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REVIEW

COHERENCE IN NEW MUSIC: EXPERIENCE, AESTHETICS, ANALYSIS, BY MARK HUTCHINSON.
NEW YORK, NY: ROUTLEDGE, 2016.

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One does not often encounter the term “coherence” in late-twentieth-century music scholarship. Presenting it as the overarching goal of his analytical excursions into western concert music from the late twentieth century, Mark Hutchinson defines coherence as “the way in which multiple domains of an experience contribute to an overall effect that transcends any one domain” (10). Multiplicity indeed characterizes the book as a whole, which consists of alternating theoretical and analytical chapters; each of the former introduces several theoretical perspectives on an experiential domain, which are then applied to a case study in each of the latter.

Hutchinson seeks to understand new music “on its own terms—the terms, above all, of heard experience and active engagement—... [without requiring] justification in the form of a systematic analytical treatise” (16–17). Coherent musical experiences arise in a listener’s mind from the interaction of expressive ideas, referential connections, and compositional processes. For Hutchinson, a musical work in its capacity as a cultural and expressive object cannot be incoherent in itself; it is rather a listener who might perceive it as such. In contrast, approaching a work “on its own terms” means engaging in “active listening” (18), which entails being responsive to a

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work's sensuous experiences and the cultural references that it affords.¹ Active listening relies on “forming” (100), or perceiving musical form as a dynamic process shaped by the moment's experience, which involves complex interactions between various experiential domains. Hutchinson's anti-reductionist stance seeks to highlight the multiplicity and contextuality of contemporary concert music rather than force recent modes of musical expression into a historical narrative of continued progress (3–4). However, among other recent analytical studies of new music, Hutchinson's stands out in identifying—in prominent twentieth century musical, philosophical, psychological, semiotic, and cognitive perspectives—an underlying contemporary worldview guided by subjective experience and shared cultural references, in which the term “extra-musical” is contradictory in its essence, because the sonorous is only one of multiple realms that music encompasses.² Therefore, the book's contribution is not only analytical, but also historical: the principles of interpretive multiplicity, subjectivity, and reference that characterize analytical approaches featured in the book embody a moment of stark ideological shift from earlier approaches that primarily relied on hierarchical organization.³

Coherence in New Music was published in the same year (and by the same publisher) as Judith Lochhead's *Reconceiving Structure in Contemporary Music*, and indeed both monographs

¹ In a recent article, Fred Maus observes that Eduard Hanslick's ideal of active listening—“following and anticipating the intentions of the composer”—perpetuates a gendered active/passive paradigm in which the active (“masculine”) role is superior (Hanslick 2018, 89; quoted in Maus 2020, 70). Hutchinson, as I clarify in the following, refers to a different mode of listening that is attuned to a work's diverse experiential domains.

² For this reason, I found Hutchinson's use of the term “extra-musical” in its conventional meaning striking and dissonant to his otherwise pluralistic agenda.

³ Robert Fink's discussion of the structural crisis in twentieth-century music analysis—the loss of hierarchy and of “musical depth” (summarized by Hutchinson on pp. 102–4)—provides a useful historical context for Hutchinson's project.

feature analyses of recent concert works guided by aesthetic considerations (Lochhead 2016). However, Hutchinson narrows his repertory to works composed in 1985–1995, to provide a “snapshot of a particular moment in time” (4). His book features examples by some of this repertory’s most prominent composers, who treat conventions as “available ‘strategies’ for the composer within a field where there are few or no overriding rules *per se*” (5), and whose techniques and styles are representative of their contemporaneous compositional landscape: György Ligeti, Kaija Saariaho, Thomas Adès, Toru Takemitsu, Henri Dutilleux, and György Kurtág.⁴

A brief analysis of Ligeti’s piano étude “Arc-en-ciel” from *Études pour piano, premier livre* (1985) that ends the first chapter demonstrates the considerable breadth of Hutchinson’s approach. The work expresses the metaphor of the rainbow from its title on several levels, including its gradual registral ascent (high registers express the rainbow’s light-colored sections, and low express dark colors) and its harmonic surprises and blurred individual sonorities that convey the rainbow’s appearance. Hutchinson also pursues Ligeti’s concurrent preoccupation with chaos theory, introducing a repeating theme in the book: an “extra-musical” metaphor that initially seems to lead into distant realms ends up providing an original and palpable perspective on the music at hand. Hutchinson eventually traces his perceived experience of chaos in “Arc-en-ciel” to the étude’s ambiguous rhythmic profile, stemming from the juxtaposition of differing metrical layers. These theoretical tangents contribute to the effectiveness of the book’s analyses and make a convincing case for Hutchinson’s approach.

⁴In contrast, Lochhead studies music by prominent women composers including Saariaho, Sofia Gubaidulina, Stacey Garrop, and Anna Clyne.

The book consists of four analytical chapters interlaced with three theoretical chapters. Each of the former is focused on a single musical composition, and each of the latter surveys (and connects) several theoretical perspectives in a single analytical area illustrated with brief musical examples. The second chapter presents an analysis of Thomas Adès's string quartet *Arcadiana* (1994), introducing strategies that are explored more fully in later chapters. The analysis is guided by three perspectives on the work drawn from Adès's statements in the liner notes and in interviews: as a series of variations on a theme that is never heard (following a reference to Berg's *Lyric Suite*); as a continuous thread made of the work's odd-numbered movements, which is interrupted anew by each of the even-numbered movements; and as a mosaic of the movements, each complete when heard by itself yet creating a different sense of completeness in interaction with the others. In constructing these complex connections between *Arcadiana*'s movements, the analysis pursues implied and overt references to other musical compositions and styles, as well as paintings and folk myths. As paratexts—accompaniments to the musical work that help “assure its presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and its consumption” (Genette 1991, 261)—these varied references are treated as part of the musical experience afforded by *Arcadiana*.⁵

Structural multiplicity and ambiguity, which characterize the book's examples, are explored in the third chapter, that concentrates on non-hierarchical approaches to structure. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of rhizome exemplifies the kind of non-hierarchical structure and unpredictability that Hutchinson finds in the repertoire (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). James Gibson's concept of affordance and its adaptation by Eric Clarke to music studies provides an approach to segmentation that features interpretive multiplicity yet is founded on a

⁵ Gérard Genette coined the term “paratext” for verbal expressions that accompany a literary work: the author's name, its title, the preface, etc. (Genette 1991).

shared object expressed in a musical score or recording (Clarke 2005). To enhance Gibson's model and express transitional moments in which perceptions might fluctuate *between* interpretive categories, Hutchinson adapts Eero Tarasti's semiotic squares to trace relationships between perceptual affordances that guide analysis (66–72). For example, a semiotic square can outline a listener's fluctuating experience between two modes of texture and articulation, in which both modes could also be heard simultaneously. Instead of an analytical tool, the squares serve a conceptual role, framing analysts' observations. While the squares neatly summarize experiential aspects such as relationships between musical layers, the analyses are not dependent upon them; rather than practical strategies for analysis, they serve a conceptual role in constructing models of structure and segmentation.

These conceptual models are applied in Chapter 4 to Kaija Saariaho's *Solar* (1993). Like the analysis of Adès's *Arcadiana*, this study also departs from a metaphor suggested in the composition's title, as well as the composer's statement in the program note, that the work was conceived as an expression of planetary gravity. Guided by the preceding chapter's topics of (non-)hierarchy and segmentation, this analysis examines *Solar* as a construction based on a simple basic unit: a sonority consisting of the harmonic overtones on the fundamental D, which generates the work's harmonic cycles. The analysis continues to explore the unpredictable musical surface focusing on textural, rhythmic, and expressive shifts that provide each harmonic cycle with a unique identity. Finally, the analysis culminates in a narrative—inspired by the metaphor of celestial gravitational forces—of gradually expanding and polarized material that alternates increasingly rapidly between intensity and calm.

Chapter 5 concentrates on structural layers. Echoing Marion Guck's critique of the distance that typically opens up between an analyst's "fictions" and listeners' perceptions (Guck 1994),

Hutchinson seeks mediating conceptual models. The first model is generated by Robert Fink’s critique of analysts pursuing hidden structure as their goal. While he accepts Fink’s ideologically motivated objection to distinctions between depth and surface that view depth as superior, Hutchinson argues for the viability of depth not as an analytical goal, but as a useful musical metaphor. He offers the term “height” as a substitute to the loaded term “depth” to distinguish perceptually significant moments from the rest of the musical surface without necessarily alluding to a hidden structure. Levinson’s concatenationism—the viewpoint according to which perceiving connections between individual moments in a composition renders large-scale structure less significant for listeners’ pleasure—emphasizes continuity (116), helping Hutchinson form a layered system that relies on significant moments rather than large scale structure. Continuity is also the problem that Hutchinson finds in Stockhausen’s moment form and its formulation by Jonathan Kramer, echoing a familiar critique on the form’s impracticality due to listeners’ perceptual inability to avoid overarching linear connections.

In the analysis of Toru Takemitsu’s tone poem *How Slow the Wind* (1991) in Chapter 6, Hutchinson proposes the theme of the Japanese Zen garden, with which Takemitsu was occupied at the time of composition, as an apt metaphor for the work’s form, which is inspired by the subjective experience and sense of ambiguity inherent in Emily Dickinson’s poem from which he drew the work’s title.⁶ *How Slow the Wind* presents aspects of moment form in its anti-linear and non-unified construction, which includes contrasting musical events either layered or alternating. Still, listeners also perceive linear connections that result from repeating appearances of the lyric

⁶ The poem reads:

How Slow the Wind—how slow the Sea—
How late their Feathers be! (Dickinson 1999, 589; quoted in Hutchinson, 123).

main theme. The piece also features a hidden structure in its subsections, whose proportions are based on the golden section. However, analytical avenues focused on the musical “surface,” such as the structural functions of timbre and harmonic variety, are more immediately perceptible to a listener and express Takemitsu’s compositional approach that favors an individual, moment-to-moment listening experience (121).

Chapter 7 consolidates theories of musical meaning into an approach that balances hermeneutics with formalism. The chapter departs from Stravinsky’s claim that “music is . . . essentially powerless to express anything at all” (145) and Joseph Straus’s contrary attempt to apply topic theory to Stravinsky’s modernist works (Straus 2001). Hutchinson proposes that David Metzger’s concept of “compositional states”—“the shaping of a musical language in a work so as to emulate a specific ideal” (Metzger 2009, 8)—provides a more generalized substitute for topic theory, making it practicable for contemporary music analysis. The chapter’s second part focuses on the impact verbal expression (such as an analytical text) can have on listeners’ perception of musical meaning. The discussion is engendered by Carolyn Abbate’s (2004) sense of anxiety about written expression’s influence on listeners’ experiences. To balance the multiplicity inherent in one’s musical experience with the need to scrutinize it in conclusive verbal expressions, the discussion turns to Nicholas Cook’s approach to musical meaning as a process of conceptual blending defined on one hand by a composition’s affordances and on the other by a listener’s subject position (Cook 2001).⁷

Chapter 8—an analysis of György Kurtág’s *Stele* (1994)—presents an example of Cook’s

⁷In defining music as an object whose materiality shapes its perception, Cook draws from Daniel Miller’s ecological theory of culture (Miller 1987). Cook’s metaphorical approach to meaning draws from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, who define conceptual blending as the mental process by which metaphors are created through connections made between otherwise distinct conceptual realms (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 29–57).

approach when applied to contemporary repertoire. The analysis focuses on the first movement and explores meaning and signification from multiple perspectives. The first, formalist reading presents the movement as a process of chromatically filling in an open octave. The second reading examines the movement's acoustic aspects as an expression of grief, and the third interprets the movement as a mournful metaphor for a paradise lost. This last reading is supported by the work's multiple references to Friedrich Hölderlin's poems and a quotation from Beethoven's *Leonore* overtures. Altogether, I find this approach to Kurtág's work attractive especially for its observations on pitch, rhythm, timbre, and gesture, which support a multifaceted hermeneutic interpretation. One piece is nevertheless missing in the puzzle of references that Hutchinson weaves in this chapter: a discussion of agency in instrumental music would allow Hutchinson to explore the musical persona already implied in his interpretation, a persona that feels grief and expresses mourning.⁸ However, this minor theoretical gap detracts little from this overall rich and informed interpretation.

Hutchinson's approach contextualizes each of the book's musical examples not only in the composer's stylistic practice, but also in the composition's philosophical and historical backdrops. It is subjective in allowing multiple interpretations, but these interpretations are always grounded in music's heard aspects. Therefore, at the same time that the analyses in *Coherence in New Music* convey the author's listening experience, they present readers with new ways of experiencing the works for themselves.

There are two areas in which the book would have benefitted from expansion. The first involves a direction for study that Hutchinson suggests but does not pursue. Multimodal

⁸ Robert Hatten's book on musical agency was not available to Hutchinson (Hatten 2018), but Hatten's earlier work, including the comprehensive article on emotion in music that he co-authored with Jenefer Robinson (Robinson and Hatten 2012), could provide the theoretical framework for such discussion.

metaphors are essential to the book's analytical observations, because active listening (which is required for perceiving coherence in new music) relies on paratexts such as composition titles, program notes, musical quotations, etc. Indeed, the analyses convincingly demonstrate that these "extra-musical" texts shape listeners' perceptions of music. The analyses also show that musical paratexts can include a plethora of references to literature, other art forms, natural phenomena, and mythical paradigms, to name just a few of the referential realms evoked in this book. Hutchinson asserts that such multimodal metaphors are multidirectional, meaning that a musical piece is shaped by "extra-musical" elements at the same time as it shapes one's understanding of them.⁹ Yet the analyses focus on the way in which musical interpretation is influenced by other art forms; the complementary discussion—of the influence of musical interpretation on the perception of those other art forms—is not explicitly developed.

The second area involves the nature of the repertory that Hutchinson covers. The book's musical examples feature complex and heterogeneous expressive strategies; this variegation is even more deeply inscribed in the way each composition lends itself to some of the book's analytical probes but not to others. At the same time, the works' homogeneity in terms of their instrumentation, notation, and the common stylistic tradition to which they belong as instrumental works composed around the same time and under the same cultural norms (of the western concert music tradition) somewhat hinders the book's project, because other types of music prevalent in contemporary western music's landscape—vocal works, improvised music, experimental works that employ extended instrumental techniques, innovative notation, and many other features—are left out of the discussion even though Hutchinson's multimodal approach

⁹"In almost all the analytical studies, the interpretative connotations of titles and other paratextual elements shape our hearing of each piece and are reshaped by it in turn" (189).

could be equally revealing when applied to these repertoires, which arguably present an even more challenging task for an analyst in having fewer established analytical approaches. Hutchinson's critique of Levinson's limitation of repertory (to works guided by "continuation, progression, development, evolution, and directionality"¹⁰) seems appropriately directed at his own project: his choice of works runs the risk of categorizing contemporary music into works that present closeness to tradition and works that seem to radically break from it, suggesting a preference for the former at the expense of the latter.

These qualms do not detract from the project's impressive contribution to new music's analytical toolkit. Hutchinson's accomplishment—an engaging survey of approaches from the past few decades, assimilated into an outlook on music analysis in a particular moment—renders this book relevant and helpful for music scholars of the different sub-disciplines who engage with multimodal music study.

¹⁰Levinson (1997), 15.

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