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The Social, Philosophical, and Narrative Act of Music Analysis: Towards a Theory of the Immanent Musical Subject

ABSTRACT

Background

The role of music analysis has been challenged somewhat in the recent developments of postmodern musicology: where it was once desirable to discuss a musical work's structural meaning using formalist theories, these were later seen to alienate a work from its pre-eminent social context. Following this trajectory, the New Musicology as it first developed in the 1970s favoured applications of *external* disciplines to complement the *internal* act of music analysis; in other words, aspects of literary or critical theory were used as an aid to the description of musical works in order to re-humanise the discipline. If we were to construct a single thread through the development of analysis in this context, then, it might broadly be drawn alongside the dichotomy between subject and object: from a focus on subjectivity within the Enlightenment project of aesthetic autonomy, the 'music itself' was then separated from this inherently philosophical and social context in formalist or 'objective' reactions, before a final return to 'the subject' through focus on a theoretical or social 'other' that subsequently disregarded the notes as a credible object of study in and of itself. It is my contention, however, that the *act* of music analysis *itself* is a social, philosophical, and narrative process that cannot be separated from either part of the subject/object dichotomy. It is precisely because the discipline has alienated form from context (and back again) that anxiety has settled around formalist analysis. This might suffice as a description of the 'problem' of music analysis broadly conceived — a deliberate nod to Adorno whose 'Zum Problemer der Musikalische Analyse', suggests a direct connection between this abstract 'problem' and misinterpretation of the subject/object dialectic.

For Adorno, this 'problem' of music analysis is conceived as a riddle or paradox found at the center of a musical work; a paradox that is mediated through traditional formal analysis in order to reveal the antagonisms of the society that produced it. He suggests, in other words, that the social and the musical are so intertwined that they are in fact mediated by each other: one cannot arrive at a conclusion about social contexts without musical form, and *visa versa*. Yet, the short text does not provide any application of such mediation within formal analysis itself, where the analyst is simply left wondering *how* the two things actually connect. I believe, however, that the text also contains suggestion of a solution. The greatest merit of this work is Adorno's conception of music analysis as an examination of the relationship between *schema* and *deviation* — a dialectic that is echoed throughout Adorno's theoretical writings and that more significantly, can also be traced through existing schemas of subjectivity. Lacan's formation of the

subject occurs according to these same two processes, which he terms masculine and feminine, but which could equally be understood as schema and deviation respectively.

The most significant analytical sub-discipline to have already attempted to deal with the integration of aesthetic elements within formal analysis is arguably that of musical narratology. Narrative theory more recently has begun to consider the function of the *relations between* elements both inside and outside of the music within a symbolic network that contributes to ideas of meaning. Byron Almén (2008) has set out a theory of musical narrative that sees a process of interaction between cultural units in which their place in a hierarchical system (their relation to convention) is challenged, which leads to a crisis (or a problem) that must be confronted. If we take the case of musical analysis to be a narrative act, then, the interaction of musical elements (cultural units) within a background of conventional form (the organization of hierarchy) causes change that leads to a crisis — sonata forms might be deformative, perceived as a crisis against the conventions of the form, for example. Crucially, this narrative process also operates according to the dialectic of schema and deviation.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper demonstrates the ways in which this narratological network of the 'relations between things' might map onto corresponding symbolic networks of musical form and philosophical subjectivity in order to construct a theory of an immanent musical subject — a manifestation of the dialectic relation between subjectivity and objectivity, aesthetics and formalism, deviation and convention — that emerges through musical analysis. It ultimately suggests that it is through this dialectic that formal analysis might more adequately connect to the social context that it has been previously removed from.

In order to explore the potential of such a claim, I will first set out the parameters of Adorno's dialectic of music analysis before mapping it alongside the Lacanian formation of the subject. The analytical subjectivity that emerges from this will then ultimately be 'quilted' back onto the musical form through two alternative readings of the opening of Beethoven's 'Waldstein' Sonata, which each interpret interactions with basic tonal conventions from within this constructed network of the 'relations between things'. It is hoped that this might ultimately provide a symbolic form within which the processes central to both social and musical identification can interact, in order to challenge this postmodern narrative of separation, and to offer a more concrete analytical form for Adorno's theory.

Methods

This paper therefore develops a new methodology for understanding dialectical subjectivity within musical form, made up of two corresponding symbolic networks that map onto each

other through the narratological theory introduced above: 1) a network of musical form, which is established through a discussion of the processes that Adorno sees as central to the interaction between musical materials and their forms; and 2) a network of philosophical subjectivity, adapted from the processes central to the Lacanian formation of the subject.

Implications

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the ways in which the aesthetic can be reconnected with the analytical — or the subject with the object — in formal analysis by offering a ‘toolkit’ for reading these narrative relational networks. It presents multiple instances of the relation of deviation to schema in musical forms as in subjects, each quilted by the idea of narrative, that ultimately support Adorno’s notion that the social and the musical mediate each other. In doing so, an immanent musical subject emerges — a subject that holds the processes within musical form as synonymous with its own formation.

Keywords

Music Aesthetics, Form, Music Hermeneutics, Common Practice Tonality, Analytical Theory, Narrative, Subjectivity.

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