

Aesthetics and Music

By Andy Hamilton

Continuum, 2007. x + 246 pp.

Aesthetics and Music is a rich and interesting study. Hamilton's approach is innovative. He interleaves chapters on the history of philosophical thought about music with more theoretical discussions of music, sound, rhythm, and improvisation, but does not cover the work-performance relation, depiction, or expression. He draws on an atypically broad range of examples, including avant-garde, medieval, non-Western, and jazz. The assumptions are humanist: 'I wish to argue for an aesthetic *conception* of music as an art... according to which music is a human activity grounded in the body and bodily movement and interfused with human life' (pp. 5-6).

The historical chapters are valuable and not without analysis and criticism. Hamilton shows how the ancient Greek theorists were more interested in music's mathematical properties as reflecting the underlying harmony of relations between cosmic bodies than in the practice of musicians. While they equated the value of art with its contribution to an education for citizenship and while their concept of the arts differed somewhat from ours, they did not lack an aesthetic appreciation of music. Hamilton discusses the relation of the German idealists, from Kant to Nietzsche, to the concept of artistic autonomy, which in music involved freedom from both direct social function and, with the rise of 'absolute' music, the other arts. The chapter-length treatment of Adorno is generous and sympathetic, given the extent to which Adorno shuns clear analysis in favour of dialectics on behalf of high Austro-German culture. Adorno diagnosed the crisis of Modernism in music of the first half of the twentieth century, according to which music's autonomy and separation from culture allowed it to reflect critically on capitalism even as it became commodified in the process.

The second chapter begins with this: 'music is an art at least with a lower-case "a"—a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic, that especially rewards aesthetic attention—whose material is sounds exhibiting tonal organization' (p. 40). In defending this view, Hamilton not only allows a broad scope and some exceptions to 'tonal organization', he also distinguishes music as a sonic art concerned with tone from other forms of sound-art that view themselves as non-musical, and he further distinguishes sound-design from sound-art. As far as I can judge, he does not allow for music that is not also art.

By defending music's essentially aesthetic end, Hamilton shows his debt to Kant and Roger Scruton. He argues that on an appropriate, everyday construal of the aesthetic, music has always been appreciated aesthetically, even when it was not presented solely for contemplation. This leads him to deny that Muzak is music; Muzak is sound-design that often quotes without thereby becoming music. Yet Hamilton resists the aestheticism of Scruton's acousmatic position, that music is tone abstracted from its worldly cause. He holds instead that the listener is simultaneously aware of music as a world of tones and as possessing physical properties and origins; musical listening is both acousmatic and non-acousmatic. He compares this with the idea that the viewer simultaneously sees the brushstrokes of a painting and what these depict. In addition, he resists subscribing to Scruton's fetish for regarding all musically significant features as metaphoric. Movement is not ascribed metaphorically to music; it is not secondary to bodily movement 'because we have already reached the musical level of description in describing human bodily movement as rhythmic' (p. 145).

I think Hamilton's aesthetic essentialism goes too far. 'Happy Birthday' is a musical piece, I assume, yet it is not normally an object of aesthetic attention, even in a thin sense of that notion. And acousmatic listening seems more an undesirable side-effect of comparatively recent broadcast technologies than one fold of an inevitably two-sided listening experience. I do not think earlier listeners would have been more inclined to regard music as a world of tones separable from their sources than they would have been to experience human utterance as indifferent to the heads from which it issued. And I see no reason to think that acousmatic listening assists, as against inhibiting, a proper aesthetic appreciation of music on the humanist conception.

Hamilton closes with a discussion of improvisation that targets not philosophers but composers and musicians who have valorized either works or the process of performance for the wrong reasons. There is room for spontaneity, not merely memory and habit, in improvisation, he argues, and its effects are detectable in the sound of the performance. Also, improvisation is not best thought of as a form of work-composition; the concern is with *process*, not a potentially enduring *product*, though the latter can result from recordings of improvisations.

There is much more of value in this book than can be indicated in a short review. For instance, I found the analysis of rhythm especially intriguing. *Aesthetics and Music* should be recommended to anyone interested in the philosophy of music.

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