to assert that 'analysis must avoid both the complacency characteristic of the

dogmatism of orthodox methodologies and the equal complacency of a collapse into relativism, where nothing beyond a purely heterogeneous political expediency privileges one interpretation over another'.²⁰ In a non-relativist guise, 'doubt, uncertainty, [and] provisionality' can surely coexist quite happily with even the most stringent assumptions of hermetic autonomy.²¹ The confusion here stems, in large part, from the manner in which 'formalism' – referring, at one level, to the way in which a given musical object is figured as an autonomous manifestation of ideal structural relations – is too easily conflated with a quite particular version of 'objectivism' – referring, at a different level, to the relationship that is presumed to exist between an object and its discursive appropriation, between 'knower' and 'known'. The correlation between this and the two contradictory interpretations of the 'modern' identified in the previous section should be obvious. The conflation of formalism *qua* normative imperative and objectivism *qua* methodological-epistemological presupposition maps quiet neatly onto the conflation of modern(ist) musicology *qua* derivative of a nineteenth-century aesthetic of autonomy and modern(ist) musicology *qua* positivistic quasi-science. The two are closely intertwined and clearly stem from the same (ideologically motivated) category error.

Secondly, and of equal significance, the complete rejection of the realist, objectivist model would appear to imply a position that was once advanced by Michel Foucault when he spoke of 'not ... treating discourses as groups of signs ... but as practices that *systematically form the objects of which they speak*'.²² Whether the early Foucault was championing a rigorous form of discursive constructionism, with its clear epistemo-ontological implications, or something weaker and more akin to a 'conceptual scheme' theory – a kind of historicised, discursive version of Kant's original categorical transcendentalism – remains a matter for some debate.²³ Nonetheless, at a superficial level the alternatives might seem reasonably clear: on the one hand, a seemingly discredited situation in which the features of an object exist independently of its (re)presentation in propositional content; on the other, a situation in which those same features are intrinsically bound up with the articulation of (re)presentational content itself.

I would suggest, however, that these are two sides of the same misconstrued coin and that an impaired conception arises when either of these constitutively dialectical poles is hypostatized – that is to say, when music is viewed either as existing absolutely prior to any discursive engagement or as coming into existence only as a contingent product of the latter. For if the musical object exists *only* as a function of the discourse that generates it, then we appear to be confronted with a peculiar 'textualised' version of an original Fichtean self-positing; and this form of what Robert Pippin terms 'absolute textuality' surely ignores the brute materiality of a music which not only shapes discourse but

which must impose limits on the extent to which discourse can shape or construct it.²⁴ Neither can the music itself be viewed as some kind of noumenal *Ding-an-sich*, in the properly Kantian sense, nor should it be portrayed as little more than a (textual) trace in the movement of discourse(s). Instead, to put it starkly, it must be seen to represent a necessary presupposition of our ability to communicate with one another about some kind of common musical object. It is precisely this (Habermasian) recognition of intersubjective understanding as teleologically implicit in the world-disclosing or action-coordinating nature of communicative praxis which provides an escape-route from the compulsion to choose between *either* a subject-object conception of knowledge *or* its (post-structuralist) liquidation in the performative contradiction of a self-positing and self-relating discursive textuality. Hence, that strong epistemological conviction which asserts that objects exist only by virtue of the particular discursive schema in which they receive their conceptual articulation ignores the dialectical point that such schemata themselves depend upon (the quite necessary presumption of) intersubjective agreement about a 'third-person' world which exists prior to and independently of them.

Interestingly, Leo Treitler appears to imply something similar when he observes that 'as effortless as such new exegesis [the hermeneutic model proposed by the likes of Lawrence Kramer] has been, it nevertheless entails the analysis of the interior of works, *the music itself*. This leaves the interpreters in a contradictory position, for they must, at least temporarily, entertain the very conceptions that they programmatically reject.'²⁵ One is struck by the similarity between this observation and the earlier quotation from Habermas in which the latter described the 'supposition of an objective world that is independent of our description' as a 'functional requirement of our processes of cooperation and communication'. Of course, in alluding to the familiar 'text-context' problem, Treitler's point has a slightly different purpose and nuance: in addition to the epistemological contention that the 'music itself' stands in for a necessarily presupposed component of a pre-discursive object world, he is making the convincing dialectical point that any attempt to 'situate' music in relation to some broader context *presupposes* the prior existence of that which is to be thus 'situated'. Nevertheless, the underlying arguments are closely related. In order that we can even presume to talk about a common musical phenomenon in any meaningful sense, we must counter the twin relativisms of subjectivist solipsism – music *is*, only in so far as it is *for me* – and discursive constructionism – 'music', always 'under erasure', is no more than the (textual) trace of locally contingent practices. In addition, we must recognise a quasi-transcendental necessity in the prior presupposition of a 'music in itself' in order that we can then, if we so choose, proceed to explore *its* multiply mediated condition.

Analysis and Musicology

It is perhaps not surprising that the purported ideological unmasking of the 'music itself' has been accompanied by a correlative critique of its methodological distillate, formal analytical practice. Yet the relationship between formal analysis and musicological interpretation is always more complex than is implied by talk either of a clear binary division or of a nominal synthesis. Again, Habermas may be of use here, albeit more by way of analogy. One significant feature of his later work, although presaged in his earliest, is the distinction he draws between *system* and *life-world*.²⁶ For Habermas, the life-world refers to the set of enabling background structures, or horizons, in which socialised individuals operate, communicate, symbolically represent and actively participate. System(s) refers to those functional, quasi-autonomous structures which regulate specific moments within a given society's processes of material production and reproduction – such as the market, the law or bureaucratic government. Habermas's dualistic conception is an attempt to synthesise phenomenological sociology and functionalist systems theory. The former views society from the perspective of situated individuals who are oriented towards the understanding and maintenance of symbolic meanings and structures. The latter views society in terms of abstract trans-individual mechanisms that are oriented toward stability and optimum functionality. It is precisely this differentiation between system and life-world which allows Habermas to argue that we do not need to see modernity – identified, in the manner of Weber, with the increasing rationalisation and emergence of distinct systemic components such as the capitalist market and liberal democratic government – as trapped in a terminal dialectic of enlightenment, where the only glimmer of hope is an aesthetics of reconciliation negatively adumbrated in certain autonomous modernist works of art (as with Adorno). Further, we do not need to abandon the enlightenment project itself and fall prey to the pluralistic celebration of myriad incommensurable conceptual schemes and language-games, the inevitable indeterminacy of meaning, or the contingent effects of power (as with much postmodern theory). It is this which leads Habermas to refer to modernity as 'an incomplete project'; the problem lies not with modernity *per se*, but with the systemic distortion or breakdown of the steering capacity of norm-regulated communicative discourse in the face of pressure imposed by seemingly independent system imperatives. The latter, of course, is Habermas's own reworking of the Marxist theory of reification. He suggests that the shift to a decentred, communicative paradigm can enable individuals critically to reflect upon and differentiate between objective, normative and subjective orientations in such a way that necessary system imperatives do not unnecessarily encroach upon the symbolic and communicative context of the life-world, while, at the same time, those former

quasi-autonomous systems can nevertheless be recognised as entirely necessary components by means of which the life-world reproduces and transforms itself.

Clearly such a framework can have intriguing implications for, and applications within, the understanding and interpretation of music itself.²⁷ However, my intention here is to employ the distinction as a kind of heuristic device in order to model the relationship between the formalist precepts of analytical methodology and the interpretative imperatives of its various critics. One justifiable complaint, where analytical methodology is concerned, derives from the entirely reasonable observation that 'music' is not merely a spatio-temporal phenomenon amenable to assertoric description and subject to predictive nomological law, but is also a concrete phenomenon firmly embedded within both the material reality of social production and reproduction, and the symbolic nexus of human meaning and understanding. Although some disciplines, such as acoustics or empirical psychology, may sometimes presume to operate within that former framework, a musicology which is to do proper justice to the full extent of music's multiple mediations and significances must include alternative, appropriately attuned modes of understanding and interpretation. This is why the Habermasian notion that society comprises two analytically separable, if concretely intertwined, spheres has a strong resonance with the need to recognise music both as a phenomenon embedded in the cultural exigencies of symbolic production and reproduction and also as an objective manifestation of ideal structural relations amenable to theoretical elucidation.

Those who are critical of formalism's abstractive tendencies tend to overlook the fact that it represents the only objectifying mechanism by means of which we are able to grasp and represent the immanent structures of a musical object in the first place. Yet a failure on the part of analysis to reflect on its own guiding assumptions could risk, in Habermasian terms, a reification of its own systemic imperatives. In other words, analysis might decouple itself from the life-world practices to which it is inextricably bound, double-back upon itself, and even subject life-world exigencies – here, music's semantic or symbolic experiential dimension – to its own self-evolving instrumental logic. There is something of this in the normative stricture implicit in closed theoretical systems. To take the most obvious example, the almost irresistible imperative of the *Urvlinie* can sometimes necessitate a tendentious adduction of implied notes in a manner that is not too dissimilar to the increasingly elaborate epicycles which, in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary, were necessary in order to keep the Ptolemaic cosmological system afloat. One might say the same of a set-theoretical analysis in which the music is rendered little more than a convenient platform for the circular demonstration of pre-conceived arithmetic manipulations. The articulation of a theoretical premise, supposedly the means to an analytical or interpretative end, becomes the end

itself. Having said that, these are extremes, and it is also clear that such observations have too often degenerated into generalising caricatures with which to dismiss analytical methodology *in toto*.

While there are certainly powerful arguments – political and ethical, as well as philosophical and theoretical – for extending the interpretation of music beyond the boundaries of the formalist premise, there are also good reasons for retaining the ability to engage with the material and structural specificity of a given musical work (or utterance). It is analytical practice which provides the sophisticated means – one might say, the ‘system’ – with which to interrogate, in a meaningful and substantive manner, the concrete specificity of individual musical objects in the first place. Adorno, inspiration for much critical musicology, always insisted that ‘to get know something intimately . . . means in reality to analyse: that is, to investigate the inner relationships of the work and to investigate what is essentially contained within the composition’.²⁸ Adorno was clear that ‘all criticism which is of any value is founded in analysis; to the extent that this is not the case, criticism remains stuck with disconnected impressions, and thus, if for no other reason than this, deserves to be regarded with the utmost suspicion’.²⁹ In short, we need not suppose that we must throw the analytical baby out with the pseudo-objectivist bath-water – something Jonathan Cross rightly cautions against.³⁰

The challenge facing contemporary musicological study, then, has less to do with the vicissitudes of postmodern theory and the denigration of an outmoded ‘modernism’ – an attitude which only serves to obscure and distract from more productive and pertinent matters – than with the mediation between two apparently antithetical conceptions: music as an autonomous manifestation of abstract structural relations, and music as a thoroughly and multiply mediated concrete or symbolic phenomenon. Hence, the more appropriate counterpart to formalism becomes something like ‘contextualism’, which, in many of its guises – among them historicist, hermeneutic or (post)Marxist – has a long and complex tradition that extends well beyond the ‘modern-postmodern’ dichotomy. The defining movement in recent musicological enquiry has indeed been the attempt to situate music within its cultural, social and historical contexts. Yet one might argue that this does not represent an overcoming, or a movement beyond, some failed ‘modernist’ agenda, but instead reveals a normative, interdisciplinary, presently fashionably and perhaps institutionally expedient preference for a particular mode of interpretation.

Nevertheless, while the practical realisation is undoubtedly more complex than its theoretical espousal, recent years have witnessed some promising developments in the attempt to situate extended formal analytical work within a modern critical and interpretative context. This is especially true of a group of British scholars whose research focuses predominantly on twentieth-century music.³¹ What is notable about much of this work is that, unlike a

predominantly American ‘new musicology’, with its typical literary-theoretical overtones, or a more general contextualising musicology, with its frequent appropriation of various externally conceived theoretical frameworks, it instead appears to have developed *out of* a self-reflective and contextualising attitude toward its own analytical and critical presuppositions. Indeed, in this respect it is much closer to the German critical tradition to which Habermas himself belongs – and, where Adorno is evoked, explicitly so. Such attempts to mediate between the sophisticated tools of *systematic* analytical theory and music’s *life-world* contexts are surely to be encouraged; and, moreover, they would seem to promise a far more productive base from which to pursue a mode of interpretation that is rigorously work-centred and yet socially-aware than do those approaches which, starting out from a misconstrued dismissal of outmoded ‘modernist’ practices and adopting a set of necessarily alien axioms, can never quite find their way back to the specifically musical.

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While it is certainly worth emphasising that none of the above is meant to deny that postmodern thought has had a significant impact on contemporary musicological enquiry, it is nevertheless clear that debates concerning formalism and the ‘music itself’ cut across many of its central themes. While postmodernism has helped to collapse, or at least make problematic, the binary distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’, the issue of formal close-reading nevertheless remains central to debates internal to popular musicology. Though Derridean deconstructive ‘readings’ can be attempted on the canonical works of the Western classical tradition and though, consequently, the notion of unity as traditionally conceived can be made suitably problematic, the analytical work itself can still operate quite comfortably with the pre-supposition of an autonomous and self-relating structure of signification.³² The ideology or ‘myth’ which underpins the ceaseless search for fundamental synthetic unity amid even the most seemingly anarchic disunity may have been subject to trenchant critique – and rightly so³³ – yet the switch from a methodologically secured elaboration of subsumptive or reductive unity to a dialectically conceived mediation between part and putative whole need not necessarily collapse the formalist conception of music as an autonomous manifestation of ideal structural relations.

The point may seem a little laboured by now, yet the straightforward association of modernism and formalism – and thus ‘postmodernism’ with ‘post-formalism’ – is so ensconced in certain strands of contemporary thought that the counter-argument bears some repeating. The conception of music as an autonomous manifestation of ideal structural relationships cannot be ascribed, simply and exclusively, to the same nexus of historical and philosophical

circumstances with which cultural modernity or aesthetic modernism are respectively associated. The manner in which various ideas are portrayed as components of an over-arching 'modernist musicology' betrays not only a reluctance to engage, in sufficient detail, with complex historical and philosophical currents, but also suggests the need to construct a suitably amorphous (straw) target for a subsequent postmodern assault. It does seem, on occasion, as though a purportedly 'postmodern' or 'new' musicology must conjure up, simply as a foil against which to define itself, the spectre of a 'modernist tradition' – surely an intriguingly paradoxical notion in its own right.

We should also do well to remember that as permeable as our disciplinary boundaries may have become, boundaries they remain; an 'analysis' which becomes too many things for too many people risks a vacuity of reference that renders the term increasingly meaningless in respect of the concrete activities to which it can conceivably and sensibly refer. For this reason, despite an optimistic and inclusive adumbration of what a 'postmodern' analytical discourse might look like, despite an otherwise admirably lucid and insightful account of the discipline's philosophical underpinning and historical development, and despite an understandable warning that such debates are 'in danger of growing wearisome', it remains a little unclear just how, for example, Jim Samson's scrupulously pluralistic depiction of contemporary analytical options can still be seen to represent a recognisably coherent practice.³⁴ Just as the splintering of analysis into a plurality of dislocated practices might very well signal its effective demise, so, equally, we must exercise caution if challenging the reifying effects of sub-disciplinary presumption is to signify little more than the denuding of one discipline by its absorption into the other. The price to be paid for engaging with context is an inability to engage with precisely that which marks out any given musical utterance as uniquely musical in the first place.

More to the point, if it is the case, as Adorno tirelessly argued, that music's very social significance is bound up inextricably with its material and structural actuality, then the 'music itself' does not represent a clinical abstraction, an ideologically motivated, 'modernist' rejection of music's multiply mediated condition, so much as the very nexus in which those multiple mediations take on symbolic or concrete form in the first place. In that sense, analytical methodology is neither a peripheral adjunct to compositional or historical pedagogy nor a mere tool in some greater interpretative scheme; rather, when conceived in a suitably reflective and dialectical manner that is correlative to the phenomenon which it is seeking to grasp, analytical elucidation lies at the very heart of any meaningful strategy of musical interpretation. For his part, Habermas argues that modernity is and remains an incomplete project – something neither to be consigned to the history of ideas, nor abstractly negated – but a potential to be continued by immanent and critical reflection. And we might well say the same of analytical formalism.

NOTES

This article is based in part on a conference paper delivered in July 2003 at the Hull University Music Analysis Conference. Some of its material will appear in expanded form in my forthcoming book, *The Discourse of Musicology* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

1. Joseph Kerman, 'How We Got into Analysis and How to Get Out', *Critical Inquiry*, 7/ii (1980), pp. 311–31; reproduced in *Write All These Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 12–32.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the Problem of Musical Analysis', trans. Max Paddison, *Music Analysis*, 1/ii (1982), pp. 169–87.
3. Such instances are too numerous to mention and are probably familiar to most readers. However, for explicit rejoinders to the postmodern or new musicological critique of analytical formalism, see Derrick Puffett, 'Editorial: In Praise of Formalism', *Music Analysis*, 13/i (1994), pp. 3–5; Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); V. Kofi Agawu, 'Analysing Music Under the New Musicological Regime', *Journal of Musicology*, 15/iii (1997), pp. 297–307; and Leo Treitler, 'The Historiography of Music', in Nicholas Cook & Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 356–77. See also *Music Analysis*, 21/Special Issue (2002).
4. A number of scholars have made important contributions in this regard. For example, Alan Street, 'Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories: the Resistance to Musical Unity', *Music Analysis*, 8/i (1989), pp. 77–124; Anthony Pople, 'Systems and Strategies: Functions and Limits of Analysis', in Anthony Pople (ed.), *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 108–23; Robert Fink, 'Going Flat: Post-Hierarchical Music Theory and the Musical Surface', in Cook & Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music*, pp. 102–37; Jim Samson, 'Analysis in Context', in Cook & Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music*, pp. 35–54; Arnold Whittall, 'Autonomy/Heteronomy: the Contexts of Musicology', in Cook & Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music*, pp. 73–101; and Robert P. Morgan, 'The Concept of Unity and Musical Analysis', *Music Analysis*, 22/i–ii (2003), pp. 7–50.
5. The allusion is to Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity: an Incomplete Project', trans. Seyla Benhabib, in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture* (London: Bay Press, 1983). This is the best known version of the essay, based on a lecture given in New York in 1981, which subsequently appeared as 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), pp. 3–14. A new complete translation, based on the original lecture given in Frankfurt in 1980, appears as 'Modernity: an Unfinished Project', trans. Nicholas Walker, in Maurizio P. d'Entrèves & Seyla Benhabib (eds), *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996). The original German text can be found in Jürgen Habermas, *Kleine Politische Schriften I–IV* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981).
6. To my knowledge, the one full-length musicological study to make significant use of second-generation theory, including Habermas, is Alastair Williams, *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).

7. Leo Treitler, 'Postmodern Signs in Musical Studies', *Journal of Musicology*, 13/i (1995), p. 12 (my emphasis).
8. Gary Tomlinson, 'Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: a Response to Lawrence Kramer', *Current Musicology*, 53 (1993), pp. 18–19 (my emphasis); see also 'The Web of Culture: a Context for Musicology', *19th-Century Music*, 7/iii (1984), pp. 350–62.
9. Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
10. Compare with Ruth Solie, 'The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis', *19th-Century Music*, 4/ii (1980), pp. 147–56.
11. Gary Tomlinson, 'Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies', p. 23.
12. The key primary texts with existing English translations are *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 1 & 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), trans. Thomas McCarthy as *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vols 1 & 2 (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984 & 1987). Readers who wish to trace the early development of Habermas's thought might wish to consult *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), trans. Jeremy L. Shapiro as *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); and, based on a series of lectures given in 1971, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), trans. Barbara Fultner as *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). A further important collection of essays, brought together in English translation, and spanning the period 1976–96, is published as *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge: Polity, 1998). The secondary literature is immense. Nevertheless, a good expository survey is to be found in William Outhwaite, *Habermas: a Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994). A number of introductory studies dealing with critical theory in general include useful sections on Habermas, and may also serve as a more general introduction to the Frankfurt tradition itself: David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1980), esp. Part 2, pp. 249–350; and Alan How, *Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Two collections of English-language essays include a representative selection of more involved or critical engagements with specific elements in Habermas's thought: Stephen K. White (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: a Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
13. In addition to the texts already cited, two collections of more recent 'philosophical essays' focus on epistemological issues: Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988) and Jürgen Habermas, *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999). Neither of these important contributions has yet appeared in English translation, with the exception of two individual chapters – 'Zur Kritik der Bedeutungstheorie', from the former, and 'Zu Richard Rortys pragmatische Wende', from the latter – both appearing as, respectively, 'Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning' and

- 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn', in Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Translations from the remaining essays are mine.
14. Jürgen Habermas, *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*, p. 20.
 15. For reaction to poststructuralist positions, see especially Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), trans. F. Lawrence as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987). See also d'Entrèves & Benhabib (eds), *Habermas and the Unfinished Project*.
 16. Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, p. 359 (my emphasis).
 17. See especially Jürgen Habermas, *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*, pp. 32–40.
 18. Andrew Edgar, 'Adorno and Music Analysis', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57/iv (1999), p. 439 (my emphasis). It may be that Edgar is relying quite heavily, perhaps too heavily, on Joseph Kerman in arriving at this observation. He later refers to the passage from Kerman cited earlier.
 19. Martin Scherzinger, 'The Finale of Mahler's Seventh Symphony: a Deconstructive Reading', *Music Analysis*, 14/i (1995), p. 69 (my emphasis).
 20. Edgar, 'Adorno and Music Analysis', p. 448.
 21. See Arnold Whittall, 'Autonomy/Heteronomy', p. 76.
 22. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 54.
 23. For Habermas's criticism of Foucault, see the relevant chapters in Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. For a series of critical rejoinders from scholars sympathetic to Foucault, see Samantha Ashenden & David Owen (eds), *Foucault Contra Habermas* (London: Sage, 1999).
 24. Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. xii.
 25. Leo Treitler, 'The Historiography of Music', p. 370 (my emphasis).
 26. See esp. Chap. 6, 'Intermediate Reflections: System and Life-World', in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action I*, Vol. 2.
 27. Alastair Williams, for example, in discussing 'Adorno's criticism of the high modernist obsession with technique', suggests that 'translated into Habermas's terminology, Adorno is arguing that high modernist construction imposes a closed system on life-world needs, instead of the latter functioning as a resource for technical innovation'; see *New Music and the Claims of Modernity*, p. 47.
 28. Adorno, 'On the Problem of Musical Analysis', p. 171.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
 30. Jonathan Cross, 'Introduction: *Music Analysis* Twenty Years On', *Music Analysis*, 21/Special Issue (2002), p. 3.

31. I have in mind work by, among others, Robert Adlington, Craig Ayrey, Jonathan Cross, David Clarke, Alan Street and Alastair Williams. Many of the entries in two ongoing book series, *Music in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Arnold Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and *Landmarks in Music Since 1950*, ed. Wyndham Thomas (Aldershot: Ashgate), are particularly representative of this trend – see especially, in the former, Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett* (2001) and Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy* (1998) and, in the latter, Adlington, *Louis Andriessen: De Staat* (2004). See also Williams, *New Music and the Claims of Modernity*; essays by Ayrey, Cross and Street in Craig Ayrey & Mark Everist (eds), *Analytical Strategies and Musical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and essays by Ayrey, Cross, Street and Williams in Pople (ed.), *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music*.
32. Martin Scherzinger's analysis of the Finale to Mahler's Seventh Symphony, for example, amounts to the deployment of a Derridean conceptual economy within what remains a notably 'formalist' emphasis on the internal structural relations of the music itself; see 'The Finale of Mahler's Seventh Symphony', pp. 69–88.
33. See Street, 'Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories'; see also Morgan, 'The Concept of Unity and Musical Analysis'.
34. Samson, 'Analysis in Context', pp. 53–4. See also Alastair Williams, 'Musicology and Postmodernism', *Music Analysis*, 19/iii (2000), pp. 385–407.