

Pogovor • Postscript

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Music, deconstruction, amnesia: Notes on the musicological reception of deconstruction

For Rose Rosengard Subotnik

Abstract: In seeking to analyze what he calls “misreading Derridean deconstruction in music,” Martin Scherzinger fails to acknowledge his own implication in the history he narrates (see Scherzinger 2005), because Adam Krims had leveled similar charges against him in 1998 (see Krims 1998). In accusing Kevin Korsyn of confusing “general and particular levels” by failing to differentiate “the workings of ‘repetition’ between pieces and ‘repetition’ within a piece,” Scherzinger misses the potential of Derrida’s notion of iterability to transgress the borders between text and context, inside and outside, repetition within a text and repetition between texts. It remains to be seen whether or not Scherzinger’s own attempt to define a deconstructive mode of musical analysis goes beyond the traditional musicological concern with ambiguity, and what it gains from the addition of Derridean terminology.

Keywords: deconstruction, Derrida, Kevin Korsyn, Adam Krims, David Lewin, music, musicology, Martin Scherzinger, Rose Rosengard Subotnik.

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1

An important moment in the musicological reception of deconstruction occurred in 1998 with the appearance of a major essay by Adam Krims (Krims 1998). In “Disciplining Deconstruction (For Music Analysis),” Krims suggested that Derrida’s name had become the locus of libidinal investment by certain music analysts (Krims 1998: 319) who seemed eager to “discipline deconstruction,” often harnessing it to relatively traditional forms of music analysis, without recognizing the potential of deconstruction transform the field of analysis by calling attention to its “constitutive ‘outside’” (324).¹ Among the analyses singled out for critique was an essay on Mahler’s Seventh Symphony by Martin Scherzinger (Scherzinger 1996). After presenting a careful textual analysis of Scherzinger’s essay, Krims concluded that “Scherzinger

¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend,’ in *Derrida and Différance*, edited by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 1 – 5, p. 3.

manages to produce an analysis not noticeably transformed by an encounter with poststructuralist thought” (Krimms 1998, 311).

That was seven years ago. Now Scherzinger, writing in the present collection of essays, wants to repeat Krimms’s bold gesture by arguing “that much of the play of deconstruction in musicological parlance is based on a misreading of the term” (Scherzinger 2005: 82). On seeing this, and having read Krimms’s earlier and widely cited essay, I expected that Scherzinger’s contribution would be autobiographical, at least in part, that he would include a few *mea culpa*s in his litany of musicological misreadings. But I was mistaken; neither here nor in an earlier and very similar study (Scherzinger 2004) does he acknowledge that he is implicated in the history of misreadings that he narrates, nor does he mention Krimms’s essay. A strange amnesia afflicts Scherzinger’s article, in which Krimms’s work, for those who have read it, may seem like an absent presence, a phantasm.

Something is lost in this process. It would have been helpful, for example, for Scherzinger to discuss his own struggles with deconstruction, his own misreadings. There is little doubt, for example, that Krimms’s essay had a salutary effect on Scherzinger, however much its appearance may have disappointed him. One obvious effect involves references to Derrida’s later work. Among other faults in musicological treatments of deconstruction, Krimms observed a tendency “to dwell on the older and more popularized versions” of it (Krimms 1998: 308). In his more recent research, Scherzinger has been careful not only to cite texts from the classic phase of deconstruction, but also Derrida’s work from the past two decades.

There is no doubt, then, that Scherzinger, like me, like all of us, has had to acquire his knowledge of deconstruction through an arduous process. So he is implicated in the process of misreadings he describes, and his own essays have probably perpetuated as many misconceptions as anyone’s.²

2

The first scholar whose work he tackles is Rose Rosengard Subotnik, whose seminal essay ‘Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky’, first appeared in 1988 (Subotnik 1996). Scherzinger essentially recapitulates a response to her work that he published in 2004, in which he concluded that “Subotnik’s reading of deconstruction is limited and perhaps even undermining of some basic poststructuralist insights (Scherzinger 2004: 257. In responding to Scherzinger in the same collection of essays, Subotnik does not deny the relevance of his argument that she creates a binary opposition between “structural” and “nonstructural listening” (Scherzinger 2004: 257). But she points out that the historical context of her essay must be taken into account, since when she composed it circa 1986, deconstruction was scarcely an issue in American musicology. With a grace and candor that can only be refreshing today, she admits that she was still struggling to understand deconstruction at the time: “My own familiarity with poststructuralism was less than a year old at the time I set out to write my essay on structural listening; the idea of including the term ‘deconstruction’ in my title occurred to me only after the essay had gone through several drafts”

² One indication of how far Scherzinger has come can be seen if one looks at one of his first publications, which was a response to my work. In the second sentence, for example, he refers to “Harold Bloom, normally associated with the Yale School of Deconstruction” (Scherzinger 1994: 298). But Harold Bloom has consistently denied being a deconstructionist, and by 1994 it should have been clear that the so-called Yale School had been little more than a publisher’s fiction. Although references to “Yale deconstruction” or the “Yale School” were common, it’s hard to imagine anyone calling it the “Yale School of Deconstruction” (the capital “D” in “Deconstruction” would make any self-respecting exponent of deconstruction wince).

(Subotnik 2004: 282). Although Scherzinger's charge that she uses the Derridean term "supplement" in a misleading way is not false, he forgets that Krims had said more or less the same thing about him, writing that in Scherzinger's analysis of Mahler's Seventh, "words like *supplément* and *deconstruction* might as well be replaced by the name of any traditional music-theoretical term and methodology, respectively" (Krims 1998: 311). Since Scherzinger's essay on Mahler was published about a decade after Subotnik's piece, at a time when musicologists had begun to explore deconstruction more fully, his misreadings seem more serious.

Subotnik also points out that for all his concern with identifying binary oppositions, he creates some of his own, as "when he opposes thinkers who are trapped by binaries to thinkers who undercut binaries" (Subotnik 2004: 287). The tendency that Subotnik observes here is not unique to Scherzinger, because a consistently deconstructive position is very difficult to sustain, in part since the sort of oppositions that Derrida dismantles pervade language itself: "everyday language' is [...] the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system" (Derrida 1981: 19). As long as Scherzinger is explaining deconstruction in general terms through careful summaries of Derrida, his work seems reasonably reliable, but when he tries to apply it to musical concerns he sometimes lapses back into habits of thought that seem pre-Derridean.

3

The tendency to revert to a pre-Derridean, "commonsensical" sort of thinking comes to the fore when he tries to engage my book *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* (Korsyn 2003). Despite acknowledging my "wealth of insight," he believes that my attempts to explain certain types of phrase expansions in music through such deconstructive concepts as "iterability" and "originary repetition" is "weak, incongruous even" (Scherzinger 2005: 89). He complains that I confuse "general and particular levels," by failing to distinguish between "the workings of 'repetition' between pieces and 'repetition' within a piece" (89). The rigid opposition of repetition within/repetition between is precisely what Derrida's notion of iterability calls into question.³ Scherzinger also believes that norms such as eight-beat phrases are merely the result of empirical generalizations, "the result of empirically-oriented experience seeking to grasp the general characteristics of things," as in the use of statistics in science (89).

It is easy to see how Scherzinger arrived at this point of view, because it reflects an intuitive, "commonsensical" perspective. In everyday usage, we tend to think of an individual utterance as something that can be separated from its context on the model of container and thing contained: the context, on this view, is the outside, the individual text or utterance the inside. But in his lengthy reply to John Searle concerning Austin's theory of speech acts, Derrida challenges this intuitive picture: "context is always, and always has been, at work *within* the place, and not only *around* it" (Derrida 1987: 60; emphasis original). Thus we do not first understand a musical phrase, and only subsequently place it into the context of things like generalizations about typical phrase types; such norms have to operate for us to understand an individual phrase in the first place, and as our understanding of norms changes, our hearing of individual musical events changes as well.

³ My discussion of phrase expansions belongs to a much larger examination of the text/context relation in music in chapters 4 and 5 of Korsyn 2003: 91-137. I will not attempt to summarize this section here, but an adequate reply to Scherzinger would have to take these chapters into account. My discussion of what constitutes the identity of a motive, for example, would be relevant to the issue of iterability. Unfortunately this reply was written in extreme haste, since Scherzinger was the last to submit his essay to this collection.

Scherzinger also muddies the issue by incorrectly summarizing my discussion of phrase expansions. When he states that in Mozart's Piano Sonata, K, 283, first movement, I claim that the "expansion of the first ten measures via near-repetition of mm. 5-10 in mm. 11-16" constitutes an instance of originary repetition, he does not accurately reflect what I said. My point was rather that while mm. 11-16 can be explained as a repetition of mm. 5-10, in which a hierarchical opposition of original/repetition can still be maintained, mm. 1-10 constitute a paradoxical sort of originary repetition, in which the phrase could be considered an expanded repetition of itself, a repetition without an original.

Scherzinger's belief that norms and statistics are merely empirical generalizations is also vulnerable to challenges from other contemporary thinkers in addition to Derrida. In *The Taming of Chance*, the philosopher Ian Hacking points out that statistics do not merely record preexisting facts; before things can be counted, they must be subsumed under a category (Hacking 1990: 147). In the case of people, for example, one must decide that a particular characteristic unites individuals into a group, such as the set of all dyslexic smokers (Hacking calls this "making up people").

4

Scherzinger's essay enters more productive territory when he explores the possibility that some musical thinkers, without having necessarily read Derrida, have reached insights compatible with his, arriving by an independent route. I pursued a similar line of thought in 'Schenker's Organicism Reexamined' (Korsyn 1994a), in which I argued that Schenker's early skepticism about organic unity in his 1895 article 'The Spirit of Musical Technique' seems to anticipate deconstruction in some uncanny ways. (Although it would take us to far afield to consider this issue in detail here, this affinity with Derrida and Schenker may hinge, in part, on their having drawn similar conclusions from reading Nietzsche.)

Among the music theorists whose potential resemblances to Derrida he considers, Scherzinger makes the strongest case for an essay by David Lewin (Lewin 1987). (I discussed Lewin 1987 at great length in Korsyn 2003: 166-75; it is surprising that in the context of an essay that critiques my book, Scherzinger omits any reference to my work on Lewin, which anticipates his in several respects.) In 'Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception', Lewin develops a model for analyzing musical perceptions, called the p-model, which is indebted to Husserl's schema of time-consciousness, with its protentions and retentions. Since Scherzinger explains Lewin's model quite effectively, I will not prolong my discussion of the model itself. Scherzinger believes that Lewin's analysis of a Schubert song, in which "the contents of m. 12 become non-identical transformations with no stable referent" suggests "a general affinity with deconstruction" (Scherzinger 2005: 101).

As thoughtful as Scherzinger's analysis of Lewin is, it remains an open question whether or not this aspect of Lewin's work constitutes its deconstructive moment; Lewin's reliance on Husserl's schema of time-consciousness, for example, might be vulnerable to the same sort of analysis that Derrida devoted to Husserl. In her recent book on Derrida's early work, for example, Paola Marrati suggests that although Husserl complicated the notion of the present, he still relies on a model of time as a series of nows (Marrati 2005: 125).

In any event, Scherzinger's reading of Lewin's essay ignores a key feature: after spending about half the essay devising the p-model, Lewin devotes the rest to exploring its limitations, to examining everything that resists the explanatory grasp of his system (see Korsyn 2003: 166-175). Lewin is attentive, in short, to the "constitutive 'outside'" of analysis to which Krims calls

attention; by ignoring that part of Lewin's article, Scherzinger may not only miss the real deconstructive work it does, but may also confirm Krims's charges about being interested primarily in the "analytical bottom line" (Krims 1998: 311).

5

When Scherzinger finally lays his cards on the table and tells us what he thinks deconstruction might involve for music, he figures it as "a mode of alertness" and a "mode of *listening*" (Scherzinger 2005: 97; emphasis original). In practice this turns out to involve a sensitivity to musical ambiguity, certainly a commendable virtue in analysis, but not necessarily one that goes beyond what music analysts have traditionally done at least as far back as Gottfried Weber in the early nineteenth century. Scherzinger analyzes the beginning of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in D Major, Op. 10 No. 3, and finds a "strange oscillating experience" at the fermata in m. 4, with its unison A sustained throughout four octaves. This causes him to wonder whether to hear this event as a tonic or a dominant, or perhaps "a tonic-sounding dominant"; for him, this constitutes a moment of "undecidability," and unleashes a "functional phantasm."

Some musicians will wonder what is gained by calling this a deconstruction, since there is nothing here that goes beyond the sort of observations about musical ambiguities that analysts make all the time.

It should remain an open question, in fact, whether any equation of musical deconstruction with listening, no matter how alert or refined it may be, can fully capture the implications of Derrida's work for music. In his late book *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, for example, Derrida undertakes a critique of intuitionism that invites us to rethink not only the place of touch in a hierarchy of the senses, but also the relationship of the other senses, including hearing, to each other (Derrida 2005). What might this mean for music?

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