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PROJECT

Music and Subjectivity: Hearing the Self in 19th-Century Music

"Subjectivity" is one of the most popular and yet at the same time most obscure terms in the modern human sciences, and nowhere is this more evident than in its use in relation to music. Though for at least two centuries music has commonly been understood as an art intimately bound up with our feelings of self and subjective being, it is decidedly unclear quite how musical sounds can be heard to create a sense of quasi-human agency or presence. One side effect of such methodological imprecision is that discussion of music and subjectivity is often vague and ambiguous, with a plethora of apparently distinct but related terms regularly being called upon (subjectivity, persona, agency, presence, etc.).

My proposed research seeks to interrogate the notion of musical subjectivity through a combination of musical, historical and philosophical perspectives. Conceived as part of an ongoing wider project on subjectivity in 19th-century music, the current proposal focuses on the production of a monograph-length study concentrating particularly on the music of Robert Schumann. This will combine close analysis of his music, consideration of the historical and cultural context in which it emerged, and broader philosophical discussion of the idea of subjectivity. Ultimately my aims are twofold: to achieve a critical refinement of how the concept of subjectivity is applied to music, and to investigate the importance of music in constructing a modern sense of self.

Recommended Reading

Taylor, Benedict. *The Melody of Time: Music and Temporality in the Romantic Era*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

- . *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory: The Romantic Conception of Cyclic Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

- . "Absent Subjects and Empty Centres: Eichendorff's Romantic Phantasmagoria and Schumann's Liederkreis, Op. 39." *19th-Century Music* 40, 3 (2017): 201-222.

In Search of a Musical Subject: Music, Subjectivity, and Schumann

The concept of subjectivity is one of the most popular in scholarly accounts of music in recent decades; it is also one of the obscurest and most ill-defined. Rarely do the numerous writings that draw upon the idea stop to interrogate what the term means or how it might be supported. This is due less to scholarly indolence, I think, than to the fact that many writers feel they instinctively know what the term means and recognise that it can serve an important, if not indispensable purpose, but find that attempting a better definition gets them caught in a conceptual thicket.

The difficulty arises in part as subjectivity appears not to be a single thing. Neither is it, at least by some accounts, reducible to a group of things. Slightly more securely subjectivity might be argued to be a relation between things. But it is one where its apparent basis - the subject or self - is itself hotly disputed, even denied by some commentators. And then, even after coming to some provisional answer to all of these concerns, how do we even begin to relate this concept to music, which similarly appears to elude verbal confinement? Faced with this state of affairs one might be forgiven for dismissing the whole topic as yet another musicological example of conceptual diffuseness, idle hermeneutics. Yet for all these evident difficulties, still we rely on it implicitly or explicitly to underpin various assertions made about music and its effect on us. We may not be exactly sure what subjectivity is but much of the reception of Western classical music in the last few centuries seems premised upon it.

In this talk I set out some of the issues that I am trying to tackle in the monograph I am currently writing on this topic (title still undecided, though "Music, Subjectivity, and Schumann" is the current frontrunner!). We start with a handful of musical examples from Schumann's music to which subjective qualities may be - and have been - ascribed with varying degrees of plausibility. (It is in fact of particular interest to me how scholars in other disciplines may or may not accept some of these interpretations.) This is used as a springboard for a more detailed account of how we might try to define the term's application to music, following the outlines of my book's opening chapter, somewhat hubristically entitled "Defining Subjectivity". Problematising the topic of musical subjectivity, this explicates the various meanings that have been given to this awkward notion and through increasing clarification proposes a range of potential meanings. Subjectivity here appears to refer to the experience of music as akin to a living being, an animate consciousness, but such that the experience may be of an apparent immediacy that shades it into a privileged first-person perspective - as if somehow viewing it as part of oneself. I go on to look in turn to how subjectivity manifests itself both in music and in history, interrogating the notion of the musical subject through a series of questions that may be summarised as who, how and where, when and why?

Taylor, Benedict (Leuven,2021)

Clara Wieck's A minor piano concerto : formal innovation and the problem of parametric disconnect in early romantic music

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=181133427X>

Taylor, Benedict (Cambride [u.a.],2021)

'Ein sonderbar' Ding' : music, the historical and the problem of temporal representation in Der Rosenkavalier

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1765647908>

Taylor, Benedict (Cork,2020)

[Rezension von: Grimes, Nicole, Brahms elegies : the poetics of loss in the nineteenth-century German culture]

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1725862816>

Taylor, Benedict (2020)

Mendelssohn and sonata form : the case of op. 44 No. 2

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1725319764>

Taylor, Benedict (New York,2020)

Rethinking Mendelssohn

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1725319527>

Taylor, Benedict (Berleley, Calif.,2017)

Absent subjects and empty centers : Eichendorff's romantic phantasmagoria and Schumann's Liederkreis, Op. 39

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1668581027>

Taylor, Benedict (Oxford,2016)

The melody of time : music and temporality in the Romantic era

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1617598402>

Taylor, Benedict (Abingdon,2014)

Schubert and the construction of memory : the string quartet in A minor, D.804 ('Rosamunde')

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1668581469>