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Part I
Institutional dimensions and the
contexts of listening



1

Music and literature: the institutional dimensions



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I

Comparative studies may look at the contacts, overlappings, and interactions between fields, or they may consider general analogies and contrasts between them. The former undoubtedly provide a sounder base and surer methodology than general comparisons, which are often arbitrary in their choices and vague in their conclusions. But interactions and overlappings usually occur at the disciplinary margins, which tend to appear indeed marginal to those who work in the respective fields.

Like most comparatists, I question the epistemological value of disciplinary boundaries, but, as my very title indicates, I recognize that we live in institutions whose divisional boundaries, however arbitrary, are difficult to overcome. Genuinely successful interdisciplinary studies of a “margin” will have to convince the scholars at the center that questions at the margin are actually central to their field. Such studies should foster then a perspectival shift of what is important in a field, a reinterpretation of what is center and what is margin.

Within mixed genres, like opera and the Lied, the music is more often part of the canonical musical repertoire than the text of the canonized literature. Though dual genres are both legitimate and important as subjects of comparative studies, they usually yield specialized results which do not lend themselves to the kind of generalized conclusions that are necessary to combat professional parochialism. If we are to convince our colleagues that the joint study of music and literature is important, we must demonstrate that our conclusions affect what they do.

These introductory remarks on “disciplinary politics” should give a taste of my institutional approach and indicate at the same time that I shall be concerned with broad comparisons and contrasts rather than with specific “interactions.” The urgency of my

topic is indicated by the great interest that both musicologists and literary critics have shown in institutional approaches to their own fields. The time may be ripe to explore these approaches on a comparative basis.

This recent interest is manifest in theoretical and historical studies of the institutions and conventions that govern the creation, dissemination, and reception of artworks, which is itself part of a general shift from subject-centred, idealist, intellectual, and diplomatic explanations to sociological studies from “below,” be they of the Marxist, neo-Marxist, or the *Annales*-school variety. To this general, art-external factor we may add several art-internal, aesthetic factors, foremost among them the twentieth-century development of the arts itself, the renewed effort by each generation to wash out the structures and borders of artworks established by the previous generations.

This constant disassembling and parodying of previous art, emblemized by Duchamp’s exhibiting of a real urinal, has made it all but impossible to define once and for all what artworks are. Although there have been many attempts in the twentieth century to define the essential features of the arts, such ontological definitions have proved to be an easy prey to critics. The failure of efforts to define what art *is* has led to newer approaches that ask rather how it *functions*.¹ And this leads to questions about institutions, for functioning always takes place within a social–institutional framework.

The shift from ontological towards functional approaches to art is evident in Arthur Danto’s article on the “Artworld,” which focuses on art that traditionally would not have been considered art at all. After considering the work of Warhol, Rauschenberg, and others, Danto concludes: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of history of art: an artworld.”² In other words, an object becomes art if it is placed within the historical, critical, and

¹ When asked what attracts him to Wittgenstein, John Cage answered that he had retained the sentence: “Something’s meaning is how you use it.” (Daniel Charles, ed., *For the Birds, John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* [Boston and London, 1981], p. 153.) Cage presumably refers to Wittgenstein’s statement on language: “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn. [New York, 1968], p. 20), but Wittgenstein adds that not all word-meanings are defined by use.

² Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” in *Culture and Art*, ed. Lars Aagard-Mogensen (Atlantic Highlands, 1976), p. 16. This article first appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571–84.

philosophical matrix of the artworld. Danto shifts from internal to external defining features, but the external matrix is for him intellectual rather than sociological. It is therefore appropriate that he should speak of an “artworld” rather than of an art institution.

George Dickie takes Danto’s approach a step further by explicitly subtling his book “An Institutional Analysis.” Like Danto, Dickie turns to institutions because earlier attempts have failed to define artworks,³ but, whereas Danto takes issue with those who want to define artworks in terms of special internal “aesthetic” features, Dickie polemicizes primarily against those who approach the issue from the reception side, seeking to define artworks by reference to the “aesthetic states of mind” they elicit. Furthermore, Dickie gives little attention to the intellectual conditions of art: he concentrates “on the practices and conventions used in presenting certain aspects of works of art to their audiences,” because he believes that these “presentational conventions” locate or isolate the aesthetic objects.⁴ Danto’s intellectual “artworld” becomes in Dickie’s adaptation an institution with “an established practice.”⁵ Works become aesthetic if they are objects of this institutional practice.

Thus Dickie’s notion of institutional practice corresponds to the notion of literary competence and conventions that Jonathan Culler established coming from structuralist linguistics. For Culler wants to reformulate statements of “facts about literary texts” in terms of “conventions of literature and operations of reading” occurring within literature as an institution. Thus, for instance, instead of defining literary texts in terms of their internal features of fictionality, we may say “that to read a text as literature is to read it as fiction.”⁶ If a text is placed within the literary institution, we apply to it modes of understanding that treatments of fiction have conventionalized, and we may apply those modes even to historical, philosophical, or psychoanalytical texts that are not normally considered fictional. No text *is* fiction by virtue of its internal features; texts *become* fiction by being treated as such.

Another institutional approach to the arts can be traced through the works of the Frankfurt School, whose major landmarks are

³ George Dickie, *Art and Aesthetic. An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1974), p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1975), p. 128. Culler’s reformulation may rid us of the problem of defining fiction in terms of internal features, but it continues to hold on to the equally problematic notion that literature is fiction.

Walter Benjamin's essay on the impact of the "reproducible" artforms of photography and film, Theodor Adorno's sociology of music, and Peter Bürger's notion of literature as institution.

Adorno's music sociology, which originated in the early 1930s and culminated in his 1961–62 introductory lectures, offers a wealth of brilliant ideas on the concrete musical institutions of opera, chamber music, music criticism, and the orchestra. Furthermore, it paves the way towards reception-oriented interpretations by repeatedly demonstrating that social practices may ill fit or abuse particular musical forms. Thus, for instance, Adorno's lecture on opera⁷ sets out to disprove the traditional assumption that "der ästhetische Stand musikalischer Formen und Gebilde und ihre gesellschaftliche Funktion harmonierten ohne weiteres. Statt dessen kann die Rezeption von Gebilden von ihrem gesellschaftlichen Ursprung und Sinn bis zum Bruch sich entfernen."⁸

It should be obvious from this formulation that in Adorno's view intrinsic meaning remains the standard. The meaning acquired by institutional practices may deviate from this meaning, but it does not by itself create meaning, it does not endow previously as yet "meaningless" works with semantic content. Adorno repeatedly criticizes those who blithely ascribe concrete and definite semantic content to music, but he too believes that musical form can be transcribed into verbal meaning by way of a "materiale Formenlehre."⁹ After all, the "ästhetische Stand musikalischer Formen und Gebilde" can clash with their social use only if these "Formen und Gebilde" have an intrinsic, use-independent (perhaps even intentional) meaning. Precisely this belief is questioned in recent, more radical institutional approaches to the arts.

The work of Adorno and Benjamin became Peter Bürger's point of departure in formulating an explicitly "institutional" analysis of the historical avant-garde. According to Bürger, "art as institution" (*Institution Kunst*) includes "the art-producing and art-distributing apparatus as well as the dominant ideas about art in a certain epoch, which essentially determine the reception of works."¹⁰ This general definition serves as a basis for Bürger's two theses: first, that art's autonomy is the informing idea of the art-institution in the bourgeois epoch, and second, that this bourgeois institution was radically, but unsuccessfully, attacked by the

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1962), pp. 81–95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81. ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 3rd edn. (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), p. 29.

historical avant-garde in the early decades of this century. I shall return to these notions later.

We may look at the emergence of institutional theories from yet another angle, by following the twists and turns of twentieth-century critical conceptions. Musical analysis and New Criticism, the dominant modes of mid-century, focused on “the work in itself,” its internal features; they questioned the notion that art was “expression” and they rejected the “genetic fallacy” that scholarship was to recover authorial intentions. Both musical and literary scholarship turned against the idealistic view that the author’s transcendental subject was the defining origin and center of artworks, and maintained that one could identify a core of stable meaning in artworks without reference to the originating subject behind them. Reference to subjects as receptors or consumers of artworks was considered to be a similar, “affective” fallacy.

Postmodernists find the “work in itself” diffuse rather than organically coherent and meaningful. Their sensitivity to the “fuzziness” of literary texts may actually move literature closer to music, for it attributes a kind of elusive semantic content to literature that has traditionally been considered typical of music. From a postmodernist perspective, New Criticism’s search for intrinsic meaning in texts is a form of fact-chasing that merely displaces the earlier positivist search for biographical and historical facts. Postmodernist critical theorists are apt to point out that both forms of positivism tend to camouflage the personal and ideological bias of interpretation.

That artworks have a “weak identity” is an idea that informs such widely differing conceptions as Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Wolfgang Iser’s “Leerstellen,” Umberto Eco’s “open works of art,” Roland Barthes’s “scriptible” texts, and various formulations of “expression,” including Nelson Goodman’s definition of it as “metaphoric exemplification.”¹¹ All of these notions imply today’s critical commonplace that artworks are inexhaustibly interpretable, but they draw different consequences from it. Deconstructionist critics like Derrida or de Man trace the indeterminacy of texts to the nature of language itself.¹² Their critique of logocentrism, their

¹¹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960); Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens* (Munich, 1976); Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, 1979); Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970); and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2nd edn. (Ind. 1976).

¹² The work of Michel Foucault represents a special case for two reasons. Following Nietzsche, Foucault occasionally takes a “deconstructionist” view of language, although

sophisticated exploration of the breaks, discrepancies, and contradictions in the “languages of art” (Goodman) have undermined the age-old belief in the unity and determinacy of artworks and offer no substitute for it. The lacking logical coherence in language simultaneously signals the dissolution of the subject as a meta-physical entity, so that the indeterminate text cannot be given stable meaning by referring “backward” to the creator’s intention. Artworks are richer than the meaning their authors imputed to them.¹³

Of those who agree that authorial intention cannot be the yardstick of meaning and artworks are intrinsically indeterminate, many resist a radical deconstruction of meaning by making the reader, the listener, and the critic or scholar the foundation of meaning. But how stable can a meaning be if it is imputed by historically and culturally bound recipients? To this question I should want to turn by considering recent notions of performance.

II PERFORMANCE

Before the spread of printed books, all three literary genres – poetry and prose as well as theater – were usually performed, often in conjunction with some form of music. The silent reading of print gradually replaced reciting and communal reading, and this led to a gap between poetry and prose on the one hand, and drama, which remained a performing art, on the other. Recent literary criticism has recognized, however, that readers have a constructive role in making a text, and it has become customary to speak of the “reader’s performance” as an act by which the text is actually constituted, not unlike the performative constitution of music. Has literature thereby moved back into the vicinity of music? The performance-metaphor of literary reception is suggestive and useful, although I suggest that we not abuse it.

Let us start with the role of notation in performance. If every aspect of sound-production could be encoded in a score, performers

this is not the image that emerges from his *The Order of Things* (New York, 1971). Furthermore, unlike most of the deconstructionists, Foucault is very much interested in the functioning of institutions and institutional power, as witnessed, for instance, in his work on the history of madness. Yet his work on institutions seems to run parallel to, rather than inform, his work on the arts.

¹³ E. D. Hirsch’s well-known proposal, in his *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967), to distinguish between “meaning” (the author’s original intention) and “significance” (a work’s interpretation by the author or anybody else) seems sensible to me but hardly a practical way to get agreement, since the authorial intention is elusive.

would have no freedom; creative performance is made possible because of inadequacies in notation. Composers who no longer believe that they own and control their work can grant creative freedom to the performer by reducing or minimizing notation. This is indeed what John Cage, one of the most radical critics of “well-wrought” artworks, wants: “my task is to open up the personality; I also want to open up the work so that it may be interpreted in various ways”; “we should forget the relationship between writing and what is heard”; and “the extreme manifestation of this form of notation would be no more notation at all!”¹⁴

Performance is the medium of sign-communication, and hence an important dimension of semiotic pragmatics. Yet, in spite of its importance, performance has not received enough attention within musical semiotics so far. For example, recent volumes of *Semiotica* and the *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* (exclusively devoted to the semiotics of music) treat the semantics of musical structure and the interaction between musical and verbal signs but they pay little attention to performance.¹⁵ In order to discuss the semiotics of musical performance, I shall have recourse to Umberto Eco’s somewhat dated article, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” which now appears in his volume *The Role of the Reader* (1979), though its first version was published in 1959.

Eco discusses the aesthetics of certain pieces by Stockhausen, Berio, Pousseur, and Boulez, pieces that authorize the performer to determine the length of a note or to rearrange the sequence of subdivisions. Such pieces, writes Eco, “reject the definitive, concluded message and multiply the formal possibilities of the distribution of their elements. They appeal to the initiative of the individual performer, and hence they offer themselves, not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates, but as ‘open’ works, which are brought to their conclusion by the performer.”¹⁶ Performers of these compositions may then reassemble the parts, as readers of Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* may rearrange the sequence of chapters. Eco believes that this new freedom granted to the performer opened “a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art.”¹⁷ He compares it with the introduction of the complementarity principle in physics.¹⁸

¹⁴ Charles, *For the Birds*, pp. 59, 60, and 171, respectively.

¹⁵ See the special issues of *Semiotica* 66:1–3 (1987) entitled “Semiotics of Music,” and *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 9:3–4 (1987) entitled “Zeichen und Musik.”

¹⁶ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 49. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 58 ff.

In retrospect, it seems remarkable that Eco should have formulated the notion of “open works,” a central idea of postmodernist aesthetics, in terms of relatively traditional compositions that did not themselves create a tradition, let alone open “a new chapter in the history of art.” It now seems ironic also that Eco was so eager to distinguish these so-called “works in progress” from “open works” in general, by claiming that the performer’s freedom in “works in progress” is more radical than the freedom that readers always enjoyed, especially since the rise of Symbolism and Modernism. According to Eco, Baroque artists, Mallarmé, Joyce, Kafka, and Brecht wrote “open works,” but Boulez, Stockhausen, Pousseur, and Berio composed “works in progress.”¹⁹

The distinction seems to me highly questionable on several grounds. First, the “works in progress” mentioned firmly retain control over pitch and other musical dimensions and grant only limited freedom to the performer. John Cage, the true radical, remarks that Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück IX* “only deals with the question of sequence. A kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of fixed fragments can’t have anything more than merely ornamental value. . . . But everything would change, if, instead of playing the eleven groups organized by the composer one after the other you played them all at once . . . we wouldn’t have to worry about relapsing into a predetermined organisation!”²⁰

But we need not collapse diachrony into synchrony in the manner of Cage in order to empower the performer. A number of older literary works have granted readers the kind of freedom that Eco finds revolutionary in the mentioned “works in progress.” As I have shown in my *Symbolismus und symbolische Logik*,²¹ combinatorially reconstitutable poetry existed in the seventeenth century, for instance in the work of the German poet Quirinus Kuhlmann. Furthermore, a number of important literary works that may not have been *intended* as “works in progress” actually remained unfinished and unclear as to the sequence of their parts. The arrangement of the chapters in Kafka’s *Castle*, for instance, has been a matter of scholarly debate. Hölderlin, Georg Trakl, and others eternally revised certain of their poems so that we now have several, radically different versions which constitute in their entirety a genuine “work in progress.” While earlier scholarship

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65. ²⁰ Charles, *For the Birds*, pp. 198–99.

²¹ See John Neubauer, *Symbolismus und symbolische Logik. Die Idee der Ars Combinatoria in der Entwicklung der modernen Dichtung* (Munich, 1978).

monumentalized the last version, postmodernist readers, like the performers of Stockhausen and Berio, find in newer editions a series of alternative texts that cannot be ranked simply by chronology. Sensitivity to such choices has multiplied the number of versions even in cases where the text has hitherto been considered relatively simple and unique. In the case of *King Lear*, for instance, traditional editions conflated the 1608 Quarto and the 1623 Folio versions, whereas the recent Oxford edition prints both of them. Finally, and perhaps trivially, completed and definitive artworks may confront their public with far more radical interpretive alternatives than those available to the performers of the mentioned “works in progress.”

It may no longer be possible to make ontological distinctions between “closed,” “open,” and “in progress” works. These labels seem to indicate intrinsic qualities in the works but the boundaries of the categories shift according to changes in our perception. Which label we choose for a particular work will largely depend on our interpretive stance, which in turn is deeply affected by conventions governing our age and our institutions. The current critical conventions sharpen our eyes and ears to the cracks and faults in monuments of the past, and as a consequence we see “works in progress” where our fathers found “open works” and our grandfathers “closed” ones. Future conventions may cement the cracks and faults, they may direct our vision once more to that which unites rather than separates. But for the time being even the staunchest defenders of stable meaning are sensitized to interpretability and the flux of critical perspectives. The diverse forms of postmodernist thought (including reception aesthetics, deconstruction, and neo-Marxism) all acknowledge that identity and meaning are no permanent properties of the work itself but eternally constituted and reconstituted in reading, seeing, and listening.

A brief excursus concerning authentic performance practices may illustrate my last point. As a resident of Amsterdam I have the frequent pleasure of listening to superb performances of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music by Ton Koopman, Frans Brüggen, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and others. Preoccupied during the day with problems of postmodern theories of literature in my teaching and research, I enjoy such musical events also as occasions for reflection.

The intention to reconstitute music “the way it really was”