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TROPES AND WINDOWS:

An Outline of Musical Hermeneutics

The aim of this book is to give practical confirmation to four closely related claims:

1. that works of music have discursive meanings;
2. that these meanings are definite enough to support critical interpretations comparable in depth, exactness, and density of connection to interpretations of literary texts and cultural practices;
3. that these meanings are not "extramusical," but on the contrary are inextricably bound up with the formal processes and stylistic articulations of musical works;
4. that these meanings are produced as a part of the general circulation of regulated practices and valuations—part, in other words, of the continuous production and reproduction of culture.

I am well aware that these claims exceed (and then some) the customary ambitions of what has come to be called musical hermeneutics.[1] Problematical though my claims may be, they are by no

1. Critical surveys of the recent literature, as well as important statements of position, appear in Monroe C. Beardsley, "Understanding Music," in *On Criticizing*

means merely polemical. Meaning is an irrepressibly volatile and abundant thing; you really can't have just some of it. My purpose here is to appropriate this strength of meaning on behalf of music—and most especially on behalf of textless instrumental music. For if my claims are tenable where music is furthest from language, they will a fortiori be tenable where music and language meet.

One obvious qualification needs to be entered at this point. For present purposes, *music* refers to European art music composed between 1798 and 1888. This restriction is not meant to be exclusionary, however. The following chapters on nineteenth-century topics are to be understood as case studies. The techniques of interpretation that I apply here to nineteenth-century art music are meant to be equally applicable—in hands more competent than mine—to the music of other periods and to music of other sorts.

As to the present chapter, its concerns are with the need to give my claims a *practical* confirmation. All of the claims stand or fall on the possibility of making certain kinds of interpretation. And though interpretive practices benefit enormously from hermeneutic theorizing, a hermeneutic theory is only as good as the interpretations that it underwrites. Freud, whose name will come up more than once in this book, repeatedly insisted that psychoanalysis was unconvincing as a body of theory. Only by *doing* analysis, by engaging in the work of interpretation whether as analyst or analysand, could one be persuaded that Freudian claims are credible—or, as Freud forgot to add, of the reverse. The same is true of musical hermeneutics, which, like psychoanalysis, seeks meaning in places where meaning is often said not to be found. I will, to be sure, theorize a little in what follows, both about music and about interpretation. The value of the theory, though, must rest with the interpretive practices that it empowers.

The essential hermeneutic problem about music is usually put by saying that music is all syntax and no semantics, or that music lacks denotative or referential power, or, to revert to Hanslick's much-quoted aphorism, that "sounding forms in motion are the one and

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Music, ed. Kingsley Price (Baltimore, 1981), 55–73; and Anthony Newcomb, "Sound and Feeling," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1984): 614–43. See also the discussion of "expressive potential" in Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), 158–75.

only content of music."[2] This view—the formalist view that has since Hanslick and even since Kant set the terms for serious thinking about music—rests on an implicit comparison of music with verbal utterance or written discourse. Not surprisingly, music emerges from this contest with language in thoroughly poor shape, conceptually indefinite and semantically impoverished. As Kant puts it,

> Although [Music] indeed speaks by means of pure sensations without concepts, and so does not, like poetry, leave something over for reflection [*etwas zum Nachdenken übrig bleiben lässt*], yet it moves the mind more variously and, though fleetingly, with more fervor; but it is certainly more enjoyment [*Genuß*] than culture (the neighboring thought-play excited by its means [*das Gedankenspiel, welches nebenbei dadurch erregt wird*] is merely the effect of a sort of mechanical [*mechanisch*] association).[3]

Kant's phrase "leave something over for reflection," however, quietly points up the weakness in the formalist attitude. Where does this incitement to reflection come from when language is in question? Where, for example, does it come from in Kant's own statement? Most obviously, it comes from Kant's truth claims: the assertions that music communicates by means of pure sensations, that poetry communicates by means of concepts, that culture entails a hierarchy of concepts over sensations, and so on. Each of these claims can be elaborated or contested: hence they leave something over for reflection. Yet there is another way to reflect on this text, a hermeneutic way that bypasses truth claims to consider the dynamic elements in the act of writing itself, to treat the text precisely as a *Gedankenspiel*, though not at all a mechanical one.

Kant's labyrinthine series of qualifiers (*ob*, *zwar*, *doch*, *obgleich bloß*, *doch*, *aber freilich*, *bloß*) suggests a struggle to control some very equivocal materials. The suggestion is borne out by the submerged and perhaps inadvertent metaphor of neighboring thought-play that is called on to crown the case against music. Kant sets out to ratify the inferiority of music to poetry as a simple consequence of the supposed inferiority of sensation to reflection. Yet he cannot stabilize

2. Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (Leipzig, 1854), 32.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilschaft*, sec. 53; from *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. G. Hartenstein (Leipzig, 1867), 5:339.

his terms. In particular, he cannot both take music as his instance of pure sensation and still maintain the difference between sensation and reflection. For music, too, provokes the mind to reflect; it excites a neighboring thought-play. As Kant's terms make explicit, the primary features of this form of reflection are intimacy (*nebenbei*) and unruliness (*[ein]-spiel . . . erregt*). The *Gedankenspiel* transfers what is palpable and impulsive in musical sensation to the detached realm of reason, culture, meaning; it intrudes bodily pleasure into the space reserved for thought. Kant later ascribes an explicit bodiliness to the "free play" (*das freie Spiel*) of both tones (*Tonspiel*) and thoughts (*Gedankenspiel*). In music, he adds, "this play goes from bodily sensations to aesthetic ideas . . . and from these back again, but with united force, to the body."[4]

But music and its *Gedankenspiel* inhibit reflection proper, the "true" reflection that for Kant is the bearer of culture. The blockage seems to derive from too much immediacy; the subject of reflection, the Kantian subject of culture, requires a space of detachment in which to operate. In order to safeguard this space, Kant peremptorily severs pleasure from meaning, pronouncing ex cathedra that the *Gedankenspiel* is only the effect of "a sort of mechanical association." This statement shifts the metaphorical ground from the coalescence of mind and body to impersonal mechanism. Kant thus demotes the sensitive body to mere extension in space and pleasurable impulse to simple physical movement. With the same stratagem, he also detaches the quasi-autonomous subject of reflection from the anarchic, pleasure-seeking, decentered subjectivity of *Gedankenspiel.*

In preferring poetry to music, therefore, Kant is striving, indeed rather desperately striving, to shield a group of higher values—culture, reflection, subjective autonomy—from encroachments and appropriations by a group of lower values—enjoyment, sensation, subjective contingency. Music is the loose cannon in this process. Kant treats it as a principle of pleasurable intrusion, so much so that he later compares it to the unwelcome scent of a perfume. In denying meaning to music, Kant not only theorizes but also legislates; he responds less to an absence of thought than to the presence of danger.

4. Ibid., 342–43.

Where does our reflection on Kant's text leave us, as would-be interpreters, with regard to music? As far as truth claims go, it leaves us nowhere at all. A certain formalism to the contrary, music does have referential power, even if we are not prepared to be very precise about it. To affirm, for example, that nineteenth-century overtures named for Coriolanus, Manfred, and Hamlet fail to represent those characters seems foolish if not perverse. Yet truth claims are quite another matter. Music—and this is precisely the truth claim of Kant's text—cannot make them. Music may seduce us, but it never makes propositions. And here we must acknowledge the kernel of truth in the formalist position. If meaning begins with (forms around, clings to) a truth claim (implicit or explicit, real or fictive), then music has no meaning in the ordinary sense. One may wish to reinterpret this admission in order to endow music with a higher than ordinary "meaning"; E. T. A. Hoffmann does just that when he claims that instrumental music conveys the sense of the infinite and is therefore the quintessentially Romantic art. Even Hanslick, and later Schenker, make similar moves.[5] The fact remains, however, that on this view music may be spoken of rigorously only in formal terms. Anything else is—at best—inspired impressionism.

Yet to argue that meaning begins with a truth claim is merely to give a restrictive definition of meaning. The hermeneutic approach that we took to Kant's text begins, on principle, somewhere else: on this occasion, with the resonance of a metaphor. In taking up the hermeneutic attitude, we approached the text by assuming that it resists fully disclosing itself, that in certain important respects it is mute, and that we ourselves understand it at first in terms we must work to articulate. To put this another way, we approached the text very much as we would be compelled to approach a piece of "abso-

5. E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," in *Source Readings in Music History: The Romantic Era*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York, 1965), 35–41. On Hanslick's concept of form as spirit or *energeia*, see Carl Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, trans. William Austin (Cambridge, 1982), 52–54. Schenker's invocation of Nature as a transcendental category is well known. The kernel of his "higher" hermeneutic is succinctly formulated in the preface to his early *Harmony* (ed. Oswald Jonas, trans. Elizabeth Mann Borgese [Chicago, 1954], xxv): "I should like to stress in particular the biological factor in the life of tones. We should get used to the idea that tones have lives of their own, more independent of the artist's pen in their vitality than one would dare to believe."

lute" music. The hermeneutic attitude, which begins to assume its modern form at just about the time that instrumental music begins its cultural ascendancy,[6] works by assigning to discourse the nondiscursive opacity that is supposed to belong to music. We enable the interpretation of a text by depreciating what is overtly legible and regarding the text as potentially secretive, or at least as a provocation to understanding that we may not know how to answer. The text, in this frame of reference, does not give itself to understanding; it must be made to yield to understanding. A hermeneutic window must be opened on it through which the discourse of our understanding can pass.

Once that window opens, the text appears, or at least may appear, not as a grid of assertions in which other modes of meaning are embedded but as a field of humanly significant actions. In the example from Kant, the window opened by the metaphor of neighboring thought-play revealed an intricate spectacle of intrusion and protection in which philosophical judgment, ambivalence about bodily pleasures, and the work of building culture all play a part.

Where, then, to repeat my earlier question, does our reflection on Kant's text leave us with regard to music? As far as interpretation goes, the answer may well be: here, there, and everywhere. Under the hermeneutic attitude, there is and can be no fundamental difference between interpreting a written text and interpreting a work of music—or any other product or practice of culture. This is not, of course, to say that it has suddenly become obvious how to interpret music; what is obvious is that we still lack the techniques for that. But we should now know how to develop the techniques we need; analyzing the hermeneutic attitude at work has given us our clue. In order to practice a musical hermeneutics we must learn, first, how to open hermeneutic windows on the music we seek to interpret and, second, how to treat works of music as fields of humanly significant action.

It will prove convenient to take up these projects in reverse order. Much of my discussion so far has been guided implicitly by a critical adaptation of J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts—a theory in which

6. On this topic see Tilottama Rajan, "The Supplement of Reading," *New Literary History* 17 (1985–86): 573–94.

language as action takes precedence over language as assertion. In his book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin begins by distinguishing between two types of utterance, which he calls constative and performative.[7] Constative utterances make truth claims, and are accordingly evaluated as true or false. Performatives attempt to achieve something, and are accordingly evaluated as successful or unsuccessful. "The path is steep" is a constative; "Be careful: the path is steep" is a performative—namely, a warning. In developing this distinction, Austin deliberately works up to an impasse: he shows that we cannot find a reliable criterion by which to separate constatives from performatives. In particular, any constative utterance can also serve as a performative: in the right setting, "The path is steep" can also be a warning. The constative and the performative thus become dimensions of utterance rather than types of utterance, and to underline this change Austin changes his terminology.[8] The constative dimension is now said to manifest itself in *locutionary meaning*, the claims or assertions that a speech act puts into play. The performative dimension manifests itself in *illocutionary force*, the pressure or power that a speech act exerts on a situation.[9]

Illocutionary force quickly proves to be a very unruly thing. Its relationship to locutionary effects (not meaning, *pace* Austin) is loose at best and highly variable; a speech act may say things that are widely at odds with what it does. Speech acts, moreover, are constantly in danger of going awry, "misfiring," as Austin puts it:

> QUEEN
> Do not for ever with thy vailèd lids
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
> Thou know'st tis common. All that lives must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity.

7. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

8. Ibid., 94–108.

9. Austin also distinguishes between illocutionary and what he calls perlocutionary forces, the former referring to what one does *in* saying something, the latter to the results one achieves *by* saying something. The distinction complicates matters with no very clear gain; I use the term *illocutionary force* to cover both meanings.

HAMLET
Ay, madam, it is common.

(*Hamlet*, 1.2.70–74)

This famous exchange exemplifies both types of unruliness. Gertrude in all likelihood wants to help Hamlet, but her help shades too easily into manipulation. She tries to control his grief—and his rage—by getting him to consent to some platitudes about mortality. Hamlet pretends to comply, but his withering multiple pun on *common* not only refuses the manipulation but also attacks the manipulator.

Austin is ambivalent about this sort of discursive skittishness; he alternately unleashes and tries to limit the instability of illocution. For present purposes, the most important fact about his proposed limitations is that none of them works. The reason why becomes apparent in a decisive critique of speech act theory put forth by Jacques Derrida.[10] Derrida points out that all acts of communication presuppose the possibility of their repetition in new contexts. In order to function at all, a speech act, like a piece of writing or a visual image, must be *iterable*, that is, capable of functioning in situations other than the occasion of its production, among persons other than those who immediately produce and receive it. In their iterability, speech acts necessarily presuppose the possibility of difference, and hence also the possibility of their being redirected, reinterpreted. The prospect of what Austin thinks of as "misfire," an "infelicitous" deviation from the norm, is actually the norm itself. Even though certain speech acts may, and do, recur in typical settings with typical illocutions, we are not spared by that fact from understanding them anew with each recurrence. Speech acts are radically implicated in the situations that they address; they come to life as a kind of improvisation.

10. Derrida's essay, "Signature Event Context" originally appeared in the short-lived periodical *Glyph*, where it provoked a now famous exchange with the speech act theorist John Searle; the essay is reprinted in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982): 307–30. For a fuller account, see Stanley Fish, "With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 693–722. For more on the instability of the performative dimension, and on Austin's treatment of it, see Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983).

Taken together with Derrida's critique, Austin's theory of speech acts holds great promise for musical hermeneutics. Although Austin privileges what he calls the "speech situation,"[11] speech act theory generalizes easily to cover writing, which also has a busy performative dimension. And although locutionary effects are confined to the sphere of language, illocutionary force need not be. Any act of expression or representation can exert illocutionary force provided, first, that the act is iterable and, second, that in being produced the act seeks to affect a flow of events, a developing situation. In their illocutionary dimension, therefore, speech acts exemplify a larger category of expressive acts through which illocutionary forces pass into general circulation. Musical processes clearly count as expressive acts according to the terms just given. If we can learn to recognize them as such, to concretize the illocutionary forces of music as we concretize its harmonic, rhythmic, linear, and formal strategies, we can then go on to interpret musical meaning.

What techniques can we use to this purpose? An expressive act can be recognized as such only within the situation that it traverses, and here again speech acts enjoy certain advantages. Either their situation is explicit, as in the example from *Hamlet*, or they imply a situation while apparently concentrating on locutionary business, as in Kant's metaphor of thought-play. Unfortunately for the interpreter, these situational signals have no exact parallels in music. They do, however, have inexact parallels—sometimes oblique ones, elliptical, latent rather than manifest, but still and all sufficient to work with.

In recognizing and reflecting on an expressive act, we empower the interpretive process; we open what I earlier called a hermeneutic window through which our interpretation can pass. When it comes to music, at least three types of hermeneutic window are available to us, either as the expressive act to be recognized or as a signpost to such recognition.

1. Textual inclusions. This type includes texts set to music, titles, epigrams, programs, notes to the score, and sometimes even expression markings. In dealing with these materials, it is critical to remember—especially with the texts of

11. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 139.

vocal pieces—that they do not establish (authorize, fix) a meaning that the music somehow reiterates, but only invite the interpreter to find meaning in the interplay of expressive acts. The same caution applies to the other two types.

2. Citational inclusions. This type is a less explicit version of the first, with which it partly overlaps. It includes titles that link a work of music with a literary work, visual image, place, or historical moment; musical allusions to other compositions; allusions to texts through the quotation of associated music; allusions to the styles of other composers or of earlier periods; and the inclusion (or parody) of other characteristic styles not predominant in the work at hand.[12]

3. Structural tropes. These are the most implicit and ultimately the most powerful of hermeneutic windows. By *structural trope* I mean a structural procedure, capable of various practical realizations, that also functions as a typical expressive act within a certain cultural/historical framework. Since they are defined in terms of their illocutionary force, as units of doing rather than units of saying, structural tropes cut across traditional distinctions between form and content. They can evolve from any aspect of communicative exchange: style, rhetoric, representation, and so on.

The loose network of structural tropes operative at any given moment forms a kind of illocutionary environment in which expressive activities of all kinds go forth. Such a network forms an extension, in the expressive/hermeneutic sphere, of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the habitus of the social sphere: "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules." The habitus, Bourdieu continues, enables us to form the strategies

12. For a discussion of this last type of citational inclusion, see Peter Rabinowitz, "Fictional Music: Toward a Theory of Listening," *Bucknell Review* 26 (1981): 193–208.

by means of which we cope with "unforeseen and ever-changing situations."[13]

For a simple example of a structural trope, consider the citation of one's own earlier work, which in nineteenth-century expressive practice often marks an important moment of reorientation. At the close of *Adonais* (1821), his elegy for Keats, Shelley tries to disentangle himself from "the web of being" and to fasten his desires on death. His success, if "success" is the word, turns on an allusion to his own "Ode to the West Wind":

> I.
> O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
> Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
> Are driven . . .
>
> V.
> Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
>
> ("West Wind," 1–3, 61–64)

> The breath whose might I have invoked in song
> Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven
> Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
> Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
> The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!
> I am borne darkly, fearfully afar.
>
> (*Adonais*, 487–92)

Condensed in the key words *breath*, *driven*, and *spirit*, the ode's language of rebirth returns as the elegy's language of death. Shelley's self-citation is almost penitential; it recants the text of what has come to seem false hope.

In his String Quartet in A Minor, D. 804 (1824), Schubert makes a similar, if less drastic, recantation. After an unsettled Allegro, the Andante seeks an idealized Biedermeier repose with the help of a

13. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977), 72, 78.

melody borrowed from the incidental music to *Rosamunde*. The third movement then introduces a problematical counterquotation from Schubert's setting of Schiller's poem "Der Götter Griechenlands"—namely, the accompaniment to the line "Schöne Welt, wo bist du?" The force of this new quotation is both to acknowledge the unhappy destiny of all Biedermeier innocence and to withdraw, perhaps self-accusingly, from the illusion of a "schöne Welt" housed in the Andante. Schubert, however, is not quite ready to be borne darkly, fearfully afar. He qualifies his negative gesture with a dialectical irony by making the third movement a minuet—itself a relic of a "schöne Welt" gone by.[14]

Structural tropes operate freely across the entire cultural field. They act independently of received ideas about resemblances among various practices, discourses, and representations, and may even override obvious dissimilarities in style, scope, and context on behalf of shared ways of proceding, of valuing, of presenting. They may or may not derive from the explicit vocabulary that a historical period uses about itself. Their structuring effect ranges from the local and fragmentary pinpointing of a structural perspective to the large-scale unfolding of a structural rhythm.[15] In their malleability and semantic openness, structural tropes implant the hermeneutic attitude within the object of interpretation itself. As latent hermeneutic windows with a diversity of cultural affiliations, they form something like the body language of an interpretive community.

Recognizing structural tropes is an empirical, even a catch-as-catch-can, matter: no formal discovery procedure is available for them. We can, however, formulate a few rules of thumb. Hermeneutic windows tend to be located where the object of interpretation appears—or can be made to appear—explicitly problematical. Interpretation takes flight from breaking points, which usually means from points of under- or overdetermination: on the one hand, a gap, a lack, a missing connection; on the other, a surplus of pattern, an extra repetition, an excessive connection. In some cases, our effort

14. The quotation in the minuet is identified by J. A. Westrup, "The Chamber Music," in *Music of Schubert*, ed. Gerald Abraham (1947; rpt. Fort Washington, N.Y., 1969), 93.

15. On structural rhythms, see my *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), 4–24, 229–30.

to turn these breaking points into sources of understanding may involve no more than reflection on the explicit expressive acts that are particular to the object. Structural tropes tend to appear, to be called on by the interpreter under one name or another, when we widen the scope of reflection: when, guided by the problem posed by the breaking point, we begin to play with analogies and recategorizations, seeking to throw light on one object by seeking out its multiple affiliations with others. The goal of this process, at least its ideal goal, resembles what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls a "thick description": an account of "a multiplicity of complex conceptual [read: expressive] structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [we] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render."[16] Structural tropes, actualized practically and experimentally during the interpretive process, emerge both as means and as ends in our approach to this mode of understanding.

A strategic map for musical hermeneutics might thus read more or less as follows:

1. Locate the hermeneutic windows of the work, starting with the most explicit (textual inclusions) and working up to the least explicit (structural tropes).

2. Identify the expressive acts found among or by means of these materials. Interpret the interplay of their illocutionary forces.

3. Ask whether the formal processes and stylistic articulations of the music can be said, either literally or figuratively, to exemplify the same or associated expressive acts. Interpret the interplay of illocutionary forces as a correlate—loose or tight, whatever seems practicable—of the interplay of musical forces. Where the music is linked to a text, treat the interplay of musical meaning as an appropriation and reinterpretation of the (already interpreted) textual meaning.

16. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 10. Geertz takes the term *thick description* from Gilbert Ryle, "Thinking and Reflection" and "The Thinking of Thoughts," in *Collected Papers* (New York, 1971), 2:465–79 and 480–96, respectively.

4. Connect the results to similar interplays elsewhere in the cultural field, freely allowing the activity of musical and nonmusical materials to comment on, criticize, or reinterpret each other as well as to repeat each other.

5. Perform these steps in any order and as often as you like, omitting any that you do not need. Avoid burdening the interpretive process itself with labels like "hermeneutic window" and "illocutionary force" except when there is little other choice. In fact, throw away this map before you use it.

The last step is not a joke, but a sober recognition of the character of interpretation. As I acknowledged earlier, hermeneutic theories can be very useful. Many flexible and powerful ones are available, from the Freudian system of condensations and displacements to the textual codes of Roland Barthes's *S/Z*. The usefulness of all such theories, however, including the one I have outlined in this chapter, depends on our according each particular theory only a provisional, implicit, occasional authority. To do otherwise leads merely to the conventionalized recycling of theoretical terms in concrete instances, and not to anything we can properly call interpretation. Real interpretation belongs decisively to the sphere of what has been called practical consciousness. However guided it may be by precept, it is learned only by example and performed only by applying tacit, unformalized knowledge to individual cases. The knowledge of how to interpret is social in its structure and origin, the product of a habitus. And such social knowledge, as Norman Bryson puts it, "cannot be abstracted from the situations in which it is revealed *in profiles*, that is, immanently within its contextual embodiment."[17]

Interpretation, accordingly, cannot be regimented, disciplined, or legislated—at least not successfully. As a practice, it is opportunistic, unruly, and contestatory, inescapably committed to both preserving and appropriating whatever it addresses. As nineteenth-century critical thought insisted, especially through the unholy trinity of Nietz-

17. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, 1983), 70. Bryson borrows the term *practical consciousness* from Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 35–42; *in profiles* is from Bourdieu, *Outline*, 18.

sche, Marx, and Freud, interpretation is intimately bound up with questions of power and desire. "Whatever exists," Nietzsche argues,

> having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed and redirected by some power superior to it. . . . The entire history of a "thing," an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations . . . a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purposes of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions. The form is fluid, but the "meaning" is even more so.[18]

An interpretation unhesitatingly seizes on any association, substitution, analogy, construction, or leap of inference that it requires to do its work. If it is guided by rules, then it partly makes up the rules as it goes along. Not for an idle reason does the term *hermeneutics* invoke the name of Hermes, the wing-shod messenger of Olympus and god of invention, cunning, and theft.

The inherently problematical character of interpretation is perhaps most evident in the paradox that while bad interpretations may be manifestly false, good interpretations can never be manifestly true. Unlike a true account of something, an interpretation can never exclude rival, incompatible accounts. For any given interpretation, an alternative always exists; as we have seen from Derrida's critique of Austin, the availability of alternatives is the very condition that makes interpretation possible. Lacking the power of exclusion, interpretations must convince by other means. My claim in this book is that they convince by their power to sustain a detailed scrutiny of a text that also reaches deep into the cultural context.

Again, unlike a true account, an interpretation cannot stabilize its key concepts—or if you prefer, cannot afford the illusion that concepts are stable in the first place. On the contrary: interpretation can only proceed by intensifying conceptual mobility, by tautening the associative threads between ideas to suggest relationships, by expanding the relationships between ideas to suggest equivalences, by prizing

18. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, essay 2, sec. 12; from *"On the Genealogy of Morals" and "Ecce Homo,"* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1969), 77–78.

apart equivalences to locate differences. In the terms provided by Kant's theory of music, we can state the case by saying that interpretation is the art of putting the concepts that Kant cherished into the *Gedankenspiel* that he mistrusted. And if Kant's description of musical *Gedankenspiel* has any credibility, we can even suggest that interpretation is an art modeled on the experience of music.[19]

None of which is to say—emphatically not—that interpretation must forgo all claims to be credible, scrupulous, and rational. What it does say is that these terms are susceptible to continual redefinition, continual transposition to unexpected planes of discourse. In order to present itself as knowledge amid so much volatility, interpretation must meet certain demands—demands for explanatory power, interconnectedness, telling detail, and honesty. Nor is that enough. Responsible interpretation also involves a principled refusal to monumentalize its own efforts, while at the same time sparing no efforts; a willingness to allow the object of interpretation its measure of resistance; a readiness to admit that interpretation, too, is an expressive act, urging truth claims—which is not the same as exhibiting the truth—while also exerting power or pressure on behalf of the interpreter's values.

This interpretive ethic is particularly important when we try to connect the object of interpretation to its cultural/historical situation; no enterprise is more vulnerable to the lure of monumentalization, the illusion that the wavering movement of meaning has been arrested at last. The danger here is to place too much restraint on the language and conceptual reach of the interpreter, as if doing so represents an allegiance to "objectivity" rather than the exercise of illocutionary coercion. A plausible alternative position might be built around Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that all interpretation necessarily arises through a "fusion" of past and present "horizons" of meanings and presuppositions—though we might see this claim, too, as overidealizing, a rewriting of Nietzsche without Nietzsche's radicalism and risk-taking.[20]

19. The role of music, as heard, in providing a model for interpretation was not lost on Kant's contemporaries. For a discussion, see Kevin Barry, *Language, Music, and the Sign* (Cambridge, 1987).

20. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, from the second German edition (1965) (New York, 1975). For a tren-

My own position was anticipated when, in point 4 of my hermeneutic roadmap, I urged the interpreter to allow musical and nonmusical materials to comment on, criticize, or reinterpret each other as well as to repeat each other. The implication is that we will quickly run aground if we treat the object of interpretation, in this case the music, merely as an instance of anterior claims or forces—merely, that is, as the reflection of some context, however thickly described. In order to release the energies of interpretation, the relationship between the object—call it the music—and its situation must be understood as dynamic. The music, as a cultural activity, must be acknowledged to help produce the discourses and representations of which it is also the product.

This principle is one of the cornerstones of what literary critics have taken to calling "the new historicism," an approach to literary and cultural history that conjoins elements of historicism, cultural materialism, and poststructuralism.[21] That is a large wad of isms, but for present purposes we can set them aside to focus on enabling principles—two in particular. First, the cultural field has no stable or privileged sites of meaning. Meaning is produced everywhere, and, like air or money, it circulates everywhere. Second, the works, practices, and activities—for us, the music—that we address as interpreters are not only the products but also the *agencies* of culture, not only members of the habitus but also makers of it. In recent years, important projects have been outlined for understanding music in its cultural/historical situation, notably by Joseph Kerman, Gary Tomlinson, and Leo Treitler.[22] My purpose in adding my voice to theirs

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chant, if brief, critique of Gadamer's hermeneutics, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), 71–74.

21. The best overviews of the new historicism emerge from the field of Renaissance studies, where the new-historicist viewpoint is especially strong. See Louis Adrian Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986): 5–12; Jean Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986): 13–43; Jonathan Goldberg, "The Politics of Renaissance Literature: A Review Essay," *ELH* (*English Literary History*) 49 (1982): 514–42; and Edward Pechter, "The New Historicism and its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," *PMLA* 102 (1987): 292–303.

22. Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); Gary Tomlinson, "The Web of Culture: A Context for Musicology," *Nineteenth Century Music* 7 (1984): 350–62; and Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

is to urge that this understanding can proceed only if it proceeds in two directions.

"Grau . . . ist alle Theorie / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum"—said Mephistopheles. This chapter has not paid much attention to particular works of music. The chapters that follow will make good the omission, but I would still like to conclude with one example, a kind of microcosm of musical hermeneutics in action. The example is a particularly suggestive one, in part because it represents a collaborative effort and in part because it focuses on a formal question that *must* receive a hermeneutic answer.

In his *Grande messe des morts*, Berlioz recapitulates the opening section of the Sanctus with a remarkable addition. Shortly after the recapitulation begins, soft strokes on the bass drum and cymbals, the latter allowed to vibrate, begin to set up polyrhythmic patterns and continue to do so until the end. The series of polyrhythms forms an independent, well-organized whole, as if an independent movement for percussion were being superimposed on the Sanctus, a portent of things to come in Elliott Carter. At first, the repetition of a single rhythmic pattern by the percussion articulates 5/2 against the basic 4/4 (mm. 3^3–23^2); next, the polyrhythms become irregular while the rhythmic pattern breaks down (mm. 23^3–33^3); finally, the repetition of a new rhythmic pattern articulates 3/2 against the basic 4/4 (mm. 33^3–47). The overall design is a lucid ABA: metrical regularity–metrical irregularity–metrical regularity reinterpreted.

What are we to make of all this? When I posed the same question to the members of a 1988 colloquium on music and narrative, some compelling answers came to the fore.[23] Reinhold Brinkmann heard the drum-and-cymbal music as a kind of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, something in keeping with Berlioz's exploitation of acoustic space in the Requiem. Anthony Newcomb seized on the fact that the bass drum and cymbals are military instruments, and suggested that the Sanctus incorporates military music in estranged or defamiliarized form, as if to subsume martial strife to religious peace. Christopher Reynolds recalled Beethoven's use of drums and cymbals in the finale of the

23. The conference, organized by Karol Berger and Anthony Newcomb, was held at Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley in May 1988.

Ninth Symphony. Beethoven, like Berlioz, employs a solo tenor at this point, and does so to set a portion of Schiller's text that is remarkably pertinent:

> Froh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen
> Durch des Himmels pracht'gen Plan,
> Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn.
> Freudig wie ein Held zum Siegen.[24]

The allusion reinforces both the spatial and the military resonance of Berlioz's percussion.

Once we put interpretive materials like this into play, we can also put them together, both with one another and with their formal environment. Take the environment first. The ABA pattern of the percussion "movement" suggests a process of gradual stabilization. The series of polyrhythms first lapses from and then recovers a state of metrical regularity. Moreover, the third part replaces a complex or irregular meter (5/2) with a simple meter (3/2)—a simple meter that can even be taken as an element of the complex one (5/2 = 2/2 + 3/2 in mm. 6–8^2, 16–18^2). And not to stop there, the 3/2 meter is articulated, as Edward T. Cone has observed, by twice-five repetitions of a basic group of three.[25] The five-beat grouping is stabilized by transposition to a higher structural level.

In the presence of so much dynamism, the spatial and military dimensions of this music demand to be understood as a process. The defamiliarization that Newcomb speaks of can be taken to increase as the drum-and-cymbal polyrhythms evolve from an immediate expressive effect to a superimposed "movement" with an autonomous structure. At the far end of this process lies Brinkmann's *Klangfarbenmelodie*: the subtilization of the sound of a military band into sound pure and simple. This sound, especially the swooshing vibration of the

24. Glad as His suns fly / Through the glorious order of Heaven, / Run your course, brothers, / Joyfully as a hero to victory.

25. Edward T. Cone, "Berlioz's Divine Comedy: The *Grande Messe des Morts*," *19th-Century Music* 4 (1980): 13–14. Cone understands the percussion "movement" as an instance of a disposition toward reinterpretation, toward the creation of multiple perspectives, that rules both the Mass and Berlioz's music as a whole. This reading is amply congruent with the others developed here. My thanks to Walter Frisch for drawing Cone's essay to my attention.

cymbals, resonates through the huge performance space demanded by the Requiem—in the case of the premiere, the Church of St. Louis des Invalides in Paris, with its great amplitude and high dome. Thus employed, the performance space becomes an embodiment of the cosmic space invoked by Beethoven's Ninth. The order of the heavens is remapped in the architecture of the church, which on this occasion is also the order of public space and of state authority. (The Requiem was commissioned to commemorate the dead of the 1830 revolution but premiered instead as a memorial for a French general killed in Algeria.) Within the multiple valences of this space, the strife of the world is nullified and one is free to praise God in peace.

It now remains to bring the claims of this chapter to life in more detail, and more than once. I will pause only to risk a personal—or perhaps I mean a political—conjecture. It is scarcely a secret that the extraordinary value ascribed to music, and to the arts in general, during the nineteenth century has lost much of its credibility; not much survives except a certain quantity of impoverished rhetoric. Professional students of all the arts have been increasingly confronted with a sense of cultural marginalization, an unhappy awareness that their work is tolerated rather than encouraged by the academy and by society at large. One response to this state of affairs has been a retreat into ever more arcane languages of inquiry and ever more exclusionary specialities, a result that Nietzsche foresaw as early as the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Yet there has also been a more affirmative response, particularly among literary critics. This has taken the form of developing communicative languages of inquiry that empower and even demand the breaking of disciplinary barriers, and of using those languages to (re)open—to discover, construct, provoke—a dynamic, dialogical relationship between cultural processes and cultural products. The growing interest in musical hermeneutics, without which this book could scarcely have been written, is a sign of this same affirmative development struggling to be born in humanistic studies. My purpose here is simply to assist in the birth.