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Rethinking Milton Babbitt's 'Serious Music' as Play

ABSTRACT

Background

At the 2016 joint American Musicological Society/Society for Music Theory conference, Andrew Mead developed a point, which he had intimated elsewhere but had not previously emphasized because—to him—it seemed too ‘self-evident’: that there is a deep ‘sense of play’, of immediacy, and of spontaneity in Milton Babbitt’s compositions and that perceiving this dimension of the music is what creates experiential pleasure (Mead 2016). This effect, Mead continued, is generated by the frequent and abrupt changes in contour, rhythm, and dynamics, by Babbitt’s idiomatic instrumental writing, and by the listener’s perception of how Babbitt exploits the work’s governing serial structure. Recognizing that this aspect of Babbitt’s music has been overlooked, or at least undertheorized, Mead extended an invitation by demonstration to rethink and reinterpret Babbitt’s music in these terms, to return discourse back to the thing that had attracted him (and, it seems, many theorists) to Babbitt’s music in the first place.

In this paper, I explore what an interpretation of Babbitt’s music as ‘play’ might entail and speculate upon why it has not been analysed in these terms, despite the fact that the rhetoric of play has often shaped the casual discourse on Babbitt’s music. I argue that conceiving of Babbitt’s music as play emphasizes dimensions of the music, which, although long acknowledged, are often minimized (particularly within musicology): his exploitation of serial ambiguities, linear indeterminacy, interplay of invariances across different structural levels, and witty titles. Amid the collection of analytic priorities advanced by new musicology (such as emotion, pleasure, and historical situation) that continue to drive musicological interpretation today, repositioning Babbitt’s music as a form of play—particularly in the sense theorized by Gadamer—presents a new way of understanding and analysing Babbitt’s music that ensures it remain relevant. Insisting upon a productive and open-minded dialogue between performers, audiences, theorists, and musicologists, such a rethinking challenges analysis grounded in formalist ideology and rather refocuses attention on the music’s experiential and performative appeal.

Enthusiasts of Babbitt’s music often characterize his compositions as *witty*, *Haydnesque*, and *charming*. They call attention to the *game-like* (i.e. rule-based) structures of Babbitt’s compositions, the *interplay* Babbitt fashions across different musical parameters, the sense of *dizzying motion* that the music engenders, Babbitt’s discursive humour (especially *wordplay*), and the *shimmering brilliance* of Babbitt’s musical surfaces (Cheung 2013; Dickinson 2011; Dyer 1987; Fine 2002; Kundera 1982; Mead 1997; Page 1982; Robin 2016; Ross 1996; Scotto 1988; Service 2010; Smooke 2011; Taub 2011; Waters 2000). Such colourful and informal language, which stands in contrast to the clear and codified linguistic apparatus that accompanies much of the analytical discourse on Babbitt’s music, suggests that the playful element in Bab-

bitt’s music is something that is intuited naturally and casually. Such tacit acceptance makes the concept of play therefore particularly powerful in understanding how meaning in Babbitt’s music has been and is constructed. Indeed, precisely because ‘play’ is a facet of Babbitt’s music that is assumed to be commonly understood (as Mead suggested in his AMS/SMT lecture), the concept has not only tacitly informed the listening practices and value systems that have guided analysis, but has also—importantly—served as a litmus test for high-level appreciation.

Subtle differences in how individuals experience play in Babbitt’s music offer nuanced reflections on how one might come to understand, and even analyse, its appeal. Many characterizations of play in Babbitt’s music rely on mapping the exploitation of arbitrarily instated conventions or rules present in language or games onto Babbitt’s manipulation of serial structure. Such descriptions imply that enjoyment arises either in the observation of Babbitt’s expert treatment of different musical parameters within the confines of the formal architecture (i.e., such listeners take pleasure in perceiving seemingly effortless or spontaneous intellectual ingenuity on display) or in the challenge that Babbitt’s music presents in terms of perception, performance, analysis, or otherwise (Leone 2003). Such enjoyment places value on proper training and discipline, prioritizes intellectual gratification, and upholds the authority of the author (Caillois 1961; Okubo 2001). In contrast, a different type of experience and ideological priorities are intimated by listeners, who seem happy to surrender to the ‘dizzying’, ‘whirling’, or ‘swirling’ effects generated by Babbitt’s music (Crutchfield 1986; Mangan 1995; Mead 1994; Page 1982). These listeners’ experiences insinuate that pleasure is created by one’s inability to decipher the unfolding of the form, or the pace of serial transformation. For these listeners, abandonment, physicality and sensuality, and subjective response are preeminent in enjoying Babbitt’s music (Caillois 1961). Acknowledging the possibility of this sort of experiential pleasure—one that does not locate the joy of listening in one’s cognitive parsing of the structure, but rather in a visceral response—is important in rethinking how one can listen to Babbitt’s music (Mead 1999). For, it empowers all listeners—not just those who have had the privilege to attain the specific expertise required to understand it—to find enjoyment in it.

Perhaps even more important to expanding understandings of Babbitt’s music, is that, in addition to broadening the spectrum of acceptable listening practices, rethinking Babbitt’s music as a form of play emphasizes the *dynamic relationship* between Babbitt’s music and its audience; for, each instance of play is, according to Roger Moseley, an interactive event (Moseley 2016). Reconceiving of Babbitt’s music in terms of play therefore challenges the pre-eminence in Babbitt scholarship of analyses guided by formalistic conventions and ideologies (manifest, for example, in the tendency to overemphasize the role of exhaustive completion in Babbitt’s music). Instead, it focuses attention on the importance of performance (how Babbitt’s music is played and played out for spectators)

and reception (how listeners experience and talk about Babbitt's music) for understanding. Indeed, framing Babbitt's music as play encourages theorists, musicologists, performers, and listeners to think of the music not as an object unto itself (formal analysis should not be taken as the terminus of interpretation), but rather as a locus around which we, together, carry out a conversation (Gadamer 2004; Vilhauer 2010). Knowing that conversations endure over time and that objects disintegrate, such a rethinking can help facilitate continued appreciation for and enjoyment of Babbitt's music.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper argues that reframing analysis of Babbitt's music in terms of 'play' not only better reflects the variety of experiential responses that performers and listeners of Babbitt's music have intimated, but also better responds to new musicology's criticisms of Babbitt's music and the formalist methods typically employed to analyze it. For, rather than emphasize objectified structure, understanding Babbitt's music in terms of 'play' highlights the act of performance and the role of the listening subject in analysis.

Methods

This paper scrutinizes how the rhetoric of play has informed the casual discourse on Babbitt primarily in concert reviews, personal and commemorative essays, and in other informal settings. It also explores how shifting conceptions of the nature of play, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, in conjunction with growing skepticism over formalist analysis in the new musicological community obscured the ludic element in Babbitt's music and affected his reception. Finally, it proposes Gadamer's theory of play as a means of reconciling two seemingly incompatible ways of thinking about Babbitt's music: as an autonomous entity and as a social and cultural act.

Implications

Babbitt's music is often portrayed as the apex of modernist fetishization of formal autonomy, of Cold War anxieties, and of academic elitism. Reframing analysis in a way that balances the music's 'serious' and 'playful' aspects offers a more nuanced and fair understanding of the music and its underlying ideologies.

Keywords

Milton Babbitt; play; formalism; Hans-Georg Gadamer; Roger Moseley; Roger Caillois; new musicology.

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