

Andy Hamilton: *Aesthetics and Music*, Continuum, 2007, vii + 246 pp. Price £55 (HB), £16.99 (PB).

*Roger Scruton,
Institute for the Psychological Sciences,
Arlington,
Virginia.*

This book is a survey of musical aesthetics, which also develops an original conception of the nature of music and of the right way to philosophize about it. Hamilton has read widely, listened hard and had his own practical engagement with music as a jazz pianist, and there is much to be learned from his argument. Although the book opens with a chapter devoted to some ancient Greek theories of the philosophical significance of *mousike* (a term that embraces much more than music as we know it), and although Hamilton rightly pays attention to the discussions that began in the 18th century concerning the nature of 'absolute' music, the emphasis is not historical. Nor is the book compendious from the contemporary point of view, Hamilton being content to pass over many fashionable topics, including music and emotion, musical analysis, and the arguments that have arisen in the wake of Heinrich Schenker's theory of tonal syntax. The book is in fact driven by a fairly narrow agenda, dictated by Hamilton's strongly motivated stance as a 'card-carrying modernist' and a disciple of Adorno, whom he praises as 'the most important writer on the aesthetics of music in the 20th century'. Hamilton's marginalizing of many contemporary discussion also reflects his attention to themes that philosophers of music, to their cost, have tended to ignore. For example, there has been much discussion, in the recent literature, of the ontology of the musical work, but little discussion of the nature of performance. And neglect of the performer, Hamilton argues, is responsible for the erroneous view that 'Western art music', with its emphasis on the written score and the listening culture, is the paradigm to which everything deserving the name of music must in some way approximate. Against that view Hamilton makes a strong case for improvisation, of the kind exemplified by the jazz tradition, and also for the cultures of dance, song and *Gebrauchsmusik* that preceded the rise of the public concert. He extends a welcoming embrace to all kinds of modernist and postmodernist experiments in the art of sound, and to all that the ethnomusicologists have taught us about non-Western musical cultures. If the result may prove less than entirely persuasive to those who argue for the paradigmatic nature of the Western tonal tradition, it is nevertheless of considerable interest in articulating a view of that tradition from outside.

Hamilton's approach to music is one that he describes as 'humanist', meaning that it emphasizes the origin of music in distinctively human activities such as song and dance. He addresses the suggestion (made by the present

reviewer) that sounds heard as music are heard in abstraction from their physical causes and effects, and assembled in another way, so as to exemplify the virtual causality required by the experience of melodic and harmonic movement. And while agreeing that this 'acousmatic' way of hearing is important, Hamilton believes that it is only one part of the musical experience. The acousmatic experience does not, he thinks, account for timbre. It does not recognize the role of performers and their physical actions in creating tones, or the ways in which we must attend to the physical location of sounds if we are to hear their full musical potential. And the longest and most interesting part of his argument is devoted to elaborating on this theme. In place of the purely acousmatic account of musical experience Hamilton develops a musical version of the 'twofold' analysis proposed in Richard Wollheim's account of 'seeing in', *Art and its Objects*, second edition, 1980. Fully to understand music, Hamilton suggests, we must hear the sounds both acousmatically, in terms of the virtual causality of the melodic and rhythmical line, and also acoustically, in terms of their physical place and causality. It is no more correct to say that you can understand a musical work purely in terms of the virtual movement contained in it, and without reference to its physical 'embodiment' in a sequence of sounds, than to say that you can see a Van Gogh as a figurative image, and without reference to the brush-strokes that compose it and which implant in its surface the visible residue of human action.

I was not persuaded by this argument. It is of course true that the acoustical properties of the sounds in which we hear the organized tones of a musical line are relevant to our experience, just as the brush-strokes are relevant to the experience of a painting. Someone who saw the image in a Van Gogh but took no interest in the brush-strokes and the way in which the image is deposited by them, would have missed something truly important. But compare the person who sees *only* brush-strokes, and no image, with the one who sees only the figurative image, and no brush strokes. The first is not in fact understanding what he sees, however aesthetic his attitude, while the second is *seeing figuratively*, and therefore with the kind of understanding to which the medium is addressed. Likewise, compare the person who hears only the acoustical properties of sounds – their position, loudness, physical causes and effects – and is deaf to the virtual causality of the musical line, with the one who is absorbed in the musical line, but has no idea of where the sounds are coming from or how they are made. The second is hearing music (even if also missing something), while the first is not. Such considerations suggest the centrality of the acousmatic experience to the understanding of music. And it is only from the premise of that centrality, I would argue, that we can build a true theory of the nature of music.

Hamilton has interesting things to say about rhythm, arguing that rhythm is not reducible to measure, and that it is the most important of the links between music and life. As he rightly suggests, a 'humanist' theory of music must foreground the experience of rhythm, and must recognize that this thing that we hear in music is a thing that we also experience in other ways – by dancing,

marching, working to the beat of a drum. He concludes from this that when we speak of rhythmical *movement* in music we are not speaking metaphorically, since we have direct experience of the thing we are referring to in our own physical activity. Again I was not entirely persuaded. Movement from A to B occurs only if something is first at A and then at B, and such movement is an object of experience only if that thing can be identified at A and re-identified at B. It seems to me, however, that the circumstances that would permit such re-identification (in anything other than a metaphorical sense) are absent from the experience of rhythm in music.

The book contains a lengthy chapter on Adorno, for whom questions like those touched on above were of next to no interest. Hamilton is drawn to Adorno's modernism, and seemingly endorses Adorno's surely highly dated view that, under capitalist systems of production, all art, music included, becomes a 'commodity', something to be exchanged and consumed, while also retaining its 'autonomy' as art. For Adorno authentic art refuses to sacrifice its autonomy, and thereby stands in judgment over those who wish to exploit it is 'commodification'. False art embraces the market-place, and becomes a placebo to the consumer's demand for distraction – a demand which is itself imposed by the system of exploitation, belonging to the 'false consciousness' of the consumer culture. Adorno, as is well known, used this kind of argument to dismiss not only the popular music of his day, but also the entire jazz tradition. This has caused a certain consternation among left-leaning musicologists, who have been tortured by the attempt to reconcile the leading Marxist in their discipline with the obligatory need to stand up for the working classes against cultural 'elitism'.

There are two easy ways out of this consternation. The first is to reject Adorno's argument about commodification, and in particular to reject the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism and all the sub-Hegelian and Feuerbachian mumbo-jumbo that it has served to perpetuate. The second way out is to endorse Adorno's elitism, and to be robustly dismissive of the consumer culture: surely a more plausible stance in the days of Oasis and The Verve than it was when Adorno directed his guns at inspired melodists like Richard Rodgers and Hoagy Carmichael. Hamilton adopts neither position, even though he is honest enough to admit that it is hard for a whole-hearted lover of jazz to be more than a half-hearted lover of Adorno.

In fact, Hamilton's largely uncritical endorsement of the avant-garde, including that most grandiloquent of *poseurs*, Karlheinz Stockhausen, who is surely crying out for a philosophical put-down, belongs to the same ivory-tower outlook as Adorno's. He makes no attempt to defend Stravinsky – not to speak of every other great modern composer outside the second Viennese school, from Sibelius to Tippett, and Vaughan Williams to Messiaen – from Adorno's *a priori* dismissal, and refrains from exploring the question that Adorno sets before us, which is exactly what our attitude to tonality should be. There is surely a certain inconsistency in a writer who defends the jazz tradition as one close to the origins of music in the human soul, while seemingly endorsing Adorno's judgement that

tonality, because it involves an intrinsic surrender to the commodity culture, is no longer 'available' to the serious composer. All jazz worth listening to is tonal, and the now standard jazz syntax achieves (unlike Schoenberg's serial system) a genuine 'emancipation of the dissonance', by making it not only possible but necessary to resolve dissonances onto dissonances, achieving thereby the kind of brief quietus which the improvisatory idiom requires.

There is much food for thought in Hamilton's book, even for those, like the present reviewer, who believe that the subject of musical aesthetics needs to be rescued from Adorno. The range of Hamilton's interests, and his familiarity with modern, postmodern, and post-postmodern culture, help to support an argument that is far more interesting in its detail than can be conveyed in a short review. There is a freshness in his approach, and a pleasing disregard for pedantic controversies, that will surely attract new readers to a subject that has not always been as well served by its practitioners as it is served by Hamilton.