

## What Was Critical Musicology?

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The use of the term 'critical musicology' was mostly British. Here in the United States, we tended to label the changes in music scholarship that took place in the late twentieth century in other ways – first, 'criticism', and later, 'new musicology'. The two terms, both designating work that would fall within the broad rubric of 'critical musicology', indicated different trajectories. In this short essay, I want to call to mind some of the issues that emerged in this period of transformation – issues pervasive in Ashgate's excellent book series, *Contemporary Thinkers on Critical Musicology*. 1

There are many ways one can think about the changes. 'New musicology', in particular, seemed to bring an emphasis on the worldliness of music, and its interactions with politics of various kinds; sometimes 'new musicologists' wrote from a standpoint of explicit political commitment. But politicized scholarship accounts for only part of what is called 'critical musicology'. Here, I take another approach, considering issues of subjectivity. These issues are still with us, as unresolved concerns in the study of music. 2

The term 'criticism', as used in musicology, calls to mind writers such as Edward T. Cone, Charles Rosen, Leo Treitler, Joseph Kerman, Anthony Newcomb, Carolyn Abbate, and Scott Burnham from the late 1960s on. Critics like these agreed that musicology should be interpretive, in some sense, rather than purely 'positivist', and believed that technical analysis, by itself, was insufficient as interpretation. Explicitly or implicitly, they emphasized subjective experience, that is, the experience of cultivated, contemplative listeners. Critics also favoured explicit evaluative commitments, based on experience. 3

The central object of critics' interpretive and evaluative work was the individual composition, usually drawn from the European classical repertory of the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, placed in historical, stylistic and theoretical context. Some critics indicated a debt to the early twentieth-century British writer Donald F. Tovey, and sometimes, as in some of Rosen's and Kerman's work, the influence of Tovey is remarkably strong. For theoretical resources, such writers tended to turn to humanistic fields such as philosophical aesthetics or literary theory; they were definitely not drawn to mathematics, the physical sciences, scientific psychology, or the 4

science-oriented philosophy that was so influential for Milton Babbitt and the subsequent music theory that he influenced.

Mid to late twentieth-century musicological criticism proffered itself as an alternative to technical analysis, but there were also deep areas of agreement between criticism and analysis. Both discourses produced representations of individual canonical works of European art music, against a backdrop of various kinds of speculation. The musical repertory addressed by technical theory and analysis, because of the field's affiliation with academic composition, extended through modernism up to the present, engaging recent music that did not seem to interest the partisans of academic music criticism. But, for both analysis and criticism, as understood in the debates of the 1980s, the relevant music was firmly within art-music traditions. Musicological champions of music criticism did not, for example, make common cause with Greil Marcus's book *Mystery Train*, a brilliant book of interpretive and evaluative criticism about popular music; apparently, it was irrelevant to their concerns.<sup>1</sup> 5

Kerman's book *Contemplating Music*, a polemical overview of music scholarship, restated his dissatisfaction with 'positivism' in music history and musical analysis, and his advocacy of criticism.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of the book was forward-looking but, in fact, the book stands as a summarizing monument at the end of a period: up to the time of the book, Kerman's style of music criticism could be seen as a central dissident discourse within musicology but, before long, it would be displaced by other initiatives. Kerman's book engaged, briefly, approaches that went far beyond the limits of criticism and analysis - in particular ethnomusicology, with its broad reach and alternative methods, and the contextualism of Gary Tomlinson, which proposed a decentering of individual musical works in musicology. But Kerman had little to say about either of these. He did not acknowledge the existence of scholarly study of popular music, an omission which perhaps reflects a failure to see beyond the boundaries of the music departments of the time. 6

The term 'new musicology', unlike 'criticism', was not primarily a term of self-description. Often, it was a term a musicologist would apply to someone else, an expression of surprise and consternation at new forms of inquiry that become increasingly visible from the 1980s on. Like 'criticism', it was a term used primarily within the field of historical musicology, though it often came with a new impulse to bring popular music within the reach of musicology. 'New musicology was a much vaguer term than 'criticism', including many disparate approaches. Among them were eclectic borrowings from literary theory, as in Lawrence Kramer's work; an emphasis on historical and cultural context, as in Tomlinson's work; and a focus on gender and sexuality, as in Susan McClary's work. Within 'new musicology', and also in enterprises adjacent to it, were many challenges to the topics 7

and subjects of existing musicology, and of previous criticism as well.

Some of the important changes took place within a discourse that could still be recognized as music criticism; specifically, these changes constituted new, dissident strands within music criticism. As practiced by Kerman or Rosen, or Tovey for that matter, criticism included an evaluative component, but with the presumption that the central task of criticism was to interpret and praise great musical works. It was a shock when Susan McClary, in *Feminine Endings*, suggested that some of the meanings communicated through 'masterworks' of classical music might be problematic; that the pleasure taken in some of Beethoven's music, for example, might be linked to politically troubling images of unsentimental strength and virile power, and therefore, that some of Beethoven's music might be harmful in its social and political effects.<sup>3</sup> Part of the shock came from McClary's indecorous frankness about sexuality in connection with classical music; another shocking aspect of her work was the suggestion that a woman's experiences of music might yield special insights; and her work proposed to revise the evaluation, and the criteria of evaluation, of works central to the existing critical canon. 8

If the critical discourse recommended by Kerman and others was intended to be experiential, articulating a listener's perspective, nonetheless, the relevant notion of a listener was abstract and normative. McClary and others complicated this image of a normative listener, with a special emphasis on differences of gender and sexuality. In contrast to the uniform construction of subjectivity in music criticism, situated critics such as Virginia Caputo and Karen Pegley emphasized that different listeners have different musical experiences.<sup>4</sup> In their jointly-written paper, Caputo and Pegley recounted parts of their musical lives, constructing a dialogue between a heterosexual woman and a lesbian, while arguing as much for the irreducible individuality of their experiences as for their typicality as representatives of sexual identities. Suzanne Cusick speculated on the possibility of a lesbian musicality, again carefully relating her arguments to her own experience.<sup>5</sup> 9

This line of thought reached a climax in Philip Brett's splendid contribution to the ongoing, contentious discussion of Schubert and homosexuality.<sup>6</sup> Brett addressed the issue in part through consideration of his own experiences of playing Schubert's music for piano, four hands, articulating connections between his own experiences as a twentieth-century gay man and the expressive meanings he found in Schubert's music. 10

The autobiographical approach led Brett to an astonishing statement about music criticism: 'Criticism is radical in musicology because it is personal and has no authority whatsoever'.<sup>7</sup> This was not Rosen's or Kerman's version of criticism. Criticism as previously conceived, gaining authority by its appeal to norms of subjective experience, here gives way to reflective 11

autobiography. The general traditions of feminist and queer studies, as already established outside music studies, were poised between activist traditions of personal self-disclosure, on one hand, and the historicizing, constructionist tradition of theorists like Foucault, on the other hand. This complex position invited a kind of writing that was both autobiographical and socially/historically self-contextualizing.

Within queer music studies, autobiographical essays by musicologists joined 12  
book-length autobiographical studies by literary scholars – Wayne Koestenbaum on opera queens, Kevin Kopleson on pianism, D. A. Miller on musicals.<sup>8</sup> Koestenbaum's and Miller's books included splendid criticism, that is, illuminating commentary on individual musical examples – Koestenbaum wrote about a selection of opera scenes, Miller about the musical *Gypsy*. Koestenbaum, Kopleson, and Miller also wrote about themselves, at length, placing themselves in the context of specific gay male cultures – middle-class white gay cultures, in the mid- to late-twentieth century United States, formed by the resonance between gay experience and various kinds of music.

Around the same time, other developments, not articulated in terms of social 13  
identities such as woman, gay or lesbian, also directed attention to personal discourse or personal testimony about music. *My Music*, a project of Charles Keil executed with two students, Susan D. Crafts and Daniel Cavicchi, strongly supported the conception of musical experience as individual and idiosyncratic. Students in Keil's seminar interviewed a wide range of people about their conceptions and experiences of music. The original intention was to gather information for theoretical generalizations about the effects of media on musical life but, in a dramatic reversal, Keil and others involved with the project came to feel that the individuality of the interviews would be poorly served by their subsumption as data in support of generalizations. Instead, the editors published a collection of interview transcripts, along with vague suggestions about how readers might seek recurring motifs through the various interviews, the latter being a much-weakened reflection of Keil's original intention of forming a grand, encompassing theory.<sup>9</sup>

Turns to autobiography bring with them a whole range of issues about the 14  
complexities of self-knowledge, as considered, for instance, within various forms of psychoanalysis; about literary and linguistic genres for the representation of subjectivity, as studied by literary theorists and other scholars of discourse; about the social and historical constitution of the self; about the problematic ideology of individualism, which a privileging of autobiographical discourse can seem to reinforce; about the notion of identities as styles of performance, articulated by Erving Goffman and influentially revived by Judith Butler; and so on.

At the same time, some fascinating new ventures in the study of music 15

seemed to involve a turn away from subjectivity. Two striking texts drew upon methods of ethnomusicology and anthropology to offer descriptions of classical music in the present-day United States, focusing on the conservatory or school of music: Henry Kingsbury's book *Music, Talent, and Performance* and Bruno Nettl's essay 'Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Culture', subsequently expanded into a book, *Heartland Excursions*.<sup>10</sup> Originating outside professional musicology, these texts nonetheless embodied powerful alternative approaches to the study of classical music, and were widely noted by musicologists. In their attention to the day-to-day behaviour of musicians, and their principled adoption of an impersonal 'outsider' perspective on classical music, these texts were the polar opposite of work-centered, insider perspectives such as musical analysis and music criticism.

One could feel, reading Kingsbury and Nettl, that the outsider perspective was somewhat artificial. Indeed, it was apparent that both writers were attempting, as scholars, to objectify, to step out of their own thorough acculturation to classical music. But around the same time, ethnomusicologists and other scholars were challenging impersonal norms of ethnographic writing. In the same year as Brett's Schubert essay, ethnomusicologists Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley published an important collection, *Shadows in the Field*.<sup>11</sup> The essays in their collection directed attention to the details of ethnographic fieldwork, the day-to-day interactions between an ethnomusicologist and members of a community. In various ways, the authors, drawing on personal experience, emphasized the contingencies of the ethnomusicologist's identity and of the interactions between the ethnomusicologist and the people studied. 16

One of the authors in *Shadows in the Field*, Michelle Kisliuk, exemplified these concerns in a thoroughly radical monograph, *Seize the Dance*.<sup>12</sup> In Kisliuk's ethnography of BaAka musical life, the author is present on every page. Rather than offering objective-sounding generalizations about the BaAka, Kisliuk gives a limpid, jargon-free, persistently personal narrative of two years of fieldwork, recounting the events through which her understanding of the BaAka grew. The book never strays from the knowledge immanent in fieldwork, continuously describing Kisliuk's interactions with various BaAka individuals, and thereby resisting the temptation to claim impersonal, authoritative knowledge of the BaAka. Some readers have felt that Kisliuk's depicted presence distracts from the goal of describing the BaAka; but this is a misreading of a challenging and successful style of ethnographic writing. Kisliuk's continuous presence makes palpable the nature of the reader's access to the BaAka, countering a mystified concept of scholarly omniscience. In an unexpected confluence of scholarly fields, Kisliuk and Brett both rely on the acknowledgment of authorial subjectivity, through autobiography, as a way of shedding unwanted authority, of speaking for themselves rather than for others. 17

Another crucial development of the late twentieth century was an increasing attention to popular music in professional musicology and in the hiring and curricular decisions of music departments. For many years, popular music studies had existed with very little interaction with the musicology of classical music. The founding of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music in 1981 reflected a sense that academic research on popular music, taking place under many different disciplinary rubrics, would benefit from a site of shared communication. But until the late 1980s, very little scholarship of popular music took place in music departments. Academic music programmes, powerful scholarly organizations and journals concentrated almost exclusively on cultivated European music and its international continuations. Beyond this, music programmes might have a marginalized place for ethnomusicology, itself also not typically concerned with popular music. 18

This has changed, though gradually and incompletely; many music programmes now include scholars of popular music and grant PhDs for popular music research. In itself, the legitimation of popular music studies has no direct relation to issues of scholarly method or theme. Musicological research on popular music has taken the forms of technical analysis, ethnography and historical research, with or without the special emphases of 'critical musicology'. But political engagement of various kinds has been common in work on popular music. In relation to issues of subjectivity, the situation is complex. On one hand, many scholars want to study popular music because of their own involvement with it, as listeners and sometimes performers, and personal perspectives contribute to their writing. On the other hand, popular music is of interest partly because it is 'popular'; it is natural to assume, in the style of Cultural Studies, that popular discourses, despite the mediation of commercial interests, give access to the thoughts and feelings of their audiences. To the extent that audience members are very different from professional scholars in their perceptions and uses of music, the autobiographical testimony of academic writers may be of dubious relevance. 19

An essay by Philip Brett summarizes issues about subjectivity and authorial voice with a pertinent quotation from Neil Bartlett's beautiful book about Oscar Wilde: 'The question was, and is, who speaks, and when, and for whom, and why.'<sup>13</sup> Various enterprises within 'Critical Musicology' posed this question, along with many others, for music scholarship. It remains urgent in many ways, not least as issues of race/ethnicity become more central and the scope of musicology becomes more global. 20

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<sup>1</sup> Griel Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*, fifth edition (New York: Plume, 2008 [1975]).

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, second edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002 [1991]).

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Caputo and Karen Pegley, 'Growing up Female(s): Retrospective Thoughts on Musical Preferences and Meanings', in Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood & Gary C. Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2006 [1994]), 297-313.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relation with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight', in Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood & Gary C. Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2006 [1994]), 67-83.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Brett, 'Piano Four-hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire', *19th Century Music* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997), 149-176.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993); Kevin Kopelson, *Beethoven's Kiss : Pianism, Perversion, and the Mastery of Desire* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996); D.A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi & Charles Keil (eds.), *My Music* (Hanover: University Presses of New England, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Bruno Nettl, 'Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Music', in Katherine Bergeron & Philip V. Bohlman (eds.), *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 137-156; Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J Cooley, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1997]).

<sup>12</sup> Michelle Kisliuk, *Seize the Dance!: BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tale, 1988), 149; quoted in Philip Brett, 'Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet', in Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood & Gary C. Thomas (eds.), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2006 [1994]), 9-26: 23.