

*Aesthetics and Music*. By ANDY HAMILTON. Continuum. pp.246. £16.99

Uniformity of format does not guarantee uniformity of content. Readers of David Davies' *Aesthetics and Literature*, in Continuum's new 'Aesthetics and ...' series, will know that it is a lively and reliable guide to most contemporary disputes in the analytic philosophy of literature: the nature of literature, fiction, fictional characters, literature and the emotions, the cognitive value of literature, and so forth. While equally impressive, Andy Hamilton's contribution to the same series is altogether different: quirkier, more individual, more original, but less of a survey and less concerned with what's at the forefront of academic fashion. Consequently, students who turn to it in search of handy summaries of various contemporary philosophers' views on, for example, expression or ontology will not find them. But what they will discover is a deeply informed author thinking hard about the musical matters which he considers – with justification – to be the most important.

The book is structured around three historical chapters: chapter 1, on aesthetics and music in ancient Greece; chapter 3, on the aesthetics of music in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and chapter 6, on Adorno and Modernism. Between these, we find chapters on the concept of music, the sound of music, and rhythm and time; while the book ends with a sustained examination of the aesthetics of improvisation

The chapter on the concept of music takes issue with writers such as Scruton who insist that music is fundamentally a tonal art and that there can be no high art of non-tonal sound. Against this, Hamilton urges that there can be a high art of non-tonal sound (or noise), that it exists on the same continuum as tonal art, and that music proper can incorporate non-tonal elements. [45-6] He feels that the introduction of noise into music must be counted amongst the achievements of Modernism:

Although musical performance has always included non-musical noise which is inessential and even a distraction – for instance, the toneless scraping of the violin

bow, or toneless breathing sounds on wind instruments – during the twentieth century, the boundary between music and noise acousmatically defined was qualified. In the modernist era, beginning with the introduction of siren glissandos and other industrial noise by Varèse and Antheil, sounds which are unpitched or not discretely pitched were allowed into western art music ...[41]

Although one can agree with his earlier statement that ‘the conscious or self-conscious exploration of sound, in a systematic way, occurred only in the twentieth century’ [41] the paragraph quoted above seriously underestimates the amount of non-tonal elements in pre-twentieth century art music, where the noises specified by composers are frequently neither distracting nor inessential. One doesn’t have to search far in eighteenth-century music to discover ‘Turkish’ and other non-tonal effects (for example, the ‘quail’ in Leopold Mozart’s *Toy Symphony*). Unpitched tambourines, tam-tams, sleigh-bells, castanets, cymbals, miniature cymbals, whips and blocks, serve to give an exotic flavour to many a late nineteenth-century opera or orchestral suite. And what of the cannons in Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, the muskets in Berlioz’s *Funeral March on the Death of Hamlet*, the fire-bells and orchestral shouts in various polkas by the Strausses, or - to become more industrial - the anvils in Verdi and Wagner?

The chapter entitled ‘The Sound of Music’ takes issue with Scruton’s acousmatic thesis: the idea that in listening to music we are interested only to the experienced order of the tones, and not the methods by which they are produced. [96] Hamilton makes a number of objections to this. He claims that the timbre and sound quality of certain instruments is frequently essential to our musical experience [103-4]; he observes that some pieces of music were written for musicians in certain spatial configurations or for certain buildings [104-5]; he points out that one can only be aware of the risk, devilry and excitement in virtuoso music if one understands its extraordinary technical difficulty [105]; he notes that the pianist’s expressions, demeanour and gestures can aid the audience’s comprehension and enhance the expressive power of his performance. [105-6]

Some of these objections are more convincing than others. It is true that a particular timbre is normally produced by a particular instrument but this need not be the case. The horn-sound, for example, is normally produced by a horn, but it can now be reproduced with extraordinary accuracy electronically, even down to its characteristic overtones and the ‘dirtiness’ associated with lips and breath. Thus we can now enjoy the horn-sound without listening to a horn. These considerations show that timbre is actually part of acousmatic experience and not part of its causal origin. Hamilton’s argument therefore does nothing to undermine Scruton’s point.

The remarks about virtuosity and music incorporating spatial effects strike me as true and telling. My only grumble about this latter point is that, once again, Hamilton is too keen to claim such music only came to the fore in the twentieth century. He writes: ‘Despite the examples of Baroque antiphonal music and nineteenth-century compositions with off-stage musicians, [music with a spatial dimension] was not prominent before the twentieth century.’ [104] But ‘antiphonal’ hardly captures the imaginative way Monteverdi exploited the interior of St Mark’s Venice for his *Vespers* of 1610; ‘and off-stage musicians’ seems a woefully inadequate description of the Tuba mirum of Berlioz’s *Requiem*, written for the resonant acoustic of Les Invalides in 1837, which not only employs a vast orchestra, but four brass bands, one in each corner of the church.

Finally, whether a pianist’s expressions and gestures enhance the expressive powers of a performance would seem to depend on the pianist. Perhaps Mitsuko Uchida’s sprightliness enhances our enjoyment of her Mozart; but Oli Mustonen’s strange full-body wobbles and haircut-shakes are distracting and off-putting. The music comes across better if you close your eyes or listen to his recordings.

Hamilton’s concludes this chapter by arguing that the way we listen to music should be akin to the ‘two-foldness’ Wollheim finds in the way we attend to pictures. In looking at a picture, we can either attend to the painted surface, or what is represented, or we can partially attend to both. Similarly, Hamilton argues that in attending to music we can either concentrate on the tones produced, or the instruments and instrumentalists

producing them, or we can partially attend to both (although with no implication that our attention needs to be equally divided). [108-111]

Overall, the book's main virtues are that it is written by someone with a genuine passion for music; he writes as a practising critic and pianist as well as philosopher; and his knowledge of modern jazz, modernism, and their associated literatures is exceptional. The views of Scruton and Adorno (an unusual combination) are a perpetual source of stimulation throughout, and his chapter on the latter has a real sense of zeal and polemical energy. Occasionally, I felt the book's presentation made heavier demands on the reader's tenacity than was strictly warranted – there are a large number of technical terms and phrases to remember in chapter 2, and the dialectical structure [197] of chapter 7 on improvisation makes it quite difficult to follow – but Hamilton's is a distinctive philosophical voice, and *Aesthetics and Music* a lively and stimulating contribution to a number of debates.

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