

Does Music Theory Need Musicology?

By Kofi Agawu

Understood as a search for “the abstract principles embodied in music and the sounds of which it consists,”¹ music theory casts a wide net: it calls for a comparative sample and insists on a systematic methodology. As “the scholarly study of music, wherever it is found historically or geographically,” musicology casts an even wider net.² In practice, however, it has not been possible to transcend historical and geographical boundaries. (How often have you read an article on contemporary rock in *JAMS* or on Asian music in *19th-Century Music*?) Obviously, any attempt to explore the juncture between music theory and music history—my particular brief from the editors of *Current Musicology*—will not get very far on definitions alone. Are not disciplinary boundaries convenient tags sanctioned by a certain distribution of economic, political, and intellectual power? Better, then, to focus on what some theorists and some historians do than to dwell abstractly on the purviews of music theory and music history.³

There are two professional organizations in this country that mirror the theory/history dichotomy: the Society for Music Theory (SMT) and the American Musicological Society (AMS). Though it is no secret that some theorists “do history” while some historians “do theory,” the task will be greatly simplified if, instead of dealing with such interesting hybrids, a normative representation of each group is assumed: SMT is to theory as AMS is to history/musicology.

Let us immediately take note of some differences in professional situations and habits. In numbers alone, historians hold stronger claims to hegemony—for every five historians there is only one theorist. Many were the voices that lamented the divorce between the newly formed SMT and its parent organization, the AMS, in 1978. Yet a decade and a half later even the most ardent critic of the break-up would have to concede that the formation of the SMT and the subsequent publication of its journal, *Music Theory Spectrum*, have brought considerable gains in consolidating the practice of Anglo-American music theory and analysis.⁴ The search for music’s organizing principles remains the primary concern of theorists, but only an uninformed critic would claim that the profile of contemporary theory is by any standards narrow. There is no shortage of work of a formal or mathematical nature; there are translations of, and commentaries upon, earlier treatises; and there are empirical investigations of the nature of music perception, analyses informed by linguistic or literary-theoretical principles, fresh approaches to pedagogy, and several experimental mergers of methods and techniques.

Historians, by contrast, have had trouble isolating a collective purpose. Because the subject of music history remains unspecified, we are encouraged to think pluralistically: style, genre, social history, criticism, biography, among many others, are all legitimate subjects. One result of this is a practical shift from history in the grand sense to various local histories. Although the community of theorists, too, is in some ways fragmented, the overriding focus on "the music itself"—overlooking ontological problems that, however interesting in themselves, rarely undermine our commonsensical intuition that we are dealing with specifiable objects—ensures a communality of vision that historians have yet to achieve.

Some historians will remind us that they, too, deal with "the music itself." They include makers of editions and practitioners of criticism, with the latter's stock-in-trade characterized by an avoidance of systematic or formal theory. It goes without saying, however, that critics who shun "hard" theory, or who are not particularly self-conscious about using theory, often end up either trafficking in an older theory or simply reinventing the wheel. It is disheartening to encounter critical writings that refuse to incorporate the results of the purely technical advance of music-analytical method. One could, of course, dispute the significance of what I am calling "technical advance," but it would be more productive if such disputation took concrete and comparative forms instead of consigning demonstration to the untouchable category of "formalism." Few academic disciplines can get away with such facile rejections of technical achievement.

Still, some historians remain unimpressed by the theorists' appeal to rigor and to systematization, processes that can easily grow in narrowness and abstraction, quickly leaving the realm of ordinary musical experience. For them context (historical, social, political, economic, and above all cultural) is so basic that its suppression in theoretical work undermines the theoretical project right from the start. In the very year in which the SMT was formed, a *JAMS* editorial felt the need to justify the intention to exclude certain kinds of work from its pages. The offending category included "articles which analyze individual pieces of music merely as abstract patterns of notes or sounds, without reference to their cultural context."⁵ No one complained about this policy, so I assume that readers of *JAMS* considered this a perfectly reasonable exclusionary tactic. But what is this "cultural context" that historians insist on seeing in any analysis of a musical work?

Context is simply more text, and in any research venture, one has to draw the line somewhere. Moreover, the decision as to when and where to draw the line can be a purely pragmatic one, determined perhaps by the next deadline. In any case, no theoretical or analytical work stands outside a context. If the musicologists' context is understood broadly as compris-

ing levels of composition and reception, as well as a neutral level, then the usual argument for attending to context needs to justify its evident privileging of one of the three levels. Moreover, it is no use insisting on context if you cannot specify its units and a set of procedures for discovering relationships embedded in context-to-music or music-to-context approaches. Could it be that the appeal to an ill-defined context is a strategy for avoiding the more technical aspects of analysis? Is it not conceivable to write meaningfully about the *Rite of Spring* without mentioning the riot that attended the first performance, about the *Eroica* without referring to Napoleon, or about the Violin Sonata in G major, K. 301 without mentioning the death of Mozart's mother earlier in the year in which it was composed (1778)? The challenge for advocates of context is to show how such writing might be improved by greater attention to context. But perhaps it is too much to ask historians for something as mundane and "formalistic" as a technical demonstration.

The context of a musical work subtends a potentially infinite number of constituent events. To list events a, b, c . . . n as being coeval with the creation of a given musical work is to state the obvious. More pertinent is to demonstrate how events a, b, c . . . n, either singly or in various combinations, determine the nature of the musical work. How, in short, can we create a syntax of networks?⁶ It seems unlikely that context-mongers will be able to provide us with an answer to this question if, as often happens, the invocation of context engenders a retreat from hard analysis. There is more than a dash of irony in the possibility that as theorists move beyond structuralism, they and not the historians will take on the challenge of theorizing context explicitly.

By now the continued use of "theorists" and "historians" (or "musicologists") will seem deeply problematic, perhaps even irritating, to some readers. Individual cases that contradict the normative profiles attributed to each group can be easily cited. But to allow this resistance to generalization to blind us to the profiles that have emerged as scholars have exercised power amounts to either turning a blind eye to, or being idealistic about, the politics of the academy. For better or worse, *MTS* and *JAMS* powerfully symbolize the contemporary practices of music theory and musicology respectively. In order to focus on some further differences between the approaches of the two groups, I will comment briefly on three striking moments in recent discourse about music.

(1) A few years ago, an interesting little drama unfolded in the world of Stravinsky studies. With scores and tables in hand, and working mostly independently, Pieter van den Toorn, a theorist, having sensed the importance of octatonic writing in Stravinsky (an earlier study by Arthur Berger provided important pointers⁷), embarked on a comprehensive search for

octatonic patterning in Stravinsky's oeuvre. The result was a monumental taxonomy of Stravinsky's octatonic vocabulary, *The Music of Stravinsky*, published in 1983, and running to over five hundred pages.⁸ Any suspicion that this is simply mindless note-counting is quickly laid to rest in two ways. The first is the author's concern to chart differences of strategy in Stravinsky's manipulation of pure and not-so-pure octatonic collections. The second is a subtle discussion of these routines in often vivid and complex prose, a discussion in which questions of influence, intention, perception, and intertextual resonance are raised, provisionally answered, set aside, retrieved, answered again and again—always from a different perspective. It is a book so rich in lessons about meaning and method that it cannot be summarily consigned to a formalist heap and thus dispensed with by the historian.

In this case, however, a historian actually found much to admire in van den Toorn's work. Richard Taruskin set out to provide a historical confirmation of Stravinsky's octatonic routines by searching for earlier (nineteenth-century) uses of the scale or constructs referable to the scale.⁹ From the works of Stravinsky's teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, back through the music of Liszt, Glinka and even Schubert, Taruskin was able to provide the missing historical link and thus to corroborate as well as complement van den Toorn's findings. Indeed, the triumphant way in which Taruskin announced the corroborative status of his findings suggests an extraordinary meeting of theoretical and historical minds.

But the significance of this corroboration remains dubious. Van den Toorn's work provided comprehensive internal evidence of a particular lexical usage in Stravinsky. What if the search for precedents had yielded nothing significant? Would we then have been skeptical of van den Toorn's findings? How would we justify our doubting when confronted with the massive evidence from Stravinsky's scores? Is it merely "heartening" (to use Taruskin's word) that work in theory is "confirmed" by work in history? Since when did theory need such "confirmation?" The point, I should stress, is not that the historical precedents unearthed by Taruskin are in any way uninteresting in and of themselves. What is less certain is the significance of those precedents as corroborative evidence for patterns observed in Stravinsky's scores.

(2) The year 1991 marked the bicentenary of Mozart's death. You could not escape the excessively programmatic emphasis on his life and music even if you wanted to. Yet at the countless symposia and festivals that brought together experts on Mozart from around the globe, one listened in vain for as much as a passing reference to an article published in 1971 in *Perspectives of New Music* by a composer and theorist, John E. Rogers. Of course, music historians do not normally turn to *Perspectives* for insights

into Mozart's music. Even if they did, they would most likely skip over an article entitled "Pitch Class Sets in Fourteen Measures of Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony," with its promise of a formidable technical language.¹⁰

What exactly did Rogers set out to do, and why did Mozart scholars overlook his contribution during 1991? Rogers's article offers an analysis of fourteen bars of intricate counterpoint from the finale of the "Jupiter" Symphony. According to him, Mozart's handling of the set-class formed by the first four notes of the movement, C-D-F-E (set class 4-11 in Allen Forte's nomenclature¹¹), is "so thorough-going that it points ahead to the compositional procedures of many composers of the 1960s."¹² After demonstrating the manifold occurrences in unsuspected guises of this *cantus firmus*, Rogers responds creatively by offering a recomposition of Mozart's music. Included at the end of the article are the concluding bars of his own Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano. This is no passive or detached reception of Mozart; it is an aggressively interested one.

Unlike some theorists, musicologists do not normally respond to the music of the past by recomposing it within the confines of a new "linguistic" context. So it comes as no surprise that they were able to ignore Rogers's twenty-year old study during the very year in which the world was ostensibly celebrating the continuing relevance of Mozart's music. When I mentioned not just the lack of any reference to Rogers's study but a more general paucity of references to "hard" theoretical and analytical studies in our bibliographies for the Mozartjahr at a London conference, one respondent suggested that my Rogers example was a "spoof" and imagined that it was "possibly intended to demonstrate the absurdity of pitch class set analysis." Since Rogers's article can be looked up in any standard library, I will forgo comment on its possible status as a "spoof." But the implicit charge—often made by historians—that Rogers's study is somehow anachronistic, needs to be refuted. Is it anachronistic in a way that an attempt to understand the historical past with today's conceptual tools is not? This seems unlikely. Nor will it do to insist—another *topos* of musicological criticism—that, by virtue of chronological proximity, composition treatises from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries constitute a far better source of information about Mozart's counterpoint than Rogers's set-theoretic or motivic method. There may well be a missing historical link from Rogers's argument—perhaps he needed van den Toorn's Taruskin—but that in itself should not sanction a refusal to grant that, in certain specific areas of theory, there has been a technical advance, both conceptually and representationally, over the eighteenth century. Rogers's economical description of the life of a single four-note set may not be the most persuasive instance of this advance, but even a cursory comparison of Schenker to Kirnberger (or rather to aspects of

Kirnberger), or a comparison of Rosen, Ratner, Dahlhaus or Rothstein to Koch and his contemporaries should leave one uneasy about granting a privilege to old thought.

(3) It is in the practical activity of interpreting musical works that the greatest potential resides for a fruitful exchange of ideas between theorists and musicologists. In recent years, some of the most innovative work undertaken by musicologists involves close readings of particular works or portions thereof. Whenever musicologists analyze music, we might expect that their perspectives will be broader than those of theorists, insofar as historical, biographical, or cultural information is readily included. In principle, the broadening of the boundaries of analysis is a turn to be welcomed, but only if it does not lead to an impoverishment of older ways of reading or hearing. It is far too soon to be able to predict the future of this new impulse in musicology, but we can at least take note of the sort of problem that it breeds.

In her provocative study of the first movement of Mahler's Second Symphony, Carolyn Abbate lays great store by the otherworldly nature of the so called *Gesang* theme or second subject beginning in bar 48 (example 1).¹³ Crucial to her interpretation is the technical means of discontinuity. Abbate considers this moment an "interruption"; it is "a radically *different* musical gesture" (her emphasis). From earlier commentaries by Specht, Bekker, Reilly, Floros, and Vill, a characterization of this moment as "a deep sonic break" is distilled. Abbate identifies "sites of hyperbolic musical disjunction" and notes that "cracks fissure the music at the entry of the 'Gesang'."

Few listeners are likely to disagree that the onset of the *Gesang* theme is an arresting moment. But how does difference become disjunction in Mahler? It is perhaps not insignificant that Abbate, in reminding the reader of this remarkable moment, quotes only the actual onset of the *Gesang* theme, not the music that immediately precedes it. Example 2 restores this context, from which it becomes immediately apparent that the triplet figure that accompanies the *Gesang* theme is heard throughout the preceding five bars in unmistakably preparatory mode.¹⁴ For those who follow this figure's course, and for others who understand the bass note C-flat/B-natural as a neighbor to the principal C, the onset of the *Gesang* theme would support metaphors opposed to Abbate's breaks, disjunctions, and discontinuities.

The point here is not to chide Abbate for failing to establish the technical limits of disjunction; it is rather to urge its sharper definition as a musical device, perhaps within the modest confines of Mahler's musical language. Abbate's study well exemplifies the self-awareness that high-level critical writing demands, but it is curious that certain music-technical op-

Example 1. Abbate's quotation of "The first 'Gesang' interruption" (bars 48–51) from Mahler's Second Symphony, first movement

Flute

Hrn.

pp lang gezogen

pp

Cello, Bass

Clar. ("Echotone")

Detailed description: This musical score consists of four systems. The first system contains the Flute, Horn, and Cello/Bass parts. The Flute part has a long, sustained note with a slur. The Horn part has a series of chords. The Cello/Bass part has a triplet of eighth notes. The second system contains the Clarinet ("Echotone") and Cello/Bass parts. The Clarinet part has a long, sustained note with a slur. The Cello/Bass part has a triplet of eighth notes.

Example 2. The music preceding Abbate's quotation

43 44 45 46

ff

ff \rightarrow *p*

47 48 49

pp

ppp

Detailed description: This musical score consists of two systems. The first system contains measures 43-46. The piano part has a triplet of eighth notes. The second system contains measures 47-49. The piano part has a triplet of eighth notes. The horn part has a long, sustained note with a slur.

positions are not subjected to her usual scrutiny. At the onset of the *Gesang* theme some may choose to hear not a “sonic break” but a tension between motivic and voice-leading conjunction on the one hand and textual, registral, and affective disjunction on the other.

A not dissimilar interpretive moment occurs in Susan McClary’s challenging reading of the middle movement of Mozart’s Piano Concerto in G major, K. 453.¹⁵ McClary divides up the opening ritornello into two segments, bars 1–5 (the “motto theme”) and bars 6–29 (example 3). In order to discern an individual/society dialectic at work in the movement and to suggest ways in which Mozart problematizes this opposition, McClary needs to claim early on in the analysis that there is a disjunction between the motto theme and what immediately follows it. According to her, “the two [passages] seem to have little to do with one another. . . . Indeed, the most important event in the ritornello—the one most in need of explanation—will turn out to be the fact of juxtaposition of the two units.” Later, bar 6 is described as “musical material entirely unrelated affectively or thematically to the opening.”

Here, too, we might insist on a contextual definition of unrelatedness in Mozart’s music, or at least in this movement. For a listener who has internalized the harmonic expectations generated by a half-cadence in eighteenth-century music, the onset of bar 6, despite—or rather because of—the intervening silence, fulfills the promise of resolution; it is a re-beginning as well as the resolution of an unresolved dominant. In these terms it is more conjunct than disjunct. Similarly, a listener interested in the grand melody of the movement will most likely follow the line mapped out by $\hat{5}$, a line that is prominently (but only partially) transferred up an octave to the oboe’s G in bars 6ff. These listeners will disagree with McClary’s reading of the two passages as disjunct because they are unable to agree with her note-to-note technical characterization.

I should point out, again, that the issue here is not so much one of disagreeing with McClary’s view that “dilemmas posed by the enigmatic motto prove to be too much—and rather than addressing these issues—the piece turns into something completely different,” but of insisting on a more secure delineation of a central device. Had she, perhaps in a parenthesis, offered the reader a formulation such as “Events A and B are considered disjunct whenever. . . ,” there might have been stronger grounds for evaluating her interpretation of Mozart’s music.

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I have chosen these particular moments in recent writing about music to illustrate what I perceive to be fundamental differences between the concerns of theorists and musicologists. In letting the SMT and AMS repre-

Example 3. McClary's quotation of two contiguous passages (bars 1–5 and 6–10) from Mozart's Piano Concerto in G, K. 453, second movement

Andante

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system, covering bars 1-5, features four staves: Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello e Contrabasso. The second system, covering bars 6-10, features seven staves: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Bassoon (Fg.), Cor (C), Violins (VI), Viola, and Violoncello e Contrabasso (Vlc. e Cb.). The tempo is marked *Andante* and the dynamics are *p* (piano). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and articulation marks.

sent the two groups, I have, of course, misrepresented the work of some scholars. But it is impossible to intervene in this long-standing debate without doing violence to the far more refined contributions of particular scholars. The apparent narrowness of the theoretical project, the preoccu-

pation with wholes (including fragments conceptualized as provisional wholes), the lack of restraint in making generalizations, and the insistence that the musical text, however defined, together with an explicit methodology for its understanding, form the basis of theorizing: these present something of a contrast to the more heterogenous and diffuse historical project. Historians are in general more receptive to fragments, more cautious about certain kinds of grand characterization, and frequently appeal to orders of authority other than the notes and an attendant methodology.

It is nice to imagine a time in the future when theorists and historians will shed their disciplinary allegiances and become one. There is, however, absolutely no evidence that such a merger will enhance the work of the new group. Has not the most influential historical work always needed theory, whereas the best theoretical work rarely depended on the insights of conventional history? On present showing, we might say that theory is theory and history is history, and that although they may meet or clash sometimes, they remain separate disciplines. To this writer at least, that ain't such a bad thing.

NOTES

¹ *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Theory."

² *The New Harvard Dictionary*, s.v. "Musicology."

³ For reasons that will become clearer later, the terms "music history" and "musicology" are used interchangeably throughout this essay.

⁴ In rating the contribution of *Music Theory Spectrum* to the current practice of theory, I do not mean to underplay the equally significant contributions of the older *Journal of Music Theory*, the newer *Music Analysis*, and several theory journals too numerous to list here. Similarly, the focus on *JAMS* is merely symbolic; there are, of course, numerous other publications that disseminate important musicological work.

⁵ Nicholas Temperley, "Editorial," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 31 (1978): 1.

⁶ Here I echo remarks about context made in the course of a critique of writing about African music. See my "Representing African Music," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 245-66.

⁷ Arthur Berger, "Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky," *Perspectives of New Music* 2 (1963): 11-42.

⁸ Pieter van den Toorn, *The Music of Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁹ Richard Taruskin, "Chernomor to Kaschei: Harmonic Sorcery; or Stravinsky's 'Angle'," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38 (1985): 72-142.

¹⁰ John E. Rogers, "Pitch Class Sets in Fourteen Measures of Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony," *Perspectives of New Music* 9-10 (1971): 209-31.

¹¹ Allen Forte, *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

¹² Rogers, "Pitch Class Sets," 210.

¹³ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 119-55.

¹⁴ Robert P. Morgan makes this point in his review of *Unsung Voices* in the *Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992): 580.

¹⁵ Susan McClary, "A Musical Dialectic from the Enlightenment: Mozart's Piano Concerto in G Major, K. 453, Movement 2," *Cultural Critique* 4 (1986): 129-69.