Introduction: Sounding Out
Musical Meaning and Modern Experience

The problem of meaning stands at the forefront of recent thinking about music. Whether music has meaning, what kinds of meaning it may have, and for whom; the relationship of musical meaning to individual subjectivity, social life, and cultural context—these questions have inspired strong feelings and sharp debate. All of them are raised anew and given a thorough shaking in *Musical Meaning*, which aims to rethink as fully as possible both how the questions are asked and how they are answered. The book celebrates meaning as a basic force in music history and an indispensable factor in how, where, and when music is heard.

In its modern form, the problem of meaning arose with the development of European music as something to be listened to “for itself” as art or entertainment rather than as something mixed in with social occasion, drama, or ritual. The music composed to be heard in this way eventually constituted a discovery that permanently altered the character and concept of music both inside and outside the European tradition. Yet although both this repertoire and the modes of listening it fostered encouraged a sense of aesthetic self-sufficiency and an idealized, unitary concept of music, a variety of exceptions and variants proliferated right alongside them to challenge the emergent model. This process has been more or less continuous, and in one respect it has been very fruitful. It has encouraged the development of both analytical devices for understanding music as autonomous art and interpretive strategies for understanding music as meaningfully engaged with language, imagery, and the wider world. In another sense, however, the debate has been fruitless, because it is not so much about the nature of music “itself” (as if there were such a thing) as about the ways in which we authorize ourselves to listen to music and to talk about it. It is obvious that in practice both sides of the debate are “right,” even if in theory one is inclined
to prefer one side over the other—as I do myself, since most of my work has been devoted to the pursuit of musical meaning.

The underlying point of this book is that the apparent dilemma of musical meaning is actually its own solution. To see this, we need to view the dilemma itself, not in negative terms as a zero-sum game that can never actually be won, but in positive terms as a historical phenomenon. What this shift of perspective reveals is that the character of modern Western music regularly turns on the question of whether the music takes on context-related meaning in particular cases. In other words, the question of whether music has meaning becomes, precisely, the meaning of music. At least since the historical watershed just described, music has generally operated on the basis of a series of contradictory tendencies: on the one hand toward the projection of autonomy, universality, self-presence, and the sublime transcendence of specific meaning, and on the other hand toward intimations of contingency, historical concreteness, constructed and divided selfhood, and the intelligible production of specific meanings. Music presents this dual character in quasi-perceptual terms, analogously perhaps to the famous line-drawing discussed by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*: a figure that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, but not both at once.¹

This interplay of autonomy and contingency is the general, higher-order context and condition of intelligibility for most modern Western music. It is not so much something heard as it is the vestibule through which we hear. It is a kind of template, a quasi-grammatical or a priori ambiguity to which no fixed content can be assigned. Either side of this duality may be gratifying or suffocating, vital or stale, enthralling or threatening or bewildering; either side may be ambivalent. Either may also recognize and make concessions to the other, which it is more likely to subordinate than to exclude. And either may lay claim to the same dimensions of musical experience: the expression of feeling, for example, may be grounded in concepts like form or structure or left adjacent to them, and the feelings expressed may be understood as in some sense universal or unconditional or referred to historically specific categories. The only thing fixed among these possibilities, and many more, is that virtually any act of musical composition, performance, listening, or understanding will engage some and ignore or repress others, and thus define itself by giving the interplay of autonomy and contingency a particular realization, be it ad hoc or systematic, explicit or tacit, even witting or unwitting.

The interplay itself, of course, is not unique to music, but it is perhaps more urgent and ubiquitous in music than anywhere else. As the art of the
ear more than the eye, music collapses the sense of distance associated with
visuality, and more broadly with the whole field of concepts, images, and
words. The resulting sense of immediacy tends to feel like bodily self-
presence, the intimacy of oneself with one’s own embodiment. We may
know the suspension between autonomy and contingency all around us, but
in music we feel it in ourselves.

This last point is crucial. For it is my thesis here that the a priori ambi-
guity of music goes beyond the vagaries of perception to articulate one of
the core conditions of subjectivity. The sense of self, too, is poised between
a unique and absolute self-presence and a contingent social constructed-
ness, and no one ever escapes from this dilemma—which, however, is also
its own solution. On the one hand, certain experiences, especially the bod-
ily urgencies of hunger and love, fight and flight, pain and desire, seem to
occur beyond relativity and contingency, even to suspend or interrupt them.
In a sense, the absolutely particular here seems to merge with the univer-
sal. On the other hand, all such experiences occur as parts of particular life
histories whose meanings are contingent through and through. Even more,
as Eric Santner has suggested, these experiences are energized by the very
contingency that they seem to surmount. Their immediacy, the fruit of col-
lapsing distance, is intensified by the secret knowledge of “its own ground-
ing in—and thus its debt to—a contingent, ‘parochial’ ” state of affairs.²

What we experience as unconditional is always somewhere marked by the
irrationality of its attachment to the contingent.

Music, the art of collapsing distances, plays out this paradox as nothing
else can. Modern Western music has regularly been associated with depths
and heights of noncontingent subjectivity; latter-day theorists have associated
it with the historical, cultural, and social construction of subjectivity.³ The
claim here is that both of these associations are grounded in the iconic rela-
tionship—part symbol, part homology—between the purely musical and
musically meaningful on the one hand, and the purely existential and con-
tingently realized on the other. Posing the question of musical meaning, and
above all posing it in and through music, in the lived experience of works,
styles, and performances, has given music of many kinds a substantial share
in the diverse, conflicted formation of subjectivity in the modern era.

The link to subjectivity rounds us back to the contradiction between pure
and applied music with which these remarks began. On the one hand, music
is above all that which surrounds, accompanies, suffuses, infuses; it mixes
with virtually anything, words, images, movement, narrative, action, inac-
tion, eating, drinking, sex, and death. To make anything more itself, or more
anything, just add music. On the other hand, music remains entirely unaf-
fected by the things with which it mixes, no matter how they may direct or
even coerce its expressivity. Subtract them from music, or music from them,
and there remains music itself, music on its own, pure music, ineffably pres-
ent to sense or memory. Music adds something to other things by adding
itself, but loses nothing when it takes itself away. By reason of this limitless
subtractability, music has often formed the paradigm of autonomy not only
in the modern system of the arts but also in the construction of subjectivity.
This is the ground of pure or structural listening, the rapture of being wholly
absorbed or deeply moved or touched by musical experience, revealed to
oneself in the ineffability of music. Because it forms the remainder of every
experience it engages, music may act as a cultural trope for the self, the sub-
ject as self-moving agency that remains when all of its attributes and experi-
ences have been subtracted. Musical affect, expression, and association
become pure forms of self-apprehension; music is known by and valued for
its “transcendence” of any specific meanings ascribed to it; identity seeks to
become substance in music, even though music, being more event than sub-
stance, continually eludes this desire in the act of granting it.

This subjective nucleus, however, is attended by the same pressure that,
as thinkers from Hegel to Bakhtin to Lacan have insisted, impels all subjec-
tivity: the subject is meaningless in itself alone and necessarily seeks to
enunciate itself in relation to others. It seeks connection, interrelationship,
in order to be. In the case of music, this dynamic dimension is registered in
the potentiality for bearing ascribed meanings, meanings grounded in
shared, socially mediated experience. No music, however “pure,” can escape
this potentiality, which can be activated by even the most casual sign, visual,
verbal, or gestural—even intonational; the subtractability of music is
always in counterpoint with its imprintability. As I hope to show, when
ascribed meaning gives musical subjectivity a specific content, the musical
remainder beyond that content becomes at the same time its support. The
remainder appears only in relation to the content it exceeds and by which it
is in that sense produced. In the meshes of this relationship, the remainder
comes to act both as the material medium and the fantasy space or screen
through which the subjective content may be enfanchised and played out.

Over the course of the past two centuries, as variously defined dualities
of autonomy and contingency have tended to define the understanding of
music, the terms of autonomy have increasingly tended to be upheld as pri-
mary or superior; subtractability trumps imprintability. Or at least we read
that it should: “We need to understand music as music, as an autonomous
language, if we want to grant it the power to speak of other things… This
is how we hear music speak: not by reducing it to some other set of circum-
stances—music is simply not reducible to any other circumstances, whether cultural, historical, biographical, or sexual, and any attempt to make it so has only a cartoonish reality—but by allowing it the opacity of its own voice, and then engaging that voice” on personal or “poetic” terms. Part of my purpose in this book is to argue for a reversal of this value inclination, which involves criticizing the values to be dethroned without debunking or dismissing them. Concurrent with this is a critique of the assumptions about meaning, knowledge, “circumstances,” and personal subjectivity that underlie the grant of an actual, rather than a figurative, autonomy in which subordinate contingent meanings must supposedly be grounded. (Clearly the stakes here extend beyond music to other forms of art and cultural practice, the involvement of which will also thread the chapters to follow.) I’m seeking to do a tricky balancing act with the debate over meaning: to uphold the semantic end, but in terms that incorporate the autonomous one; to acknowledge the historical, ideological, functional importance of the experience of autonomy in the context of a view in which the primary term is contingency. I want to take autonomy seriously by finding its indispensable place in the network of indispensably contingent practices.

In this respect the book can also be understood as a response to recent scholarship by Stanley Cavell, Lydia Goehr, Gary Tomlinson, and others, that treats music in light of the noumenal qualities that have repeatedly been ascribed to it since the turn of the nineteenth century. I do not disagree with these writers in any crude way, nor do I conceive of myself as writing in opposition to them. At one level, I am simply seeking to insist on a complementarity, a historically grounded stress on music as more a means of engagement with the world than of disengagement. The chapters that follow aim to suggest some of the diverse ways in which music acknowledges the dense phenomenal life that its apparently noumenal qualities obscure. They revel in the embeddedness of music in the actual contingent conditions of life and thought, which music reflects, enhances, and in part helps to create.

At another level, though, this book does engage in a critique of the noumenal idea of music, even as the object of sophisticated historical inquiry. This level is essentially political, shaped by the democratic principle that the free public use of language is our only safeguard against destructive irrationalisms. I am always suspicious of claims to ineffability, because people who invoke the unspeakable may use it to justify unspeakable things. The mystery of music will always be cherished by music lovers, but it is best cherished when it is demystified, understood as a contingent effect, not as a first principle. My effort to do that here is not antagonistic,