
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Music in the Moment by Jerrold Levinson

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We have seen how the phrasing slur injures the form, changes and distorts the structure of the voice-leading [*Stimmengefüge*] and damages motives individually and in their interrelationships, in short how it destroys precisely that which represents the value of a masterly synthesis.

. . . One can say: with this single stroke music has been felled, like a tree! There is no more Bach, no more Handel, no more Haydn or Mozart or Beethoven. . . .

But I believe that I am also not mistaken in relating this unpleasant thought to the social and political ideology that understands unity only as uniformity. For has there not been, for about the past two hundred years, a huge phrasing slur encircling the entire world, drawn by a few presumptuous peoples of the so-called Enlightenment . . . around all the other peoples in contradiction to their individuality and also to the concept of a higher unity growing organically from contrasts? . . .

And just as the masterworks, under the phrasing slurs of the editors, glare at us in their uniformity, so all of music glares at us uniformly under the phrasing slur of the Enlightenment, whether or not the product of genius. . . .

And yet I am convinced that the political and social phrasing-slur uniformity can deceive mankind only temporarily about its true, higher unity. . . .

In music, too, true unity will be achieved once again. I believe in the German's love of truth and his integrity: if only he recognizes his mistake, and finally learns what goodness, truth and beauty are based on, then we may be able to count on him. (pp. 29–30)

To continue to progress as a musician influenced by Schenker, to build upon, to react against, or to surpass his work, one must recognize all of its richness, brilliance, inconsistency, and cultural baggage. The goal is to render Schenker obsolete, once his models of analysis have been supplanted by ones better equipped to handle the complexity and lack of hierarchy that troubled him. Schenker himself hinted at this in *Das Meisterwerk*, when he followed the quotation cited at the outset of this review with: “Finally, the devoted student is at liberty to reorder the illustrations, and even to add other descriptive language if he wishes, provided only that he correctly understands the subject matter” (p. 107). To this end, Schenker's examples of uninhibited personal engagement with music, brought to light in *The Masterwork in Music*, might provide a more effective foundation and inspiration for surpassing *Der freie Satz* than anything else published in the last sixty years.

JOSEPH LUBBEN

Music in the Moment, by Jerrold Levinson. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997. xii, 184 pp.

The one-paragraph entry on Edmund Gurney in the *New Grove* notes that his great work of music theory, *The Power of Sound* (London, 1880), attracted lit-

tle attention, though it was praised by William James.¹ Small wonder. For in this work Gurney claimed:

It is characteristic of the whole apprehension of Music, of all grades of perception of it from the highest to the lowest, that the attention is focussed on each part as it comes; and that we never get our impressions of a long musical movement, as we commonly do those of a great architectural structure, through views which sweep over and embrace the whole rather than dwell on the parts. . . . Thus pleasure in the [musical] whole has no meaning except as expressing the sum of our enjoyments from moment to moment.²

Gurney's bottom-up perspective is clearly at odds with the top-down, architectonic approach to musical form that came to dominate music theory and analysis in the twentieth century. But the bottom-up approach has been making a comeback, and in *Music in the Moment* Jerrold Levinson takes up Gurney's thesis and refines it into a position termed *concatenationism*, which he defines as follows:

Music essentially presents itself for understanding as a chain of overlapping and mutually involving parts of small extent, rather than either a seamless totality or an architectural arrangement. . . . we may arrive at four propositions, concerned respectively with musical understanding, enjoyment, form, and value, whose conjunction constitutes concatenationism:

1. *Musical understanding* centrally involves neither aural grasp of a large span of music as a whole, nor intellectual grasp of large-scale connections between parts; understanding music is centrally a matter of apprehending individual bits of music and immediate progressions from bit to bit.
2. *Musical enjoyment* is had only in the successive parts of a piece of music, and not in the whole as such, or in relationships of parts widely separated in time.
3. *Musical form* is centrally a matter of cogency of succession, moment to moment and part to part.
4. *Musical value* rests wholly on the impressiveness of individual parts and the cogency of successions between them, and not on features of large-scale form per se; the worthwhileness of experience of music relates directly only to the former. (pp. 13–14)

Levinson does not deny that large-scale musical form exists, or that it may have some bearing on musical understanding, enjoyment, or value. For a concatenationist, however, musical form must be vested in (and thus apprehended through) our aural experience of moment-to-moment musical relationships. While analysis, historical study, or other kinds of “intellectualizing” about a piece of music can engender various sorts of music-related understanding and

1. Gordon Epperson, “Edmund Gurney,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 7:853.

2. Gurney, *The Power of Sound*, 213–15, cited in *Music in the Moment*, 9–10.

a variety of music-related pleasures in their own right, they are not essential to our enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation of the music itself.³

What *is* essential is listening attentively in the moment. As Levinson has remarked elsewhere, “To take satisfaction in some music is, above all, to enjoy following it, and its value as music is plausibly quite centrally its enabling an experience of following it over time that is intrinsically rewarding.”⁴ Active attention in the musical moment is the foundation of what Levinson terms “basic musical understanding.” While Levinson does not give a precise definition, he notes that it involves “[a] present-centered absorption in the musical flow; active following of musical progression; inward seconding of musical movement; sensitivity to musical alteration; reproductive ability; continuational ability; and grasp of emotional expression” (p. 32). Like many other aestheticians, Levinson accepts the premise that the aesthetically relevant properties of an artwork are those that are understood through the experience of its medium: in the case of music, the unfolding of sounds in time. A sculpture may make a good paperweight, and a piece of music may have a marvelous soporific effect, but their value as artworks must rest on other properties. Thus the aesthetically relevant properties of a piece of music *qua* music must be *audible* properties (and only some audible properties, at that). Given this premise, the limitations on our ability to hear and remember sounds must necessarily constrain what can and cannot be counted as aesthetically relevant aspects of a musical work. Here is Levinson’s summary of this position:

The central value of a piece of music is to be measured, surely, by the value of the experience it affords suitably prepared listeners. Now the core experience of a piece of music is a matter of how it seems at each point—how interesting, cogent, right, expressive, and so on—a matter of the character and quality of each part as it comes. (p. 159)

Over the course of *Music in the Moment*, Levinson anticipates and defends various criticisms of his concatenationistic account of musical experience, often engaging current discourses in the philosophical literature.⁵ His main argu-

3. “The music itself” is a problematic notion, as Richard Taruskin has amply noted, for example in “Facing Up, Finally, to Bach’s Dark Vision,” reprinted in his *Text and Act: Essays in Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 307–15. Discussing musical works in platonic terms is a standard tenet of analytic aesthetics, however, and so it is perhaps unfair to take Levinson to task on this point.

4. Jerrold Levinson, “Evaluating Music,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 198 (1996): 608.

5. Levinson specifically notes Roger Scruton’s “Analytic Philosophy and the Meaning of Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 169–76; Malcolm Budd’s “Understanding Music,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1985): 233–48; Robert Kraut’s “Perceiving the Music Correctly,” in *The Interpretation of Music: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Krausz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 103–18; Aaron Ridley’s *Music, Value, and the Passions* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Stephen Davies’s *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994). He also notes the relevance of work in music perception, especially Nicholas Cook’s *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

ments are two. First, any knowledge of large-scale form (such as might be gleaned from musical analysis) has a limited causal efficacy in relation to our occurrent experience of a piece of music (pp. 43–52). Second, if we do have an awareness of form, it is just that—an awareness of the arrangement of the events that constitute the piece, abstracted from the events themselves (p. 69). Thus, in the end Levinson maintains that “in order to basically understand a piece of tonal instrumental music, or perhaps any music of [a] teleological character, it is unnecessary to possess *any* explicit knowledge of the piece’s formal structure or to maintain *any* awareness of its large-scale form” (p. 173; italics mine). His argument boils down to the following sort of claim: knowing that a piece is made up entirely of golden section relationships does not make it sound any better. For it follows that (a) if I have to be told that the piece I just heard is composed entirely of golden section relationships, then *a fortiori* I cannot hear them; and (b) even once I am told, this knowledge affects neither how I hear nor what I hear.

If Levinson is right, then an awful lot of musical analysis is aesthetically irrelevant. In contrast to architectonic approaches to form, concatenationism rejects any approach that presumes or requires the synoptic comprehension of a piece or large sections thereof. On one level, anti-architectonicism seems to be just common sense: of course we cannot perceive entire musical works all at once. Yet at times musicians and music theorists (notably Heinrich Schenker) have maintained that at least *some* listeners can hear a piece (or large portions of it) as if it were all perceptually present.⁶ While many theorists would reject this notion, a common (and largely unexamined) premise of many analyses is that musical structures are highly recursive. Thus small-scale melodic motives, contrapuntal patterns, metric frameworks, and the like are presumed to be “translatable” to higher levels of musical structure. Such translation assumes (a) that these motives, meters, and so forth are intelligible on higher levels; (b) that one can and will recognize them as analogues of their foreground counterparts; and often (c) that the same syntactic principles operate in the small and in the large. The identification of conformance relationships between low- and high-level structures is a standard music-analytic game (e.g., that a series of notes is also manifest as a sequence of keys; that entire pieces can be understood as a single hyper-hyper-hypermeasure). When pushed to extremes, recursion often amounts to the reentry of synoptic hearing through the analytic back door.

While Levinson’s emphasis on aural comprehensibility makes good sense, his insistence on grounding musical value solely upon the aurally comprehensible features of music raises several difficulties. Nowhere is this insistence more problematic than in his consideration of the effect of thematic return and large-scale closure:

6. Schenker writes in *Free Composition*: “There is no doubt that the great composers—in contrast to performers and listeners—experienced even their most extended works not as a sum total of measures or pages, but as entities which could be heard and perceived as a whole” (trans. Ernst Oster [New York: Longman, 1981], xxiii).

A motive or phrase used both as a beginning and an ending of a musical paragraph is likely to strike one as satisfying when heard at the end, without one's thinking of or connecting it explicitly to the beginning, because one will have heard it before and will thus register it first as familiar, and then as somehow fitting and consummatory, when and where it recurs. (p. 162)

Yet realizing that such returns are "fitting and consummatory" presumes an awareness of the role the returning motives or phrases play in engendering a sense of closure. While Levinson concedes that taking note of a thematic recapitulation can add to our enjoyment of a passage, this enjoyment remains "a distinctly intellectual satisfaction" (p. 154). For Levinson such intellectual pleasures are the icing on the cake, not the cake itself: "Such pleasure is, first, manifestly *weaker* than the enjoyment consequent on basic musical understanding, and second, strongly *parasitic* on the achievement of basic musical understanding and the degree of enjoyment derived from it" (p. 155; emphasis in original). In other words, if the listener is not engaged in the moment, then she will have no interest in the larger dimensions of a piece's structure. This is of course true, but only trivially so, and the converse does not automatically follow: that is, if a piece is engaging in the moment, then the listener will have no interest in its large-scale form. Thus, while Levinson acknowledges the closural function of thematic recurrence, and hence an awareness of large-scale formal relationships, at the same time he labors hard to keep this awareness outside the purview of basic musical understanding. But large-scale closure is more than just a question of "enjoying" the effect of a significant recapitulation; anyone with a "basic" understanding of a piece would surely recognize whether or not the piece as a whole had ended or was approaching its conclusion. Yet Levinson's concatenationistic account of form hardly allows for such recognition.

Levinson's refusal to countenance any "intellectualizing" within the context of basic musical understanding also seems to contradict some of his earlier ideas regarding musical ontology. Elsewhere he has noted that essential aspects of a musical work may exist apart from its sound structure, and hence cannot possibly be gleaned from aural experience alone. He offers the following aesthetic thought-experiment:

A work identical in sound structure with Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) but composed by Richard Strauss in 1897 would be aesthetically different from Schoenberg's work. . . . As such, it would be more *bizarre*, more *upsetting*, more *anguished*, more *eerie* even than Schoenberg's work, since perceived against a musical tradition, a field of current styles, and an oeuvre with respect to which the musical characteristics of the sound structure involved in *Pierrot Lunaire* appear doubly extreme.⁷

7. Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 70; emphasis in original.

First, in this passage Levinson acknowledges that qualities like eeriness admit degrees, and that one may make plausible comparisons of the eeriness of one piece relative to another. This passage also implies that perceiving such qualities is part and parcel of one's occurrent experience of the music—one hears eeriness and anguish in the moment, not as part of post-listening contemplation or analysis. Yet by Levinson's own admission, this perception occurs against the backdrop of "a musical tradition," and so it is dependent upon knowledge that lies outside the moment, outside the experience and memory of any one performance, and (moreover) outside our memory of purely musical experiences. While some aesthetic qualities, such as "originality" or ascriptions of influence, may lie outside the purview of basic musical understanding, it is not clear that all or even most of them do.

This, then, is what will perhaps chafe musicologists the most: Levinson's concatenationism, even in its modified form, often presumes a rather wide gulf between listening to and reflecting upon music. Curiously, his anti-intellectual stance seems to contradict his insistence that suitable enculturation is a prerequisite to a listener's basic musical understanding, for he notes that one typically needs to hear a piece several times before properly experiencing and understanding it in all its richness and depth (pp. 31–36). These requirements become less curious when one places concatenationism in the context of current discussions regarding the nature of aesthetic understanding (see n. 5 above). Levinson's requirements for proper enculturation and for suitable exposure to a work move away from the "innocent ear" approach that aestheticians have long since discarded. But it is often the task of the aesthetician to develop principles of exclusion—to build a fence around the artwork, so to speak, lest anything and everything be deemed aesthetically relevant to its understanding. Levinson's concatenationism is a radical version of this strategy, as he builds his fence very close to the sound structure of the work. Even if concatenationism has significant flaws or ultimately fails, it remains an instructively provocative argument in terms of just what aesthetic properties it can capture. In this regard, one of Levinson's most significant achievements may be his treatment of the expressive properties of a work, which seem to be so largely grounded in the moment (pp. 146–47 and *passim*).

Levinson's thesis is likely to draw very different responses from music theorists and music psychologists. For theorists committed to top-down forms of architectonicism, concatenationism will appear naive or simplistic, while psychologists will embrace it for its veridicality.⁸ Indeed, the reception of *Music in the Moment* in these differing academic communities is symptomatic of

8. The discussion of *Music in the Moment* on the SMT-list, in the weeks following a special session on Levinson's book at the Twenty-first Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory, Chapel Hill, December 1998, offers good evidence of this antipathy. Archived discussion may be accessed via the Society for Music Theory website, <<http://smt.ucsb.edu/smt-list/smithome.html>>, following the directions under "smt-list hypermail."

their different commitments to what Mark DeBellis has characterized as “weakly non-conceptual” versus “strongly non-conceptual” modes of musical hearing.⁹ As DeBellis shows, music-theoretical ascriptions involve a tangled thicket of perceptions, beliefs about perceptions, beliefs about music theories, and beliefs about musical structure. If one finds Levinson’s approach too severe—slashing through the underbrush in hopes of finding bare ground—one must at least give him credit for seeing how theories of musical structure have sprung up around musical scores like so much aesthetic kudzu.

Mostly, however, *Music in the Moment* ardently defends the musical experience and understanding of the ordinary listener:

It is dispiriting to think of the many persons fully capable of appreciating the glories of classical music, to speak of no other kind—such as jazz—who have turned away without even venturing to cross the threshold, disheartened by the mistaken belief, which music theorists and commentators often do little to dispel, . . . that elaborate apprehensions of the form and technique of music are necessary to understanding it, and thus to reaping its proper rewards. (p. 174)

And here Levinson seems most right: architectonic comprehension of form is all too often used as a badge of musical competence (as are other musicological rites of passage), and such competence becomes a prerequisite for any aesthetic judgment. In answering the question of who is allowed to judge, Levinson’s staunch reply would seem to be “anyone who listens a lot and is true to her ears.”

When a musically sophisticated aesthete like Levinson feels compelled to polemicize, we do well to pay heed. While we may (and should) respond by defending the practice and rewards of intellectualizing about music, we also ought to think about the sense of disengagement between aesthetic claims and musical experience that motivates Levinson’s essay. Listening is both an experience of occurrent sound and an invitation to contemplation, and such contemplation will engage a wide range of thoughts and memories, from a passage just heard to the writings of musicologists and aestheticians read months or even years before the concert began. Perhaps, then, Levinson is telling us that in all of our analysis and historical exegesis, and in the tone of our pedagogical practices, we too often seem to forget that music is, first and foremost, for listening.

JUSTIN LONDON

9. Mark DeBellis, *Music and Conceptualization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Justin London, “Hearing Is Believing? A Review-Essay of Mark DeBellis’s *Music and Conceptualization*,” *Current Musicology* 60–61 (1996): 111–31.