

Peter Kivy, *Sounding Off. Eleven Essays in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 296, £ 41.00, ISBN 9780199697526

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Peter Kivy's latest book contains an inspiring selection of essays in the philosophy of music. It discusses a broad array of problems, including musical genius, authenticities and the perception of music; and relations between music and moral, religious, political and scientific categories, mediated by the concepts of meaning, representation and intention. The four main parts of the volume are followed by two large polemic appendices which contribute to the discussion of the previously treated issues (genius again, and the "great divide" in the history of the Western musical culture), thus offering a *tour de force* of impeccably clear and well-pondered argumentation. The book's straightforward, sparkling and, at times, colloquial style (so typical of Kivy) makes it an accessible and highly rewarding read for a whole range of readers. It offers some significant critical insight into scientific research on music, including a detailed discussion of some recent claims made in psychology and musicology.

Part I and the first Appendix deal with the problem of musical genius. In the opening essay, *Mozart's skull*, Kivy discusses and defends the basic idea of genius in music (and the emblematic case of Mozart's genius) against ideologically-motivated attempts at its conceptual deconstruction. He maintains that it is not possible, nor would it be desirable to arrive at a scientific explanation for genius. It is the very precocity and magnitude of Mozart's musical ability and achievement that daunt us, stimulating our curiosity but remaining an inexplicable mystery despite all our scientific efforts to shed light on the phenomenon. According to Kivy, the genius problem is comparable in this respect to the hard problem of consciousness. This is not necessarily a drawback, however, since the mysterious quality of Mozart's music enriches our experience of it.

Kivy defends this position against some recent attempts to dismiss the whole issue by denying the very existence of geniuses by means of politically-driven "demystification" (T. DeNora, P. Higgins). The "post-modern genius syndrome" is

the fear of genius, seen as an elitist concept that presupposes a radical, innate inequality between human beings and provides an objective standard for artistic evaluation. Scholars prone to this “syndrome” claim that “*all* geniuses are politically constructed” (p.15), and so is our experience of their works. Kivy’s refutation of these claims appeals to the “experience of the transcendent beauty of Mozart’s music” (ibid.). He argues that it is inconceivable to accept the political deconstruction theory and still have this sort of experience.

The miniature *Case of the purloined partitur* compares three parallel stories concerning the early musical education of G. Ph. Telemann, G. F. Handel and J. S. Bach. They all follow the same “plot archetype” (p.27), namely that of the *Wunderkind*’s disobedience and perseverance in his approach to music despite the disapproval of his elders. In Bach’s case this narrative pattern prevails over the biographical facts; it is part of the genius mythography. “But *genius* is *not* a myth – concludes Kivy. – It is the *fact* that the myths are about” (p.30).

Appendix I contains a detailed response to J.O. Young’s vigorous criticism of Kivy’s account of musical genius and how it was shaped by the philosophical elaboration of the concept of genius in Kant and Schopenhauer, following two ancient paradigms: Longinian (for Handel and Beethoven) and Platonic (for Mozart). Kivy rejects all of Young’s critical claims and interprets the historical examples of usage of the term “genius” prior to Handel as mere footnotes to what he likes to call the “grand narrative” on the modern concept of musical genius.

Part II contains three essays on musical *Authenticities*, a subject already treated at length by the author in the book of that name. Kivy thinks of musical authenticity necessarily in the plural, primarily because he distinguishes the authenticity of performance from that of understanding and appreciation. Secondly, this is because the historical authenticity of performance can be understood in three ways: as 1. *intention*, i.e. the realisation “of the composer’s intentions with regard to how the particular work in question should be performed” (p.91); as 2. *sound*, i.e. the reproduction of the sounds that an audience contemporary with the composer would have heard; and as 3. *practice*, i.e. the performing of a piece in the way music was played in the composer’s time and *milieu*. This is a wholly conceptual distinction, since it is perfectly feasible for

conditions 1, 2.1 (cf. *infra*) and 3 to coincide in the same performance.

In more detail, Kivy further divides authenticity as *sound* (2), depending on whether it is meant as a purely physical (acoustic) phenomenon or as an intentional (heard-as) object, into 2.1 *sonic* and 2.2 *sensible* authenticity. This is a crucial point because the musical sensibility of a concert-goer of today arguably differs from the pre-Wagnerian and pre-tonal listener's sensibilities. The same acoustic phenomenon of minor sixth or third heard by modern-day ears is a consonance, but this was not so for a pre-classical listener etc. The mere reproduction of the *sonic* structure might therefore not be sufficient today, nor even necessary, to achieve the *sensible* effect that it had on an audience around 1600 or 1400. Instead, in the words of Arthur Danto cited by Kivy, to attain such a sensible authenticity (in some cases at least) "we must 'elicit equivalent experiences through *inequivalent* stimuli'"(p.92).

Kivy uses these basic distinctions to elucidate various problems and tensions underlying the widespread *historically informed performance* movement, and to argue as well against the "new criticism" in musicology (S. McClary). His argument is roughly that if you accept the death of the author thesis (R. Barthes, S. Fish) applied to music, namely that the composer's authority over his work's meaning fails to hold, then you have no rational grounds for concerning yourself with the author's intentions regarding the music's performance. But, according to Kivy, this is the only possible justification for any historically authentic performance (p.63). Therefore, either one of the pillars of modern historical musicology is unfounded, or the "intentional fallacy" argument cited by the proponents of the "new criticism" in order to attribute sexual and political content to works of absolute music is invalid.

Opera *is* music, it is drama-made-music (and not the other way round, despite the attempts of the *Camerata fiorentina* to make opera *dramma per musica*). Kivy points out that the quality of the music (not of the libretto) is the only criterion used to position an operatic work in the repertoire. Also, while it is common practice to present concert versions or orchestral transcriptions of operas, it would be hard to imagine a stage version of an opera without any music. He says that the musical setting for conversational speech essential to opera makes of it "perfect musical form and perfect conversational nonsense"

(p.95), considering the radically different pace of speech and singing, and because of the frequent patterns of repetition (e.g. *Da Capo aria*) needed in a closed musical form, but clearly foreign to the nature of conversation. The author claims that the original verbal layer of an opera is a part of its *musical* text and therefore the practice of staging Italian opera in English (*vide*: English National Opera) can be criticised not just because it is historically inauthentic, but also and more importantly because it fails to perform the opera at all.

Part III includes four variegated essays on meaning and representation in music. The first two examine questions deeply rooted in the more general problem. Can we speak of the meaning of a work of music in terms that would justify an *epistemic* and *moral* assessment of that meaning? If so, under what conditions? Would such an assessment be relevant to the work's *artistic* value? In *Messiah's message* Kivy argues against one musicologist's claim that Handel's oratorio "was designed to teach contempt for Jews and Judaism" (M. Marissen cit. in p.114). He takes the position that morality and immorality, truth and falsity can be attributed to works of art, and that these qualities are their artistic virtues and defects, respectively. As to *Messiah*, in particular, Kivy exculpates Handel of anti-Semitism, though he still blames him for the artistic defect of having falsely represented the Jews. In the same manner, to a convinced atheist, the oratorio (like any other piece of sacred music) has the general demerit of projecting the theistic world view.

This very problem comes under scrutiny in the second essay, *Is nothing sacred?* Can an atheist fully appreciate a religious work of art? Kivy advances a Jamesian distinction between *live* and *dead hypotheses* that, when applied to their attitude to the religious message, respectively characterise the *non-aggressive* and the *dogmatic atheist*. It is not a matter of whether or not we share the religious faith implicit in a work of music that makes us appreciate it to the full, but whether or not we still see said faith as a *live hypothesis*. The *dogmatic atheist's* appreciation of sacred music is therefore somewhat diminished, but the same does not apply to the *non-aggressive* atheist. Any "humanistic" interpretation of religious art offering a naturalised, symbolic, psychoanalytic or other reduction of an artwork's theistic content should be dismissed as a misinterpretation. For "when

you change the work's meaning you are *ipso facto* turning it into a different work" (p.139).

In his *Sound in sound* essay, Kivy explores the category of *sonic representation* in 18th-century music, citing examples from Handel's *Saul* and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. He recalls E.T. Cone's distinction between "realistic song" and "operatic song" to construe a parallel category for instrumental music, where by "realistic music" he means the "representation of music in music" (p.149). Kivy responds to some objections to the pictorial representation of music in music advanced by R. Scruton, J. Robinson and S. Davies.

In *Music, science and semantics* the author offers a severe methodological criticism of some recent attempts (A. Patel) to probe musical meaning by means of experimental psychology.

Contrary to what the cover note says, Part IV contains two essays. In *Authorial intention and the musical parameters* Kivy argues against the apparently plausible dualism of the intention-bound content and the pure musical parameters of a composition, that some consider to be independent of intention. All such musical devices as cadenza, imitation, modulation etc., are authorial-intention-relative; no function can be attributed to pure sound structures if not on the grounds of the composer's presumed intention.

The closing essay, *Leonard Meyer's sonata*, is a rare and intriguing example of what we might be tempted to call the *music of philosophy*, albeit only as a roughly-sketched outline. It interprets Meyer's thought in its entirety as a two-theme sonata movement. Furthermore, this interpretative metaphor is presented in a literary form that intentionally evokes sonata-form structure and leads the reader through it.

Sounding off is a book whose author does not hesitate to make audacious claims. Some of them, like "operas in general are not *about* anything" (p.105), are striking, but convincing too. Others, like Kivy's authorial-intention-focused analysis of an artwork's meaning as if it were a kind of utterance, leave ample room for doubt. Some of the empirical premises for the author's philosophical reasoning warrant scrutiny (as, I believe, in the case of *Operatic authenticity*, as far as Europe's stages are concerned at least). These and other potentially debatable points, however, by virtue of the author's much-praised merits of clear style and argumentation, make the book even more valuable as a stimulus for further discussion and research.

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