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Music Theory as Knowledge Building

Since the summer of 2001, things we had considered solid and unchanging were radically altered by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. As a resident of the New York City area, I experienced in palpable ways the upheavals to a normal existence: a colleague whose spouse just escaped, students whose parents were among the lucky ones, and alumni who were not. In the fall of 2001, reflection on the present moment of the music theoretical enterprise and what lies ahead in the new millennium seemed strikingly irrelevant. Within the shadow of an ever-escalating cycle of world terrorism and reprisal, a "business as usual" approach to my work was unthinkable. But the unthinkable brought about reflection that eventually led not to a reconceptualization but rather to a rediscovery of the underlying motivation for understanding music—a motivation that I propose to think of as knowledge building.

Study of the history of music theory and its attendant analytical practices provides evidence of the conceptual milestones that mark the historical path of theory-building. And each of these milestones corresponds to processes of understanding that eventually have taken shape as formal concepts. Rather than focus on these conceptual milestones, I propose to consider the aspects of process and discovery in the theoretical enterprise, to establish how the practice of music theory may be understood within a broader context of living in the world. I begin by distinguishing between perceptual and conceptual understanding, establishing a reciprocity

between them, and finally linking understanding to the task of building knowledge.¹

Perceptual understanding encompasses the sensory and physical acts of musical engagement such as listening, performing, or composing. These are practices of either production or apprehension in which individuals are actively engaged in sensuous and non-reflective modes of understanding a sounding world. Such non-reflective understanding is fundamentally interpretive: that is, understanding entails the constitution of meaning through the freedom of the constructive imagination and the constraints of a prior framework of possibilities. The mix of imaginative freedom with a delimiting framework characterizes an understanding which is both creative and repetitive. The creative dimension flows from the productive and dynamic features of cognition and the repetitive arises from the sedimented forms of knowledge that establish possibility. Such frameworks are constructed from different types of learning: unconscious learning as part of acculturation, informal learning within a cultural context, and formal learning in specific educational context. Perceptual engagement with music, either as performance, composition, or listening, enacts in practice these frameworks of possibility in broadly creative modes of practical understanding. Thus, such understanding entails both constitutive acts of making something anew and the repetitive acts of deploying existing ways of apprehending the world.

Conceptual understanding is not entirely distinct from perceptual understanding, but unlike the practical and sensory nature of the perceptual, conceptual understanding operates at a conscious level of linguistic or symbolic formulation and representation. In this conscious mode, individuals take as their goal the linguistic or symbolic modeling of their lived world. Music theoretical and analytical work is a type of conceptual understanding, consisting of the development of new and the

¹ My account of the distinctions and relations between perceptual and conceptual understanding is grounded in the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans Georg Gadamer. See in particular: Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*; Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*; and Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

deployment of existing conceptual models.² These models are the conceptual milestones of the history of music theory mentioned earlier which have taken various forms—number, linguistic concept, symbol, metaphor, and so forth.

A conscious conceptual engagement with musical phenomena begins from perceptual understanding and hence is fundamentally linked to practical modes of sensory apprehension and production. But while the formal modes of understanding have their genesis in practical modes, it is important to remember that such modes are themselves affected by various types of learning, including the conceptual. The interaction of perceptual and conceptual modes of understanding is a dynamic and historically variable process that generates change at fundamental levels of understanding.

Knowledge is a term referring to both kinds of understanding. On one hand, it refers to the store of more formal modes of understanding. It is reflected in codified and systematized forms that are typically found in textbooks, and it constitutes the backbone of education. Knowledge may also refer to practical and more general forms of engaging the world. A savvy carpenter, for instance, will have most likely acquired a host of knowledge about measurement and force from a very practical engagement with the materials and equipment used for construction. In general then, knowledge refers to the results of both perceptual and conceptual understanding. It arises from and stands as the marker of the processes of understanding.

The music theoretical enterprise is an activity engaging the theorist in both perceptual and conceptual understanding, and its eventual result is the building not simply of the codified and systematic forms of knowledge but also of those forms that flow into the activities of perceptual and conceptual understanding. Music theory may thus be understood to play a significant role in processes of historical change that result in cultural renewal. The issue here is not simply the historical variability of the field's

² I do not mean to imply a wedge here between theoretical and historical modes of music scholarship, since historical studies often require the development of new concepts about musical sound.

conceptual milestones, but more significantly the variability of perceptual and conceptual understanding. These processes of understanding link the theoretical enterprise to the very nature of hearing and thus to the renewal of musical conception itself.

The musical theoretical enterprise may have no particular solution to the problems of world terrorism, but the task of the music theorist is very much of the world. Focus on its processual nature allows the epistemological function of theoretical work to appear. The theoretical task of moving from the practical domain of perceptual understanding to the formal domain of conceptual understanding is one that both clarifies and shapes the practical domain, and at the same time the theoretical task contributes to the transformation of knowledge—to keeping knowledge dynamic and relevant, to the way we conduct our lives in a world in which terrorist acts occur.

Judy Lochhead



A Story, An Apologia, and A Survey

My department of graduate study ran two independent programs, one in theory and the other in history. They were quite separate operations, and the concerns of one were rarely noticed by the other. The faculty itself cleaved along programmatic lines for political and ideological reasons, and it was not hard to get the impression that one's alma mater was to be the particular program, not the whole department.

Fate had it that, while the two student populations mostly but not entirely pursued separate courses, they came together haphazardly for fellowship in the library stacks, over coffee and lunch, and at parties, both official and unofficial. Friendships blossomed despite academic segregation. A few of us, finding our friends in the other program to be kindred spirits of one kind or