

*Review Essay*

DECONSTRUCTION,  
MUSICOLOGY AND  
ANALYSIS: SOME RECENT  
APPROACHES IN CRITICAL  
REVIEW

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One way of viewing the current debates about 'deconstructive musicology' is against the background of an old dispute concerning what precisely can be meant by the idea of music as a putative 'language of the emotions' (Cooke, 1959) or indeed, as a 'language' in any sense of that term amenable to clear – not vaguely metaphorical – deployment. This raises questions as to just what is at stake in the naturalization of musical 'language' in terms of its (supposedly) intrinsic expressive qualities despite very marked cross-cultural differences of tonal, melodic or harmonic character. For there is a strong suspicion that any such argument must be premised on certain quasi-universal values – of thematic complexity, tonal range, organic form, the dynamic interplay of 'foreground' and 'background' elements, etc. – which in fact pertain only to the high tradition of western classical art-music and chiefly to a late (post-1750) phase in its development. All the same – I shall argue – there is little to be gained by the kind of blanket cultural-relativist approach that declares those values 'ideological' through and through, or which treats them as a product of the interests vested in a mainstream 'discourse' of music analysis devoted to upholding the western canon by every means at its disposal (Bergeron and Bohlmann, 1992; Citron, 1993).

For this approach lies open to the charge brought against it by defenders of analysis, among them Pieter van den Toorn. That is to say, it merely *inverts and reproduces* the value system that it claims to deconstruct, and does so, moreover, in a spirit of one-sided prosecuting zeal that leaves no room for genuine engagement on matters of shared musicological or ethico-political concern (Van den Toorn, 1995).

In Derrida's reading of Rousseau these questions are posed with a critical force that is often missing from other, more derivative treatments of the theme. For Rousseau, the primacy of melody over harmony went along with a range of other such beliefs, among them the priority of nature over culture, of speech over writing, and of passion (or uncorrupted human instinct) over everything that belonged to an advanced and 'civilized' – that is to say, an artificial and decadent – state of human existence (Rousseau, 1990 [1781]). In each case, contrary to enlightened opinion, Rousseau remarked upon the symptoms of a falling-away from that original (mythic) time when human beings lived in perfect accord with nature and with each other, and when they thus had no need for such unnatural 'supplementary' devices as political structures, legal codes, written constitutions, and so forth. With music there had occurred a similar decline – likewise falsely regarded as 'progress' – from pure melody to harmony and counterpoint, or from the direct expression of human feeling through an unadorned vocal line to the decadent state of a music now given over to artifice, complexity and the tyranny of written notation. Language and music both had their origin in that mode of passionate speech-song which, according to Rousseau, was the source of all genuine spontaneity and grace. This had been preserved to some extent in the 'Southern' (i.e. Italian) music of his day, a music which – like the languages of southern Europe – had not gone so far along the path of 'civilized' corruption. Thus Rousseau in his joint role as composer, theorist and speculative music historian sided with the Italian musicians of his day rather than with those eminent French contemporaries – Rameau among them – whose compositions and writings bore melancholy witness to the prevalence of harmony over melody. (See Downing [1995] for a useful discussion of these 18th-century debates about the origins of language and music; also Neubauer [1986] and Sweeney-Turner [1995].)

To say that Derrida 'deconstructs' Rousseau's arguments is *not* to say that he proposes a reading indifferent to any normal (reputable) standards of interpretative truth, logic, consistency or respect for authorial intentions. On the contrary: his point is that one *can and must* read with a due regard to those basic protocols, but also that there may be elements in the text – sentences, passages, entire chains of logico-semantic implication – which are not fully under Rousseau's control and which give rise to a pattern of repeated conflicts between manifest and latent sense. Thus Rousseau may self-evidently wish to say (*vouloir dire*) that melody is more 'natural' than harmony, that nature has been corrupted by culture, and that language has

likewise suffered the decline from its original (authentic and spontaneous) role as a conveyor of human passions to its present (all too sophisticated) use for the purpose of concealing our true sentiments and desires. However there are passages in the text – passages very often passed over, naturally enough, by mainstream commentators – where Rousseau is constrained *by the logic of his own argument* to state (or imply) just the opposite case. Thus nothing could possibly count as a language in the absence of those various ‘artificial’ features – lexis, syntax, predicative functions, anaphoric devices, speech-act conventions, etc. – which alone make it possible for speakers to communicate on a basis of mutual understanding. In the strictest sense these are the *conditions of possibility* for knowing, possessing or sharing a language, as indeed Rousseau has perforce to acknowledge in those proto-deconstructive passages where his argument comes most visibly under strain (see Derrida, 1967; de Man, 1979).

By the same token there is no possibility of appealing to a ‘natural’ (organic) state of society that would somehow antedate all the various structures – political, social, civic-institutional, familial, gender-based, and so forth – which define the very character of social existence and are hence presupposed in every attempt, like Rousseau’s, to redraw the line between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. In the case of music it is likewise a fallacy (a self-deconstructing argument) to propose that there must once have been a phase in the history of musical development when melody alone was sufficient for all expressive purposes and when harmony would not yet have come to exert its artificial, corrupting influence. Thus (1) there is no melody without harmony in the sense that even the simplest melody (folk song, plainchant, monodic improvisation, etc.) would not be perceived as such in the absence of implied harmonic or cadential structures. Furthermore (2), there is the fact of the overtone series which prevents any single note – let alone any sequence of such notes melodically arranged – from ever being heard in perfect isolation. Besides which (3), it is impossible for Rousseau coherently to advance his idea of a stage in musical *history* – or a phase of musical *development* – when as yet music remained untouched by the forces of history and change.

Such is the ‘logic of supplementarity’ that Derrida finds everywhere at work in Rousseau’s texts. What *ought to be the case* – according to Rousseau – is that nature, speech and melody belong together on the same side of a clear-cut binary distinction that sets them apart from such bad derivatives (or mere unnecessary ‘supplements’) as culture, writing and harmony. What Rousseau *actually demonstrates*, on the other hand, is the failure of his attempt to hold that distinction in place and the way that those ‘supplements’ always turn out to inhabit the very point of origin. Thus there is simply no conceiving of nature in the absence of cultural predicates, of speech as apart from those attributes that it shares with writing, or of melody in the absence of harmony. Sometimes Rousseau contradicts himself directly through statements

which cannot be reconciled with other (more familiarly 'Rousseauist') themes and ideas. Elsewhere it is a matter of complex – even tortuous – grammatical constructions and strange twists of tense logic combined with shifts from the indicative to the subjunctive mood. What thus stands revealed in Rousseau's texts – despite and against his avowed intent – is the *impossibility* that music can exhibit (or that it might/could/should once have exhibited) the character of purely spontaneous, passionate utterance that Rousseau wishfully ascribes to it.

Derrida's reading has attracted the interest of music theorists since it raises not only certain crucial issues in the province of textual criticism but also some questions of profound import for our thinking about musical language, form and history. Indeed it is the relationship between these terms – the way that they have figured in the various discourses of music scholarship and criticism over the past two centuries – that has lately given rise to a good deal of deconstructive commentary. Thus, for instance, several writers have drawn attention to the powerful ideology of 'organic form' which has always (at least since Aristotle's *Poetics*) played a major role in western aesthetic philosophy, but which acquired a central – well-nigh unquestioned – prominence in the thinking of 19th-century composers, critics and music theorists (Goehr, 1992; Kerman, 1983, 1985; Solie, 1980; Street, 1989; Subotnik, 1988, 1991). This is the idea, briefly put, that great works of art are those which manifest a complex yet integrated structure, that is to say, a capacity for somehow reconciling such otherwise discordant concepts of values as unity and multiplicity, form and content, structure and development, 'background' and 'foreground', or thematic coherence and the kinds of inventive, unpredictable detail that break with established (period-specific) convention.

Along with this goes the belief – again deeply rooted in 19th-century idealist thought – that certain world-historical artworks or *genres* represent a consummate expression of the *Zeitgeist*, a 'concrete universal' which somehow reveals the innermost spiritual truth of its epoch while transcending all mere particularities of time and place (Hegel, 1975). Among the chief candidates for this privileged status was the great (pre-eminently German) line of musical descent from Bach to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and beyond. What emerges most clearly is the close relationship that exists between aesthetic values – of complexity, unity, organic form – and the idea of art as an autonomous realm of expression where freedom can somehow be reconciled with the knowledge of a higher necessity. On Hegel's account this knowledge is arrived at through an epochal process whose upshot (or final guarantee) is the self-consciousness of universal Spirit. Nevertheless it is a process that tends to manifest itself, from one epoch to the next, in decidedly culture-specific or nationalist terms.

Such was, for instance, Schoenberg's well-known claim to have secured the continued pre-eminence of German music through his discovery of the 12-tone compositional method as a way forward from the impasse of late

romanticism. Implicit in that claim were the three main tenets of 'aesthetic ideology' that deconstruction sets out to challenge (see de Man, 1986; Korsyn, 1993; Norris, 1988). First, there is the concept of musical history as governed by certain deep-laid laws of development – of formal evolution, thematic complexity, the progress beyond traditional (key-related) distinctions between consonance and dissonance, etc. – analogous to those that define the very nature of 'organic' musical form. Second, there is the idea that any such development must be 'natural' in the sense of somehow deriving (as Schoenberg thought) from the sound-material itself, that is to say, from a method which explored the farther reaches of the overtone-series – thus bringing about a liberation from classical tonality – while nonetheless claiming to represent an inevitable (preordained) stage of musical advance. And third, closely connected with this, there is the notion of music as playing a privileged, even world-historical role by expressing the spirit of the age as defined – ironically enough – in terms of some particular (culture-specific or language-based) national tradition. All the more ironic, in Schoenberg's case, since he was driven into exile as a direct result of just such a bid for world dominance on the part of that very culture whose musical hegemony he had sought so zealously to promote.

Deconstructive approaches in music criticism have mostly been concerned with 'aesthetic ideology' in one or other of these three main guises. In particular they have sought to show how certain deeply acculturated (quasi-natural) conceptions of musical language, form, style, history, development and value can better be viewed as artefacts of a certain 'discourse' whose seeming naturalness works to conceal its often unwitting ideological investments. This deconstructive enterprise takes various forms according to the particular balance of interests between historical, sociological, linguistic and philosophico-aesthetic aspects. In some cases it is chiefly focused on the emergence of a classical canon of 'great works' and the extent to which the relevant selection-criteria – unity, complexity, formal coherence etc. – reveal not so much a process of 'pure' aesthetic valuation as a socially influenced (in the stronger variant, an ideologically determined) procedure for maintaining those hegemonic values (see Bergeron and Bohlman, 1992; Goehr, 1992; Stradling and Hughes, 1993). Where this approach differs from other, e.g. Marxist or 'straight' sociological accounts is in its greater attentiveness to the various stress points – the contradictions, non-sequiturs, conflicts between avowed and implied meaning – that are held to characterize the discourse of mainstream musicology. Other theorists, among them Joseph Kerman, have questioned what they see as the mutually supportive, circular relationship between an aesthetics of organic form and a canonized version of musical history based on closely analogous ideas of cultural development and growth (Kerman, 1980, 1983). Such thinking evokes the Hegelian conception of history as a process that unfolds through successive phases of dialectical conflict and synthesis which finally issue in

a moment of achieved self-knowledge when consciousness becomes present to itself through reflection on all the manifold forms of its development to date. To deconstruct this version of aesthetic ideology is to focus on those various discrepant details – an-achronisms, structural anomalies, hybrid *genres* and so forth – which put up resistance to any such organicist (or ‘totalizing’) view of the relation between history and art.

A similar approach is to be found in the work of theorists like Rose Rosengard Subotnik who aim to deconstruct the discourse of received (high-cultural) music criticism by questioning both its canonical judgements and its reliance on concepts of structure, unity and integral thematic development which are taken as defining what shall count as great music or an adequate analysis thereof (see Subotnik, 1991). Here again, so it is argued, there is a self-confirming process of circular or reciprocal definition whereby value accrues to precisely those works which manifest qualities perfectly suited to analysis in just those terms. Thus for instance – according to Subotnik – value is equated with structural complexity, which in turn gives a hold for the kind of ‘structural listening’ that ignores mere details of surface texture (or emotional involvement on the listener’s part) and concentrates rather on long-range matters of thematic transformation, motivic development, progressive tonality and suchlike formal criteria. What is specifically deconstructive about this approach is the lesson it has learned from Derrida in locating certain value-laden binary oppositions – such as ‘structure’ versus ‘texture’, ‘form’ versus ‘content’, ‘analytic’ versus merely ‘appreciative’ criticism – and showing how these encode a whole range of hierarchical (culturally privileged) values and assumptions. From here the next step is to show that this binary logic cannot be sustained except by means of a selective, arbitrary, even ‘violent’ suppression of those other values (the second term in each pair) which constitute a challenge to orthodox habits of thought. Thus analysts in the broadly Schenkerian tradition take it for granted that complexity and unity are the chief (indeed the defining) virtues of musical form, and again, that the measure of a truly adequate, successful or profound analysis is the extent to which every last detail of a work can be shown to relate to some underlying matrix of generative themes or germinal motifs (Narmour, 1977). This in turn goes along with that quasi-evolutionist idea of musical history according to which the great line of descent is that which runs (through various disputed intermediaries) from the First to the Second Viennese Schools, and thence to those high modernist successor movements which sought to extend serial techniques to every parameter of musical organization. For it is no coincidence – so the argument runs – that ‘analysis’ happens to work so well when applied to music that lends itself ideally to just such formalist treatment (see Kerman, 1980).

In this sense, deconstruction might plausibly be viewed as a part of the wider ‘postmodernist’ reaction against the values and priorities of a musical culture perceived as having raised formal complexity to a high point

of mandarin virtue, and thus as having placed an insuperable gulf between 'structural listening' and the pleasures of straightforward musical experience. On the other hand, deconstructive writings about music still tend to concentrate on works (and analyses of works) that belong very much to that same tradition of 'high' western canonical artforms. Certainly they are complex and demanding in a way that scarcely invites comparison with current styles of postmodern, minimalist or neo-Romantic music. (A similar complaint is often voiced, one might add, about deconstructionist literary critics who routinely denounce the elitist values enshrined in the 'great tradition' of canonized texts while continuing to produce highly sophisticated readings of just those texts and the mainstream commentaries hitherto devoted to them.) Where the emphasis does fall differently is in the *kind* of 'structural listening' that these theorists propose. That is, they tend to favour works – such as song cycles, fantasy impromptus, intermezzi, hybrid pieces of various types – the generic affiliation of which is in doubt, or which constitute a challenge to conventional (organicist) modes of analysis. For these works can be seen as calling into question the presumed existence of an overarching formal unity whereby to integrate (and aesthetically redeem or justify) various otherwise 'meaningless' local details.

This difference of views is nicely figured in the exchange between two analysts, Jonathan Dunsby and Alan Street, on the subject of Brahms' late piano *Fantasies*, Op. 116. Thus the former would have us hear them *not* as just a sequence of loosely related character pieces but rather as a complex, integrated, 'organic' whole whose unity is established by numerous instances of allusive cross-reference, tonal development and subtle thematic linkage (Dunsby, 1983, 1989). For Street, on the contrary, there is nothing whatever – no ultimate principle of aesthetic value – that could justify this quest for structural coherence despite and against the music's resistance to any such merely abstract formal imperative (Street, 1989). To this latter way of thinking it is rather the case that many works often praised for their integral ('organic') qualities of style and form can in fact be shown – on a closer deconstructive analysis – to manifest just those kinds of generic ambivalence or heterodox structure which find no place within the standard analytical conventions (see also Kallberg, 1988; Korsyn, 1993; Scherzinger, 1994). They should thus be heard, so these critics argue, as putting up resistance to that dominant idea of musical tradition which assimilates work to history (and history to work) through a range of naturalized organicist metaphors connoting predestined development and growth.

Other theorists have pursued a related enquiry into the origins of the notion of 'absolute' music which gained ground rapidly among critics and aesthetic philosophers from the mid-18th century on. In particular they have pointed to the shift of emphasis from an earlier mimetic or representational philosophy of art where literature was thought of primarily in terms of its capacity for presenting vivid images (*ut pictura poesis*), and music valued

chiefly in so far as it served to express or communicate the meanings contained in some sacred or secular text. However, these values underwent a sharp reversal with the rise of *genres* – such as the symphony or string quartet – whose formal structures were increasingly divorced from any reliance on textual or programmatic sources (Neubauer, 1986). This development coincided with a renewed interest in the sublime as a category of aesthetic thought, that is to say, with the idea of art as somehow ‘presenting the unrepresentable’, or giving access to a realm of transcendent experience beyond the furthest reach of prosaic or everyday knowledge (Barry, 1987). So it came about that music was elevated from its erstwhile, largely ancillary role to the status of a privileged artform, one that held out the beguiling possibility of breaking altogether with such commonplace referential or extra-musical constraints. At its most extreme this belief gave rise to the Symbolist doctrine that poetry should ‘aspire to the condition of music’ by renouncing all interest in mere thematic content and striving to attain an absolute purity of diction and form.

From a deconstructive standpoint this must be seen as yet another version of that mystified organicist creed – that potent strain of ‘aesthetic ideology’ – which values works of art for their power to transcend the limiting conditions of commonplace (prosaic or timebound) human experience. Most influential here has been Paul de Man, a literary theorist whose texts were mainly devoted to unmasking and resisting this delusory belief (de Man, 1979, 1984, 1986; Norris, 1989). Thus the task of deconstruction is to exercise a rigorous, self-critical intelligence which prevents philosophy and criticism from falling into the typical post-Romantic error that would take such claims at face value. On this view – exemplified by mainstream interpreters of Romanticism and also (supposedly) by post-Kantian idealist philosophers such as Hegel and Schiller – aesthetic experience belongs to a realm above and beyond all mere contingencies of time and place. It is the idea of language as somehow consubstantial with processes or forms in the natural realm, or that which equates the highest achievements of poetic art with a power to overcome the vexing antinomies of subject and object, mind and nature, word and world. At its most extreme (as in well-known passages from Goethe, Coleridge and others) this leads to the high valuation of tropes such as metaphor and symbol conceived as giving access to imaginative truths of a visionary, transcendent or eternal order (Norris, 1989).

De Man both denies that this can be the case – since language is inherently a non-natural and a temporal medium – and considers such ideas the source of much confusion in criticism and philosophy alike. Moreover, he sets out to show that the texts where such claims are most insistently raised are also very often texts whose rhetorical complexity manifests a kind of counter-logic – a self-deconstructive moment of resistance – at odds with their overt or professed intent (de Man, 1983). Thus a theorist may argue that the language of symbolism excels that of allegory since the latter involves a



merely conventional ('arbitrary') relationship between sign and meaning or form and content, as well as belonging to a temporal order where everything is mere prosaic succession – one episode after another – affording no access to the realm of transcendent imaginative truths. However it is de Man's claim, borne out by close readings of considerable subtlety and power, that these texts are themselves allegorical in so far as they reveal the strict and absolute impossibility that language should ever achieve that wished-for condition. Furthermore he takes music – and Rousseau's writings on music in particular – as his instance of a 'language' that cannot be construed as pointing toward such a consummate union of the sensuous and the spiritual, content and form, or their various correlative terms (de Man, 1983). For in music we encounter the paradigm case of an 'empty' sign whose structure and meaning can only be grasped allegorically since it resists all attempts to specify its content in naively referential (or high-toned symbolist) mode.

De Man thus differs from Derrida in regarding Rousseau as the least deluded, most critically self-aware of writers, one whose texts hold out against mystified (mainstream-Romantic) conceptions of meaning and form. That is, Rousseau anticipates everything the canny deconstructor might wish to say concerning the nature of aesthetic ideology, its sources in the 19th-century discourse of philosophical reflection on art, and the fallacies involved in any premature leap to symbolist-inspired notions of musical or poetic language. More than that, such notions are deeply seductive and can easily acquire the kind of wider (historical and sociopolitical) resonance that de Man and others have linked to the rise of a 'national-aestheticist' manner of conceiving the relation between art, politics, and culture (de Man, 1984; Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989). What this amounts to, in brief, is an idea of the nation-state as itself an organic unity, an embodiment of those same sublime or transcendent values that characterize the great work of art. Nor will such arguments appear far-fetched if one considers the role of music in Nietzsche's early philosophy or in Wagner's conception of opera as the ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the union of music, mythology, and stage spectacle in a prophetic vision of German national destiny (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1995). At very least these ideas may be said to have exerted a potent force in the emergence of totalitarian creeds that envisaged the nation-state as itself a kind of artwork or ideal projection of the great leader's will expressed through forms of mass political mobilization.

Hence the importance – so it is argued – of tracing such fantasies back to their source in that strain of aesthetic ideology which promotes a confusion between art and life, or which elevates art to a transcendental realm where all such distinctions are thought to fall away in the moment of revealed truth. In short, there are some large, even violent, things behind this current attempt by critical theorists to deconstruct certain deep-laid assumptions about language, art and aesthetic value. De Man puts the case most forcefully in a passage concerning Schiller's idea of 'aesthetic education' and its

appeal to a state of harmonious balance or reconciliation between the various human faculties. Thus: 'the "state" that is here being advocated is not just a state of mind or of soul, but a principle of political value and authority that has its own claims on the shape and the limits of our freedom' (de Man, 1984). To grasp what is at stake, he suggests, we should look to those crucial passages, in Rousseau and Kant especially, which on the one hand have given rise to a history of 'aberrant' (naive or uncritical) readings, but on the other can be seen to resist or deconstruct the interpretation placed upon them by less attentive readers. For it will then become clear how close is the relation between aesthetic ideology and those forms of organicist thinking that can all too easily carry across from the literary or musical to the socio-political domain.

In this respect deconstruction makes common cause with that strain of 'negative dialectical' thinking developed by T. W. Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Adorno, 1973, 1981). That is to say, it manifests a kindred suspicion of any philosophy, such as Hegel's, that holds out the prospect of a grand dialectical synthesis wherein all contradictions would at last be resolved and consciousness attain a viewpoint (that of Absolute Knowledge) beyond all the partial or limiting perspectives of its progress to date. For Adorno such thinking was complicit with the drive toward a 'totally administered' society – that of late capitalism – which reduced every aspect of present-day life to the dead level of conformist popular 'taste' as dictated by a wholesale culture-industry given over to the purposes of mass indoctrination. In so far as there remained any hope of resisting this process it belonged to those stubbornly intransigent forms of artistic production – the music of a Schoenberg or the writings of a Samuel Beckett – that held out against the blandishments of a falsely affirmative culture.

Thus deconstruction can be seen as continuing Adorno's critical project, albeit with greater emphasis on those moments of textual *aporia* (contradictions, paradoxes, ideological stress points) that emerge in the discourse of mainstream musicology. At present it remains a somewhat specialized area of research and one whose appeal is mainly to the younger generation of music theorists. However, its influence is already apparent in the widespread questioning of analytic methods – Schenkerian procedures especially – which take for granted such values as structural unity, thematic coherence, or organic form as criteria of aesthetic value. Meanwhile there are others, 'old-style' analysts among them, who have lately risen to the deconstructive challenge by developing more refined and sophisticated versions of the formalist approach. What these debates make clear is the fact that all parties continue to practise some version of 'analysis', whether with a view to upholding traditional (work-based or organicist) norms, or in order to deconstruct those norms by revealing their covert ideological agenda. Where they chiefly differ is on just this point of intrinsic versus extrinsic criteria, or structural features imputed to the work itself – in its presumed formal autonomy – as against

those aspects of our thinking about music which may be subject to analysis in the deconstructive mode. Nevertheless it seems fair to conclude that analysis in some form continues to provide the best – indeed the only adequate – basis for addressing these complex issues.

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