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LARS ECKSTEIN / CHRISTOPH REINFANDT

On Dancing about Architecture: Words and Music between Cultural Practice and Transcendence

> No one much believes in universal languages anymore, or in music as a universal language, but surely there is no doubt that it can be a transcendent language. (Brown 2005)

It is a popular truth universally acknowledged that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture" – so much so, in fact, that most recent critical engagements with the topic of music and literature use it as a starting point (see, for example, Cook 2000, Mergenthal and Reinfandt 2005, Viol 2006). Music and writing, this tells us, develop meaning in altogether different ways, and a translation of musical meaning into writing is ultimately bound to fail. While it seems impossible to pin down who is to credit for this memorable coinage (which is most commonly attributed to Elvis Costello, but also to Frank Zappa, David Bowie, Woody Allen, Theolonious Monk or even Clara Schumann, among others, cf. Scott 2005), it can be argued that it perpetuates an intellectual tradition that has its roots in the 18th and 19th centuries. In a process that John Neubauer has memorably called *The Emancipation of Music from Language* (1986), it was particularly the German romantics who renounced the platonic unity of *logos*, harmony and rhythm by promoting music to a "true universal language" (Forkel 1788, 2, our trans.) with an expressive power beyond the possibilities of verbal signification. E.T.A. Hoffmann, in his famous review of Beethoven's 5th, for instance, argued in 1810 that "[m]usic unlocks an unknown realm to man; another world which has nothing to do with the world of exterior perception surrounding him, and in which he leaves all emotions that can be verbally classified behind in order to devote himself to the unspeakable" (1963, 35, our trans.).[1] The notion that music has an 'absolute' (cf. Dahlhaus 1989) quality to it has remained a topos

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[1] "Die Musik schließt dem Menschen ein unbekanntes Reich auf; eine andere Welt, die nichts gemein hat mit der äußern Sinneswelt, die ihn umgibt, und in der er alle durch Begriffe bestimmbaren Gefühle zurückläßt, um sich dem Unaussprechlichen hinzugeben." It is important to note in this context that Hanslick, Hoffmann and others promoted the notion of 'absolute music' with a clearly pragmatic interest to strengthen the position of German instrumental composers like Beethoven against the French and Italian operatic traditions.

ever since, and one can make out a trajectory from romantic ideas of musical genius through Schopenhauer's association of music with the "will itself" rather than ideas[2] to Adorno's notion that music is essentially non-referential,[3] and on to structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to the different 'textualities' of music and verbal language (cf. Steiner 1981, and, more critically Tarasti 2002). What all these approaches to the intermedial relationship between music and the written word have in common is a focus on music and writing as aesthetic or structural entities and on their internal mechanisms of producing meaning. While taking into account such 'textual' intermedial relations, however, our interest in this special issue on *The Cultural Validity of Music in Contemporary Fiction* goes beyond such decontextualising approaches: We are particularly interested in how music and written texts function in specific contexts of cultural practice.

By adopting a largely pragmatic view of the historical traditions and social contexts of performance and communication, we wish to demonstrate with this issue that "dancing about architecture" can indeed be a productive rather than inherently frustrating enterprise, and moreover one which cannot be avoided after all; as Nicholas Cook puts it in the foreword to his succinct introduction to music: "We use words to say what music cannot say, to say what we *mean* by music, what music means to us. And in the end, it is largely words that determine what music *does* mean to us" (Cook 2000, n.p.). In fact, Cook's approach is symptomatic of recent developments in music studies, which, following the lead of the 'cultural turn' in literary studies with a slight delay, have increasingly ventured to (re)locate the production of musical meaning in specific communicative situations and cultural contexts. While until far into the second half of the 20th century the institutionalised way of thinking about and particularly of teaching music in Western schools and universities was dominated by a focus on the decoding of an inherent structural rhetoric of compositions usually taken from the established canon of classical music, the last 20 years or so have brought to the fore alternative interpretive models triggered by approaches in ethnomusicology and studies of popular music culture (see for example, Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, Radano and Bohlman 2000, Bohlman 2002, Frith 2004).

This development can also be observed in the history of studies more specifically interested in relationships between narrative fiction and musical styles. One school of critical approaches largely works within the premises of traditional or structuralist notions of music, literature and narrative, and is almost exclusively interested in intermedial relations between literature and works of classical music. The most important names, here, are Steven Paul Scher (1984) and Werner Wolf, who in his seminal *The Musicalisation of Fiction* has proposed the most encompassing attempt so far to negotiate the possibilities of 'imitating' musical sounds, formal structures and 'imaginary' musical content in fiction (Wolf 1999, see also Wolf 2002).[4] Another school of critical approaches takes a rather pragmatic, cultural studies approach to narrative and music. It is no longer exclusively interested in art music (Scher 2002), but for instance investigates the roles of blues and jazz (cf. Jones 1991, Simawe 2001), or that of popular genres such as rock, pop and punk in fiction (cf. Elicker 1997). The most recent and encompassing study, here, is Claus-Ulrich Viol's *Jukebooks: Contemporary British Fiction, Popular Music, and Cultural Value* (2006), which is poignantly critical of the limited scope of traditional and structuralist approaches and insists on a thorough cultural perspective.

With the compilation and critical scope of the present special issue, we wish to balance and renegotiate the insights of both schools, rather than opting for one or the other. Our contributors do take an interest in the possibilities of imitating musical forms and practices in fiction – Lars Ole Sauerberg, for instance, touches upon a narrative arpeggio-technique that imitates musical polyphony; Christoph Reinfandt deals with the narrative arrangement of a twelvebar blues pattern; Lars Eckstein perceives a narrative tendency to match the improvisational spontaneity of jazz; Susanne Rupp talks about a narrative 'in your face'-aesthetic comparable to that of punk – but the structural and aesthetic 'dramatisations' of music in fiction are not seen as ends in themselves, but as discursive markers of larger cultural issues at stake. What we are especially interested in in this volume is how narrative fiction is capable of taking up the performative conventions and ideological frameworks of certain musical styles, and how it may in turn write back to and contribute to larger debates about their cultural validity.

At the beginning of the new millennium we look back on a century in which the great variety of available media and the concomitant effects of globalisation have led to an impressive proliferation of musical styles. Against this background, the differences between Western art music and world music, folk, blues and jazz, rock, punk and pop, to name but a few, cannot be adequately described by concentrating exclusively on their respective aesthetic and formal principles. In fact, these principles can only be understood in their various cultural contexts which determine conventions of performance, typical relationships between performers and audiences, the preference or rejection of specific audiences within larger social, ethnical or gender formations, and, last but by no means least, ideological frameworks between hedonism and protest, artistic aspiration and commercial viability. Musical styles embody cultural value and propagate world-views and styles of living.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' (1984) and Howard S. Becker's notion of 'art worlds' (1982) that are constituted and received through institutional and discursive practises, Simon Frith distinguishes three core sources of music evaluation that have evolved from the 19th century. The first draws on the world of 'art' music, which, for Frith,

---

2 For Schopenhauer, "music [...] never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena, the will itself. It does not therefore express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*" (Schopenhauer 1883, 338).

3 "[M]usic is similar to language in that it is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound. [...] But what is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs" (Adorno 2002, 85).

4 Earlier examples of approaches in this tradition are Edgecombe 1993, and Gier and Gruber 1995.

> is organized around a particular notion of musical scholarship, a particular concept of musical talent, and a particular sort of musical event, in which music's essential value is its provision of a transcendental experience that is, on the one hand, ineffable and uplifting but, on the other, only available to those with the right sort of knowledge, the right sorts of interpretative skills. (Frith 1998, 39)

The second source is what Frith terms the "folk music world," which instead places an emphasis on 'purity' rather than knowledge, unchanging musical 'truths,' informal club and festival performances, and an insistence on 'authenticity,' which is, of course, to be seen as a discursive construct rather than an ontological given; as Neill MacKinnon points out with regard to *The British Folk Scene*, folk relies on an "elaborate construction of informality" (MacKinnon 1993, 81). Frith's third core source of music discourse, finally, is that of 'commercial' music, or in other words, music that has more recently been subsumed under the label of 'pop.' This type of music is essentially organised around notions of entertainment and commerce, and is produced for mass market audiences by the major label music industry. In its most extreme manifestation, pop fully sacrifices artistic innovation and 'authentic' integrity in favour of 'feel good' fun and commercial success.

Most musical styles range and fluctuate between these extreme poles of 'art,' 'folk,' and 'pop,' and the cultural capital they embody. Some examples will have to suffice to illustrate this: The traditions of the blues, one could argue, largely work within the performing ethics of the folk world, while drawing more heavily on a call-and-response dynamic between performers and audiences derived from West African models. One should be careful to distinguish, however, between the 'Southern' or 'country' blues, which comes very close to a folk ideal, and the 'classic' blues, which has grown from urban black theatres and minstrel shows and clearly take on aspects of both the worlds of art music and commercial pop. The social history of jazz still more poignantly reveals how the more folk-oriented (and 'black') early jazz was rapidly appropriated by the commercial forces of the emerging swing era (which was dominated by white band leaders). The bebop movement of the 1940s and 1950s, then, can be seen as a conscious countermovement which deliberately drew on the conventions of art music by cultivating an aura of connoisseurship and musical genius to regain a sense of artistic agency (cf. Jost 2003). Rock music styles, on the other hand, can be seen as attempts to unite a commercial pop-appeal with notions of non-alienated, 'authentic' performances and a sense of artistic integrity; Keir Keightley (2001), for instance, has proposed a distinction between a more folk-oriented "romantic" and a more art-oriented "modernist" type of performing authenticity in rock. Punk, in turn, has been associated with an attack on the bourgeois tendencies of both 'arty' progressive rock and the romantic singer-songwriter traditions (though, ironically, the man behind the Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren, was well aware of the commercial dynamics of the pop world, and employed them very skilfully).

The contributions in this special issue on *The Cultural Validity of Music in Contemporary Fiction* investigate how recent novels (all published between 1998 and 2003) take up the formal *and* performative properties as well as the cultural capital associated with particular musical styles in their fictional design in order to position

themselves in the larger debates negotiating the cultural validity of the styles they engage with. Lars-Ole Sauerberg takes on the role of classical music in Richard Powers's best-selling epic saga *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), which deals with three generations of a musically gifted family of mixed Jewish and African American descent in the United States. Sauerberg illustrates how Powers's novel oscillates between notions of cultural ownership in the world of classical music on the one hand, and the transcendence of social and historical matters by means of music on the other. Despite the fact that Powers highlights the entanglement of classical music in institutionalised discourses which are affected by elitist, and, at the end of the day, racist practices, *The Time of Our Singing* does not give up on the transhistorical and transcultural promise of bliss and redemption in sound.

Kylie Crane's contribution turns from the discussion of music as caught up between social appropriation and universal transcendence to another fundamental binarism, namely the conception of music as torn between notions of nature and 'authenticity' on the one hand and culture and 'artificiality' on the other. Taking an ecocritical approach and touching on the domains of folk and world music, she adresses this issue through Tim Winton's novel *Dirt Music* (2001). *Dirt Music* revolves around the Western Australian folk-guitarist Lu Fox, who loses his family (who also formed his band) in a car accident. Lu consequently retreats from society to live outside of 'culture' on an island off the rough north-western coast, attempting to establish a form of sound-making (music) that is in tune with the place and nature (dirt) surrounding him – but the novel also suggests that music, as an inherently intersubjective form of art, eventually relies on culture and the social world.

Christoph Reinfandt's contribution returns from the Pacific to the Atlantic world and engages with Patrick Neate's 2001 novel *Twelve Bar Blues*, a book which is deeply steeped in the mythologies surrounding the emergence of early jazz in New Orleans. The novel even utilizes the blues form as a blueprint for its narrative structure. Astonishingly, Neate, a white English author, manages to create a sense of authenticity *and* to question the cultural constructedness of this authenticity at the same time. He does so by paying close attention to the pragmatic and historical contexts in which music and narrative exist as cultural practices which should ideally combine closure with openness, overview with involvement, and an awareness of their own contingency with cultural authority – just like the novel itself, which convincingly stages the impact of what the sociologist Paul Gilroy has called the 'Black Atlantic' on late-20th-century affairs.

Lars Eckstein continues the discussion of jazz, but takes it into the second half of the 20th century to post-bebop jazz styles. He sets out by tracing recent debates between a neoconservative and a 'liberal' camp of critics about what types of music and which musicians are indeed to be included under the label jazz, and then goes on to illustrate how the Black Scottish writer Jackie Kay's first novel *Trumpet* (1998) works within and propagates a conception of jazz that is fully in line with the 'liberal' view of jazz as an improvisational, performative form of art that defies any boundaries of gender or race. This is illustrated in the 'jazzsthetic' discourse of the narrative itself, but particularly on the story level, which engages with issues of identity formation

and philosophies of being revolving around the fate of jazz-trumpeter Joss Moody, who lives and performs as a man, but is biologically female.

Stefan Glomb then opens up the debate in this volume to a larger discussion of the role and viability of popular music culture in contemporary societies. He takes on Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), a novel whose plot moves from India via England to the US, tracing the spectacular rise and fall of the fictional rock band VTO. His contribution foregrounds the *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* as a modern version of the Orpheus myth, and illustrates how it links the cultural validity of ancient myth to rock 'n' roll music's quality of constant motion and the questioning of received truths and boundaries of the real. Rushdie's novel thus provides a fundamental corrective to dominant views of rock culture as a "tragic history of decline [, a]ggression and fragmentation" (Scruton, quoted in Frith 1998, 252) by instead emphasising rock 'n' roll's protean fluidity and dynamics.

Susanne Rupp finally closes this volume with a reading of John King's novel *Human Punk* (2001). She sets out by reviewing cultural histories of punk and the British punk scene written retrospectively in the 1990s, focussing particularly on Jon Savage's influential *England's Dreaming*. Savage essentially conceptualises punk as art, and as the domain of a small cultural elite which defied mass market rock 'n' roll. For Savage, the aesthetics of punk is in fact in danger of being retrospectively appropriated by theories which claim punk as a popular, working class practice. This view is then countered by the narrative practice of John King's novel, which presents punk as exactly that: an everyday, ordinary, working-class practice which is deeply suspicious of 'arty' behaviour. *Human Punk* thus provides a particularly poignant example of how narrative fiction may align itself with musical practices, both thematically and aesthetically, to stake its own claim on the cultural validity of a particular musical style.

The readings of Powers, Winton, Neate, Kay, Rushdie and King against the background of classical, folk, blues, jazz, rock and punk music cultures demonstrate that contemporary fiction is hardly afraid of a good and thorough "dance about architecture." Taken together, the contributions to this volume reveal that music plays a crucial role in much of today's most exciting writing – be it as a formal challenge, as a *sujet* of philosophical debate, or as a resource of distinct cultural practices. But then again, it would be surprising if this were otherwise. How could today's novelists not take on music considering the role that it plays in the everyday lives of many of us – as a means of nuanced identification and distinction, as a source of private and public aesthetic pleasure and expression, but also as one of the few remaining openings for transcendental experience in a (post-?)secular world? It makes good sense, therefore, to close this introduction with a narrative courting of music which brings together a lot of what music and writing about music may mean. In Ian McEwan's latest novel *Saturday* (2005), the die-hard materialist neurosurgeon Henry Perowne witnesses a rehearsal of his son's blues band:

> No longer tired, Henry comes away from the wall where he's been leaning, and walks into the middle of the dark auditorium, towards the great engine of sound. He lets it engulf him. There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself. Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peacable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever – mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state. But only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalisingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes. [...] Naturally, no one can ever agree when it's happening. [...] He doesn't want the song to end. (171-2)

And with this glimpse of musical transcendence in a specific narrative and cultural context, we will let this introduction fade away...

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