Session 4

Sound and Songfulness

1. MYTHS OF MUSICAL MEANING

- "[i]t is not easy to determine the nature of music, or why any one should have a knowledge of it" (Aristotle 1990, vii, 7)

A) The Mimesis Myth

Pythagoras

Combination of mathematical research

E.g. the relationship between the pitch and the length of vibrating bodies

and highly speculative assumptions:

planets and stars emit different pitches which result in a vast music of the spheres producing a cosmic harmony grounded in particular numerical, rational relations.

Profane music may accordingly "affect changes in human character, so that moral and spiritual life [are] intimately wed to musical phenomena" (Bowman 1998, 25).

Plato

Music/poetry is only partly desirable in an ideal nation state

- "poets are a divine race and often in their strains, by the aid of the Muses and the Graces, they attain truth") qtd. in Bowman 1998, 29)
- poets alienate us from the ideal by appealing to pleasure and cheap appetites in mindless imitations, as "even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character" (ibid., 55)
- only some harmonies/modes, only some instruments are desirable

Baroque theory of affections

> [t]here are eight main affects which music may express: First, love; second, mourning and lament; third, happiness and exultation; fourth, fury and indignation; fifth, mercy and sorrow; sixth, fear and affliction; seventh, resolve and courage; eighth, astonishment; all remaining emotional dispositions can easily be traced back to them. (Kirchner 1650, 598, my tr.)

Criticism: It is highly questionable that there is a rational, direct relation between musical quality and social, psychological or conceptual effect.

B) The Idealist Myth

Immanuel Kant

Aesthetic judgement is

- unaffected by either social constraints or bodily appetites, and thus exclusively based on "delight and aversion apart from any interest" (Kant 1952, § 5, 50).
- based on mental concepts, but conceptless; aesthetic beauty is located in the object itself, yet nevertheless in need of being processed by human understanding in disinterested fashion to be properly acknowledged.
- universal – as our minds work identically and the process of perception is ideally 'free' and disinterested aesthetic judgements are eternally valid irrespective of cultural variation and change.

Criticism: "A music emancipated from history, from science, from morality, and from sensation is ultimately a music emancipated from meaning itself" (Bowman 1998, 87).

C) The Formalist Myth

formalist positions take from idealism the idea of autonomy and universality, but deny any extra-musical effect.

Edouard Hanslick

Against "feeling theories" – "enthusiasts" enjoying music as a "fuzzy state of supersensuously sensuous agitation" is utterly banal, as "for all they would know, a fine cigar or the piquant delicacy of a warm bath produces the same effect as a symphony" (Hanslick 1986, 59).

- "the representation of a specific feeling or emotional state is not at all among the characteristic powers of music" (ibid., 9)
- musical meaning is located exclusively in "tonally moving forms" (ibid., 29)

Enjoying music s to painstakingly attend to unfolding tonal patterns and to take intellectual pleasure from anticipating a composer's intricate tonal design.
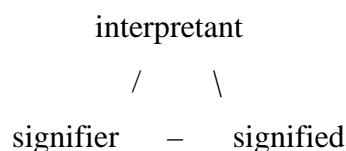
2. A TRIALECTICAL APPROACH TO MUISCAL MEANING

Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse* **(1990)**

Against formalists:

"what is said [by music] cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs" (Adorno 2002, 85)

Recourse to Charles S. Peirce:

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              interpretant
               /      \
       signifier   –   signified
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"The meaning of an object of any kind is the constellation of interpretants drawn from the lived experience of the sign's user – the 'producer' or 'receiver' – in a given situation" (Nattiez 1990, 10).

"In fact, a perfect balance between the poietic [encoding process] and the esthetic [decoding process], in which poietic and esthetic strategies closely correspond, seems to be the rarest bird in the history of music" (Nattiez 1990, 99)

Musical universals are not to be sought in "immanent structures, but in the *behaviors* associated with sound phenomena, particularly in poietic strategies" (ibid., 65, emphasis in the original).

Lawrence Kramer (the importance of the social)

> "musical meaning is continuous with meaning in general – an idea that is only surprising because we are so used to thinking the opposite without enough surprise. We make sense of music as we make sense of life. And since we make sense of life only amid a dense network of social, cultural and historical forces, musical meaning inevitably bears the traces, and sometimes the blazons, of those forces." (Kramer 2002, 163)

Susan McClary (the importance of the body)

> "music is foremost among the "technologies of the body," that is, a site where we learn how to experience socially mediated patterns of kinetic energy, being in time, emotions, desire, pleasure, and much more. […] These patterns inevitably arrive already marked with histories – histories involving class, gender, ethnicity; music thus provides a terrain where competing notions of the body (and the self, ideals of social interaction, feelings and so on) vie for attention and influence." (McClary 1994, 32-33)

Christopher Small (the importance of percormance)

> "[t]here is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. […] If there is no such thing as music, then to ask 'What is the meaning of music?' is to ask a question that has no possible answer" (Small 1998, 2-3)

The meaning of music, what music means to *us*, evolves in a 'trialectical dynamics in *lived experience* between the *aesthetic* (cognition), the *social* (distinction), and the *physical* (embodiment).

3. Scarborough Fair: Songful Transformations

The Interaction of Words and Sound

> "The ways in which song words are subject to the pressure of their music are subtle and fascinating. […] They are reinforced, accented, blurred, belied, inspired to new meaning, in a continual interplay" (Booth 1981, 7-8)

Against formalist approaches: We need to conceive of two complex (trialectic) meaning-creating systems – one verbal, one musical – that are short-circuited in a feedback loop in such a way that they continually and dynamically inflect each other. Both systems, moreover, are instable in themselves, even if verbal meaning is commonly more conventionalised and depends to a lesser degree on pragmatic fixture. Whether meaning is then stabilised ("reinforced," "accented"), further destabilised ("blurred," "belied"), or whether an unexpected synthesis produces newness ("inspired") in the enriching encounter of words and music in song really depends on in which way not only the formal, but particularly also the social and bodily conventions of lyrics and music correlate in a specific performance arena in the very act of musicking.

The Concept of Songfulness

→ **Why are we sometimes completely unaware of the actual meaning of words in songs, even though we can hear them very clearly?**

Lawrence Kramer (2002)

Example: Schubert's setting of Goethe's "Heideröslein"

Last stanza: "Und der wilde Knabe brach / s' Röslein auf der Heiden; / Röslein wehrte sich und stach, / half ihr doch kein Weh und Ach, / musst es eben leiden. / Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot, Röslein auf der Heiden"

(basically a song about the rape of a virgin girl …)

> "As the medium of meaningful utterance, voice brings the music into a space of potential or virtual meaning even when actual meaning is left hanging; as the medium of social relationship, voice involves the listener in a potential or virtual intersubjectivity that in some circumstances may be realized in the course of song; and as a corporeal medium, voice addresses itself in its sensuous and vibratory fullness to the body of the listener, thereby offering both material pleasure and an incitement to fantasy. These effects all depend on the ability of the singing voice to envelope or suffuse both melody and text so that their independent existence is obscured. One way of defining songfulness is as the condensation of this distinctness into a quality, the conversation of the absence of textual and melodic distinctness into a positive presence." (Kramer 2002, 54)

Martin Carthy's version of "Scarborough Fair" vs. Sergio Mendes' version

Carthy:

- listening conventions of the folk music world (hexis)
- fantasy structure of male, ordinary, working class community
- elaborate musical technique is played down – foregrounding of the story
- Carthy on his guitar style:

"it's basically that, only cutting one of the beats out, so that you use the thumb as well to play a melody note. Instead of going 'dong, ding, dong, ding, dong' you go 'dom...dom...dom...dom,' and the second beat is used to play a note of the melody. On certain things I rest the heel of my hand on the guitar. If you whack the bottom string with the heel of your hand on it, you get this 'thunk' and it carries over onto the fifth string, which then drones. You're not actually striking the second string, you're just sounding it as you're going past […] **I tend to play either what I'm singing or a very, very basic variation on that, or just the skeleton of what I'm singing**" (qtd. in Kidney 2004).

- Cathy evades contemporary norms of songfulness in both art music (by its roughness and imperfection) and popular styles (through the 'outdated' vocal ornamentation, e.g. melismata on 'Sage' and 'and').

Mendes

- part of the 1950s bossa nova scene in Rio around Antônio Carlos Jobim und João Gilberto.
- Moves to California in the 60s after bossa was made popular through US jazz musicians like Cannonball Adderly, Charlie Byrd or Stan Getz
- bossa changes in the 60s from Brazilian folk (minimalist guitar arrangements, small clubs) into a global pop phenomenon (dance music, easy listening)

"Scarborough Fair" transformed into:
- the listening conventions of the commercial music world
- off-beat 4/4 time (enhancing rhythmic quality and danceability)
- orchestral arrangement (adding notions of opulence and cosmopolitanism)
- playful, teasing, dominantly female but anonymous, androgynous vocals (octave parallel between Lani Hall, Karen Phillips and Sergio Mendes)
- catering to Hollywood-inspired feel-good fantasies of the Copacabana of Western audiences
- voices transport 'pure', 'disembodied', 'liberated', 'anonymous' but very **intimate** sex

"Songfulness is a fusion of vocal and musical utterance judged to be both pleasurable and suitable independent of verbal content. It is the positive quality of singing-in-itself: just singing" (Kramer 2002, 53)

different fetishisations of sexuality in Carthy and Mendes's versions

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