

Music Analysis as Process

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The connection of analysis to musical experience is problematic, especially if analyses are understood as out-of-time, synoptic representations of the underlying structure of the music analyzed. Such structure, although it may be unfolded in time, is itself complete as a set of objects and relations that precedes its temporal unfolding in the already completed musical work. The structure is in itself singular (universal), objective, and unchanging. In contrast, the performance/hearing/experience of the piece is inescapably temporal, evanescent, subjective (particular), different from time to time and from person to person.

It might be argued that the structure analysis represents is ideal and that it can be approached only imperfectly in actual hearing and playing. But if musical experience is such an unreliable guide, on what grounds should a representation be granted the status of a true or at least adequate representation? And how can the multitude of disparate analytic representations be evaluated in their claims for the way music is constructed?

Here I would like to suggest a radically temporal or processive approach to such dilemmas by seeing analysis less as a representation of structure and more as an activity. In this way, analysis could itself be understood as a performance that, as such, can serve as a vehicle for learning, and that can be evaluated in terms of its efficacy in promoting fresh, intense, or valued experience; and evaluated, moreover, in terms of its efficacy in promoting experience that is itself productive or creative, in the sense of opening possibilities for feeling and thinking further. These desiderata do not make analysis less problematic – quite the contrary.

Analysis: from *analyien* – to unloose, undo. Analysis is a taking apart – taking a part or a particular detail *out* of its complicated context or (in a reduction of context to keep within the limited context or boundaries of analytic practice) interaction with other *possible* details (in conformity with a culturally circumscribed language that is the definition of what is possible). It is an undoing of connection and is thus destructive. Moreover, it is destructive of meaning if meaning is the making of connection and the growth of context or complexity. And yet, this undoing, this temporary exile into the isolated detail or particular can pay off [if the odds are good and] if “it” is later rejoined to a new context (in something like an investment). “It” is in quotes because, once rejoined, there is no longer a separate, disconnected detail as just itself. If the former work of taking apart and isolating a particular does pay off, it will be paid out in the currency of the new and (if things have gone well) more highly valued, more intense, more meaningful situation/event. There will have been learning (a sort of earning).

Michael Polanyi (1969) has described something of this movement in his thought of analysis as “alienation” (or “exteriorization”) and in his thought of alienation as loss of

meaning. I have long admired Polanyi but haven't found an opportunity yet to speak of his work in any detail, so I'd like to take this opportunity to present a very brief introduction to Polanyi as a way of envisioning a positive contribution of musical analysis to musical experience and indeed, as a way of moving toward a thought in which musical analysis and musical experience (broadly defined) need not be categorially opposed.

Polanyi distinguishes two kinds (not degrees) of awareness in order to point to a circulation of these two kinds – neither could exist without the other, and both must together oscillate to continue to exist. The terms are “focal awareness” and “subsidiary awareness.” The relation is vectoral: we attend *from* subsidiary *to* focal.

Focal and subsidiary name whole and part in new ways, ways that speak of process and that preclude separation. Here whole and part are always active and interactive; they are also simultaneous and not intermittent, that is, not off or on, but moving between. Part, or “particular,” or detail works to create meaning when integrated in a focal awareness. Focal and subsidiary generally work together seamlessly. However, for developing skills, changing habits, and making discoveries it is useful to change focus, to temporarily make focal what had been subsidiary even though this is immediately destructive of a whole – the subsidiary is isolated and no longer participates in the meaning of the “comprehensive entity” it has now been alienated from. Thus, much as a violinist might try to develop better bowing technique by at first awkwardly isolating arm and wrist and losing a former fluency, an analyst might focus on some feature or detail while temporarily losing the meaning of that detail in the context of the whole, but then let go of that focus to discover a new and more intricate hearing. For such change to work, the detail, like the wrist must again become subsidiary and in a sense, be forgotten. (See also Deleuze (1994) for the need for such forgetting.)

If music analysis were to aim for such a process of learning, we would have to ask what parts, what sorts of detail could actually function for learning, how we could focus on detail, and what difference might be made when a creative forgetting leads to new experience. Clearly, this would be an experimental method in which analytic procedures and objects might be tested. This would certainly be a challenging program but one that could address question of truth or adequacy in pragmatic ways and allow for cooperative, intersubjective research.

To conclude my presentation, I will introduce some current work on this problem – an ongoing experiment my students and I have undertaken with a professional string quartet.

References:

Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. Paul Patton (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Polanyi, Michael. 1969. "The Logic of Tacit Inference." In Marjorie Grene (ed.) *Knowing and Being*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.