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Music as Sound Process: Kurth's Bruckner and the Timbral Insider

ABSTRACT

Background

In the history of Western music theory and analysis, comparatively scarce attention has been given to timbre, density, dynamics and the other aspects of music as sound, and it is commonly accepted that Adorno was among the first scholars to consider timbre as a constructive element of music in his late writings, for example in his monograph on Mahler (Adorno 1960) and in the 1966 Darmstadt lecture *Funktion der Farbe in der Musik* (Adorno 1999). This has been underlined also by scholars who take a critical stance towards some aspects of Adorno's thought and categories (Klein 1991; Sheinbaum 2006). In this respect Ernst Kurth (1886–1946) was, to say the least, an earlier exception, having devoted considerable attention to music as sound not only in his study on romantic harmony (1920), but also in his huge monograph on Bruckner (1925), in which Kurth deals in particular with dynamics, timbre, and instrumental density in the symphonies (Cecchi 2012). An idiosyncratic music theorist, Kurth focuses on Bruckner's symphonies not so much in terms of an analysis of their scores, but rather as concrete manifestations of an 'overall sound process' ('gesamter Klangverlauf') (Kurth 1925, 273). In his view, actually, the most innovative characteristic of these works is the ever-changing interrelation of timbre, density, dynamics, and register — which he compares to the continually changing shapes of the clouds (Kurth 1925, 272). More radically, Kurth hears Bruckner's 'inner fluency (*innere Gelöstheit*) of sound material (*Klangstoff*) and structure (*Klangstruktur*)' (Kurth 1925, 272) as the most significant means with which to deploy musical forces, tensions and energies in order to shape musical form as an event, that is, as a process unfolding over time. All this means that Kurth conceived of music largely as sound and as a listening experience, and that he was able to think beyond the ontology of the musical work that in any case he accepted.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Starting from these premises, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, it offers an investigation of the role of timbre, density, and dynamics in Kurth's analyses of Bruckner's symphonies so as to test his epistemological construction of music as sound. This implies discussing the limits of Kurth's metaphysical and meta-theoretical assumptions (see Lippman 1992; Rothfarb 2002; Cecchi 2015) that on the one hand lead to an overemphasis of timbre and density to the detriment of other parameters, while on the other being the stepping stone for including an insightful evaluation and a broader consideration of sound parameters in music theory. Secondly, the paper aims

at rethinking Kurth's approach in the light of more recent epistemologies of music as a 'sonorous unfolding in time' (Reybrouck 2004) and a 'real-time listening' experience (Reybrouck 2015). In this respect, examples from Bruckner's symphonies will be presented as sound experience through recordings, so as to discuss aspects of Kurth's analytical remarks relating to timbre, density, and dynamics.

Methods

The approach of the research is mixed: it resorts to the history of music theory, conceptual history, and discourse analysis for the discussion of Kurth's philosophical (i.e. metaphysical and meta-theoretical) assumptions; and it draws on recent epistemological perspectives (Reybrouck 2004 and 2015) in order to rethink Kurth's approach to music as sound process in terms of an epistemic construct. Moreover, the presentation will use software (Sonic Visualiser) to analyse through spectrograms fragments of recorded Bruckner symphonies. The visualisation of sound processes will permit the specific focus of Kurth's discourse to be emphasised, insofar as it develops in terms of a listener's experience rather than of one reading from the score.

Implications

The work underlying this paper is based on an unprecedented attention to the details of Kurth's discursive analyses of Bruckner's symphonic sound (Cecchi 2012). Among the expected implications, a reconsideration of Kurth's special focus on sound parameters such as timbre and density from the perspective of music as a process unfolding in time and an epistemic construct (Reybrouck 2004 and 2015) takes central stage. In so doing the paper tries to establish innovative perspectives, along the line of the current cross-fertilisation of sound studies and traditional musicological approaches to Western art music (Auner 2018). Other significant implications of this work are expected from the application of software for sound visualisation and analysis to recordings of Bruckner's symphonies. The application of new technologies to recorded art music presupposes and at the same time encourages a vision of music as a sonorous process unfolding over time, which reaches beyond the idea of the musical work as timeless structure fixed in the score, but at the same time interacts with this more traditional view insofar as it pertains to a different epistemic level.

Keywords

Musical Epistemology, Music Theory, Music Analysis, Ernst Kurth, Anton Bruckner, Instrumental Music, Timbre, Density, Dynamics, Texture, Instrumentation, Listening Experience, Listening Approach, Music and New Technologies, Sound Analysis, Spectrogram Analysis.

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