

## 1

**Introduction: different trains**

Craig Ayrey

'Interpretation' in music is ordinarily associated with performance. Scholarly and critical work too is always interpretative in some respect. Both types of musical activity play with the two meanings of interpretation: to (re)present or render the work, and to expound or explain meaning.<sup>1</sup> To interpret, we think, is to understand. It is here that clarity ends. How and what do we understand? And, lurking behind this question is another: how do we understand interpretation itself? Are we, as Rilke thought, 'not really at home in our interpreted world . . .'?<sup>2</sup>

The onto-epistemological status of interpretation is a fundamental philosophical question. Similar debate in music has mainly advanced what is called metatheory, and within this, critical evaluation focused on the implicitly interpretative nature of studies conducted in the spirit, if not the letter, of structuralism with either an assumption of disinterested enquiry (often called 'objectivity' or 'neutrality', sometimes a 'limitation on subjectivity') into the autonomous aspects of the artwork (usually called 'structure'), or with the confidence of irrefutable method.<sup>3</sup> But the period of unwitting interpretation is passing: we are all self-aware now (or are presumed to be), sometimes to the extent that our work is hampered by self-conscious control of interpretative practice. Even here, at the heart of what intellectual musicians do, the familiar conflict of theory and practice is present: we can turn our attention to the hermeneutic question itself, a question that provides no ready answer, or continue to work as before, willingly blind to the interpretative traps that our work, valuable

1. See F. M. Berenson, 'Interpreting the Emotional Content of Music', in Michael Krausz, ed., *The Interpretation of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 61.
2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* [1923], 'The First Elegy', trans. Stephen Mitchell (London: Pan, 1987), p. 151.
3. The most influential study of this type is Alan Street, 'Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories: The Resistance to Musical Unity', *Music Analysis*, 8 (1989), 77–123. See also Jonathan Dunsby, 'Criteria of Correctness in Music Analysis and Theory', in Anthony Pople, ed., *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 77–85.

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as it may seem and productive of significant results, is leading us into. Under such conditions, it is generally agreed that the minimum we should expect of any study is that the strategies of interpretation are acknowledged and clear.

The essays collected in this volume are concerned with praxis, not with the theory of interpretation. Their interpretations are offered, with integrity, as an integral dimension of what the texts they consider might mean. It will be seen as appropriate, I hope, that this first essay in the book explores the boundaries of interpretative praxis in music analysis. First, however, some observations on theory.

**When ...**

... Nietzsche wrote in 1883–8 that ‘Against positivism, which halts at phenomena – “There are only facts” – I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations’,<sup>4</sup> he meant that our world is an interpreted world, that our concepts are metaphors, that interpretations constitute the facts as we see them now. *In order to exist for us, phenomena come into being through interpretation.*

But Nietzsche had written in 1882:

an essentially mechanical world would be an essentially *meaningless* world. Assuming that one estimated the *value* of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas: how absurd would such a ‘scientific’ explanation of music be. What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is ‘music’ in it!<sup>5</sup>

... Susan Sontag wrote in 1964 that ‘in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art’, she meant that criticism should desist from its preoccupation with the meaning of art (‘latent content’) and concentrate on what it is, that to rehabilitate the immediacy of art ‘we must learn to see more, hear more, feel more’.<sup>6</sup> *In order that their existence be maintained, art works must not be interpreted, simply explained.*

But Sontag also asked:

What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place? What is needed, first, is more attention to form in

4. *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 267.

5. *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 335–6.

6. ‘Against Interpretation’, in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 104.

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art. If excessive stress on *content* provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough description of *form* would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary – a descriptive rather than prescriptive, vocabulary for forms.<sup>7</sup>

... Adorno wrote that 'interpretive understanding [*Verstehen*] ... both dissolves and preserves the enigmatic quality'<sup>8</sup> of art, he meant that the critical task is to solve the 'riddle' of individual works by 'identifying why it is insoluble'.<sup>9</sup> *In order to maintain their existence, it must be true of art works that they cannot be explained, but interpretation is essential to understanding.*

What is meant here by the distinction between explanation and interpretation? Elsewhere, Nietzsche defines explanation [*Erklärung*] as 'the expression of a new thing by means of the sign of things already known'.<sup>10</sup> Explanation is thus a reductive activity, the effect Sontag wants to avoid ('latent content', the preoccupation with meaning). But it also problematises the relation of metalanguage to the work: a highly sophisticated metalanguage will almost inevitably 'reduce' the work to its theoretical precepts; this is what Jonathan Dunsby has called 'overdetermined' analysis in music.<sup>11</sup> Sontag's 'interpretation' is equivalent to Nietzsche's 'explanation' (new things described in terms of the old). And her 'explanation' seems equivalent to Nietzsche's 'interpretation' (so much for her title) which, superficially at least, appears to ask the impossible: attention to the sensuous surface would be a type of interpretative synaesthesia, as a translation from one medium to another. The resemblance of Adorno's *Verstehen* to Nietzsche's 'interpretation' is partial. The expression of the 'new thing' in Adorno is a limited expression: interpretation goes only so far as to identify the riddle of, not the (chimerical) solution to, the artwork – 'chimerical' because it is implied that a solution, if it were available, would be mere explanation of a necessarily *second-rate* work, one that was completely explicable. All three theories stand primarily as ideals, as theories. That is to say, they are at once radical and take risks with praxis. Large areas of criticism (political, ideological, cultural, allegorical: that is also to say, everything that Sontag is 'against') are marginalised by

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

8. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 178.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

10. *Nietzsche Werke, Kritischer Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967), vol. VII, Band 2, Fragment 34.

Translated in Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 137. 11. Dunsby, 'Criteria', p. 79.

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Nietzsche's dismissal of explanation; while Adorno's *Verstehen* risks not exploring the *achieved* work but treating it as a patient for whom diagnosis is sufficient. The apparent banality of Adorno's actual analyses could be said to demonstrate the practical consequence of this theoretical position.<sup>12</sup>

Extrapolating from Nietzsche, the clear implication is that interpretation must be the expression of a new thing *using new signs*, and thus not a translation from new to old, or to put it differently, interpretation must produce, must *be itself*, a new sign. Interpretation itself, therefore, must be creative; it must match the challenge of the artwork. This position is familiar now as the Barthesian view of criticism:

The danger of Method (of a fixation upon Method) comes from this: research work must satisfy two demands; the first is a demand for responsibility: the work must increase lucidity, expose the implications of a procedure, the alibis of a language – in short must constitute a *critique* (let us recall once again that to *criticize* means to *call into crisis*); here Method is inevitable, irreplaceable, not for its 'results' but precisely – or on the contrary – because it realizes the highest degree of consciousness of a language *which does not forget itself*; but the second demand is of a very different order: it is the demand for writing, for a space of desire's dispersion, where Law is dismissed. Hence, it is necessary, *at a certain moment*, to turn against Method, or at least to regard it without any founding privilege, as one of the voices of plurality: as a *view*, in short, a spectacle, mounted within the text – the text which is, after all, the only 'true' result of any research.<sup>13</sup>

Here, among Barthes's many themes, there is Method as a 'view', an interpretation. And thus an opposition: interpretation as a spectacle, interpretation as speculation. The nominal difference is the difference between product and process, made famous by Arnold Whittall in the teaching of music analysis. Methods in this formulation are tools (good or bad) in a process that is necessarily speculative. But speculation cannot be conducted in a void: there must be something mirrored, something shown. And therefore, to put it more generally, interpretation must be essentially the perception of relations (within the work, between works, media, within culture). This is one intention of Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-*

12. On this, see Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 169–71.

13. Roland Barthes, 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 319. Barthes's emphases.

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*texte*. Interpretation installs relations (from wherever) in the text: a new sign, in Peirce's infinity of interpretants.<sup>14</sup>

*The space between*

Interpretation as a 'relational field' is potentially limitless. Jonathan Dunsby succinctly defines the Scylla and Charybdis of theory, the opposition of decidability and undecidability, of 'over-determined' and 'under-determined' analysis,<sup>15</sup> that is found in Nietzsche's interpretative theory as the conflict of dogmatism and relativism.<sup>16</sup> Interpretation today is indeed, as Dunsby suggests, situated inter-state, in the space between extreme positions.

This field is evident also in my three snapshot citations as the conceptual space opened up within interpretation, 'interpretative space', a space between Nietzsche's conception of interpretation as originary and positional (his famous 'perspectivism') and Sontag's sensuous empiricism, and between Adorno's *Verstehen* and the 'enigmatic' quality that he attempts to hold in balance in a single formulation. Sontag, 'against interpretation', seems to be pleading for criticism as a simulacrum, a doubling of the art work: to be pejorative, a sustained tautology, at best an extended metonymy, a criticism of effects, not causes. Adorno, on the other hand, is concerned ultimately with the causative in art-works, their origins and cultural authenticity. Adorno allows this to emerge through a work's structure (that is, through its content which determines form); but Sontag, too, approaches this position in her approval of criticism that 'dissolves considerations of content into those of form'.<sup>17</sup> Sontag therefore pleads for description (as opposed to 'a prescriptive vocabulary for forms') which Nietzsche finds useless. But are they talking about the same activity? Sontag's 'description' could not, certainly, be neutral: there must be something interpretative (in Nietzsche's sense) in it. (If criticism is 'to serve the work of art' then it must be concerned with meaning.) Nietzsche, on the other hand, is concerned with the relationship of description and value (the latter is clearly an element of meaning). It is obvious that Nietzsche's 'scientific' stands for a type of neutrality: such a method can never lead to understanding because it is essentially uninterpretative. But if *everything* is 'interpretation' in Nietzsche then, since there are no facts, a description will constitute an interpretative act, however involuntary.

14. Although interpretation is relational, this does not bear directly upon the ontology of the work, the identity of which is a separate, though related, problem. 15. Dunsby, 'Criteria', pp. 78–9.

16. See Schrift, *Nietzsche*, p. 190. 17. Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 103.

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And so there are tensions (spaces) within each theory. In Nietzsche between the rejection of positivism and the limited value given to the 'scientific' explanation of music (there is *something* that can be 'counted, calculated'); in Sontag between 'immediacy' and descriptive formalism (since it is never clear how description of form would remain empirical, or how it would serve 'an erotics of art'); and in Adorno between the simultaneous 'dissolution' and 'preservation' of the work as 'riddle'. Thus my three theorists circle around the question in the quest for a definite position only to encounter obstacles they do not want to overcome. The retreat from extremes is a common, even necessary, move: the 'space between' is preserved in order to make room for interpretation, to defend the creative aporia without which interpretation is paralysed. Interpretation, by definition (it seems to me), cannot itself be defined. But its boundaries can be indicated or declared by recommending ways of working (as Sontag does) and by identifying attitudes.

Modern proposals of theoretical or practical restraints on the activity of interpretation in music have tended to be modest, defining minimum standards of acceptability. Jonathan Dunsby's suggestion of 'correctness' as a criterion for music analysis is an example: 'a standard that gives us the confidence to publish our work, and the confidence to impede the dissemination of work we don't like'.<sup>18</sup> Dunsby attempts to define the relation of method and interpretation flexibly; but the danger here is that only a limited value is conceded to method – method here is a psychological prop – so that 'correctness' exists between proof and subjective response as a type of protocol of praxis. The definition is therefore more pragmatic rather than practical, with the validity of interpretation, I infer, decided by (upper-house) peer review, an impossible cloning of Umberto Eco's 'model reader'. Any statement of protocol will encounter the same irresolvable difficulty: who or what validates interpretation? Who or what, in the end, decides?

I retreat from these questions, since they seem to be unanswerable obstacles, in order to adopt a new perspective. Stepping back from the 'how?' to the 'why?' of interpretation, from Dunsby's protocols to motivation, the essential, minimal fact of interpretation is that it is an act of appropriation.<sup>19</sup> Interpretation is an appropriation directed towards the work, uniting the two senses of the term, possession and appropriateness, towards making the work one's own. In musical performance (where indi-

18. Dunsby, 'Criteria', p. 77.

19. This term, but not all aspects of its definition, is borrowed from Schrift, *Nietzsche*. See especially pp. 169–98.

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vidual expression – interpretation – is advanced *through* the work) it is commonplace to refer, for example, to ‘Brendel’s Beethoven’; it is not nonsensical to refer similarly, in analysis, to ‘Schenker’s Beethoven’. To express the point more forcibly, we should not separate interpretation from *desire*: desire as Barthes glosses it, ‘the demand for writing’ which clears a space for desire’s ‘dispersion’ which may take many forms. The act of appropriation is made out of desire not disinterest. But even the use of a ‘disinterested’ method (neutral, structuralist, systematic) is already an interpretative act, deliberately or unwittingly: that is to say, an intention (however unexamined) not to impose on the text, but to live with it, allow it to reveal itself, to become hospitable to the interpreter. As Wallace Stevens wrote, ‘to impose / is not to discover’.<sup>20</sup> To take only the most superficially resistant example, the discovery procedures of the much-maligned neutral or objective methods could be said to express the most self-effacing desire, simply by intending to allow the text ‘to analyse itself’, whatever the practical outcome. That such methods impose great restraints on the interpreter, but not (at least by intention) on the work, provides a parallel with performance: whereas the nineteenth-century attitude to performance interpretation is focused on the freedom of the individual performer, the late twentieth-century attitude is characterised by authenticity, the decision to *constrain* interpretation. Objective analytical methods, which occupy one theoretical extremity, also could be said to be defined by the drive towards authenticity, an authenticity of structure (but not – certainly not – of textual interpretation). On the other hand, twentieth-century literary (and, increasingly, musicological) interpretation resembles the virtuoso performance tradition of the nineteenth century, especially in style: the virtuoso flourishes of Derrida, or Dai Griffiths in this volume,<sup>21</sup> are remarkably like the nineteenth-century virtuoso’s freedom with the text, a technique or style of interpretation that demands that we do not value what is said far above the manner of its telling.

Interpretation as a concept, therefore, has a history which is not to be confused with the reception history of the work: many problems of definition come from the attempt to consider interpretation *tout court*. We take unnecessary risks if Nietzsche’s genealogical perspective is ignored. For this reason debates about the limits of interpretative freedom might strike us as naive, as long as it is remembered that we are at liberty to read the interpretation itself with the same free discrimination that we bring to

20. ‘Notes towards a Supreme Fiction’, in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1955), p. 403. 21. pp. 301–14.



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the work. We are free to accept or reject interpretations: it is not necessary to be told what is acceptable (although we, and our students, could expect to be told what is normative). It is an attitude of interpretative hubris that assumes that the production of interpretants stops with the interpreter: plurality, often taken to be only the sum of as many perspectives as can be mustered, also proceeds exponentially, in an exegetical continuum.

It is possible, however, to determine traces of desire, as the minimal conditions for taking an interpretation seriously. Respect for the text is one condition, another is the creative interplay of interpreter and work, the act of bringing something to the work (not extracting a conceptual object from it): an informing rather than an exploitative attitude. Beyond these, all other prescriptions are more or less dogmatic. Interpretation, we may provisionally conclude, will have something to do with intention, within which 'good intentions' towards the text are only a part. Nietzsche's problematic, the status of description as involuntary interpretation, is eased by the notion of intention: descriptive interpretation can be described as 'unintentional'. The interpretative content of a description can be observed, but not, perhaps, taken entirely seriously since a sense of responsibility is lacking. That is to say, we do not know what is the status of the interpretative fallout of a description: an 'intentional' interpretation, on the other hand, contains clues to its significance in its precepts.

All this pre-echoes a theory that might be expected to find favour with music analysts and theorists, Eco's theory of interpretation constructed on three types of intention (author, interpreter, text). These help define the mixture of intentions in the theories of Nietzsche, Sontag and Adorno, a mixture (played down by Eco) that will be present in any interpretation. Nietzsche's 'only interpretations' is the intention of the interpreter, the diatribe against 'scientific' explanation of music is, at least implicitly, *against* the intention of the interpreter (Nietzsche's rage is occasioned by the presumption of the 'scientist' who dares *not* to interpret). The 'truth' for Nietzsche is a personal truth ('This – is now *my* way: where is yours?'<sup>22</sup>). Set against this liberalism (the freedom to be wrong, or useless) is the plurality of Sontag (the freedom to be subjective), concerned above all with the intention of the text ('the sensuous surface of art') which she attempts to protect by regulating the intention of the interpreter. And Adorno sides fundamentally with the work (the intention of the text), *as long as* it is largely predicated on the authority of the author

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Spirit of Gravity', *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 213.



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or composer. It is not surprising, then, that in an interpretative climate defined by plural perspectives, much contemporary debate about the relative demerits of analytical and cultural approaches to music springs from an insecure grasp of the type of intentionality in play in any given instance. The situation is not ameliorated by the fact that intentions are frequently implicit, shifting or confused, out of a (sometimes defensive) desire to expand the terms of a study beyond its theoretically defined limits. (Hence the ritual, extraneous reference to the 'sensuous surface' of a work in a structural analysis, or the fragmentary, partially applied, analytical methods encountered in musicological work.)

Eco's preference for the 'intention of the text' should provide a corrective. It is, in Bernard Williams's reading, another term for the Model Reader who is 'the location of constraints on interpretation', though, crucially, this does not imply that 'the idea [the Model Reader] provides a criterion for acceptable interpretation': 'there is no criterion of acceptable reading', Williams writes, 'only plausible or implausible readings, and the idea of the Model Reader offers a focus or frame for assembling the constraints that seem appropriate'.<sup>23</sup> 'Appropriate constraints' is the variable to be established by praxis, but it seems to me that it could be at least indicated in theory. No Reader (interpreter) is 'model', no interpretation is 'focused', I would suggest, that does not exhibit a sense of methodological decorum, an awareness of the limits of method, limits that have more than a coincidental correspondence to the limits of interpretation itself. While it seems appropriate, timely, now to accept Alan Street's influential articulation of one manifestation of interpretative plurality, that plurality can be installed within method, we should treat cautiously his suggestion that we do away with the 'convenient conceptual props' that distinct methodologies have provided.<sup>24</sup> A collage, piquant though it may be, is not *ein Gemälde* (that my metaphor would collapse in the face of a *work* demonstrates baldly the difference between interpretation and art): interpreters' desire can be expected by their readers to be directed, channelled.

This is Barthes on Theory:

Simply, a day comes when we feel a certain need to *loosen* the theory a bit, to shift the discourse, the ideolect which repeats itself,

23. 'The Riddle of Umberto Eco', *The New York Review of Books*, 42/2 (2 February 1995), 34.

24. Street, 'Superior Myths', p. 121. See also Craig Ayrey, 'Debussy's Significant Connections: Metaphor and Metonymy in Analytical Method', in Pople, ed., *Theory*, pp. 130–1.

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Excerpt

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becomes consistent, and to give it the shock of a question. Pleasure is this question.<sup>25</sup>

And 'pleasure'?

*Pleasure of the text.* Classics. Culture . . . Intelligence. Irony. Delicacy. Euphoria. Mastery . . . The pleasure of the text can be defined by *praxis* . . . This pleasure can be *spoken*: whence criticism.<sup>26</sup>

*The discipline without  
aporia*

'The pleasure of the text can be defined by *praxis*.' Reading this twenty years on, Barthes's definition still offers a challenge to music analysts: to justify their products, in which there often seems to be precious little evidence of pleasure, to their readers. In 1994, hardly an issue of the *Musical Times* failed to contain a complaint about the concern of analysis with the autonomy of works or of its discipline, its formalism: 'music analysts, performers and critics', Anthony Pryer wrote, 'have long felt that they could put history away in a box when they confined their responses to something which they are fond of calling "the music itself"'.<sup>27</sup> And hardly a fresh publication in contextually-aware musicology (the 'new musicology') fails to contain a condemnation of, or challenge to, analysis as traditionally practised.<sup>28</sup> But it has long been recognised, even by music analysts, that music analysis is a formalism, and that this brings with it aesthetic risks. Commenting on the work of Carolyn Abbate in particular and the new musicology in general, Derrick Puffett writes:

there is no less need for precision, or exactitude, in analysis than there was before [the new musicology]. . . . Analysis, in other words, needs to maintain its own internal logic, its aims and its sense of purpose – which may be described as *formalist* aims and purposes, in the best sense of the word. This does not mean that analysts can afford to ignore everything else that is going on in the world.<sup>29</sup>

25. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 64. Barthes's emphasis.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 51. Barthes's emphases.

27. Anthony Pryer, 'Re-thinking History', *The Musical Times*, 135/1821 (November 1994), 682.

28. For example, Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 176, and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 109.

29. 'Editorial: In Defence of Formalism', *Music Analysis*, 13 (1994), 4–5.