

Updated in this version

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A post-1970 movement of thought in philosophy, literary theory and (subsequently) other disciplines. Its main inspiration has been the work of Jacques Derrida (1931–2004), who insisted on principle that ‘deconstruction’ cannot be defined as a method, a theory, a programme or anything that lends itself to adequate statement in the form ‘deconstruction is X’. Rather it is a process ‘always already’ at work within texts to complicate their overt or manifest sense by revealing a ubiquitous counter-logic sharply at odds with the mainstream interpretative view.

Derrida located points of conflict or unresolved tension in a wide range of philosophical writings, from the Greeks to the 20th century. In each case he showed how an apparently clearcut binary distinction – nature/culture, speech/writing, reason/rhetoric, concept/metaphor, philosophy/literature etc. – in fact turns out to be strictly undecidable as regards its order of priority. Thus ‘nature’ is always culturally defined, while speech (supposedly more authentic than writing, since it gives a more intimate access to the utterer's thoughts and feelings) is itself a kind of writing in so far as it bears all the marks (of structure, convention, the arbitrary [non-natural] relation between signifier and signified) that thinkers since Aristotle have standardly attributed to written discourse. In the same way philosophy can be shown to depend at certain crucial points on a rhetoric or a range of ‘literary’ metaphors, such that there exists no clear demarcation between those various, hierarchically ordered terms. However, it is no use simply reversing these received orders of priority, since all our theories of metaphor, literature or rhetoric, from Plato and Aristotle down, have been precisely philosophical theories and can hence be understood (and criticized) only through a detailed critical engagement with philosophy's conceptual resources. Thus deconstruction is not simply an all-purpose licence for interpreting texts in whatever way one likes or for collapsing the outworn genre distinction between philosophy and literature.

The late 20th century witnessed a marked deconstructionist ‘turn’ among theoretically minded music critics and analysts. This mostly has to do with certain deep-rooted preconceptions in regard to matters of history, development, genre, form and style. A major source is Derrida's discussion of Rousseau's ideas about music. For Rousseau, the primacy of melody over harmony went along with a range of other such beliefs, among them the priority of nature over culture, speech over writing, and passion (or uncorrupted human instinct) over everything that belonged to an advanced and ‘civilized’ (i.e. an artificial and decadent) state of existence. In each case, contrary to enlightened opinion, Rousseau remarked the symptoms of a falling-away from that original (mythic) time when human beings lived in perfect accord with nature and with each other and thus had no need for such unnatural ‘supplementary’ devices as political structures, legal codes, written constitutions etc. With music there had occurred a similar decline, falsely regarded as ‘progress’, from pure melody to

harmony and counterpoint, or from the direct expression of human feeling through an unadorned vocal line to the decadent state of a music now given over to artifice, complexity and the tyranny of written notation. Language and music both originated in that mode of passionate speech-song which, according to Rousseau, was the source of all genuine spontaneity and grace. This had been preserved to some extent in the 'southern' (i.e. Italian) music of his day, which (like the languages of southern Europe) had not gone so far along the path of 'civilized' corruption. Thus Rousseau, as composer, theorist and speculative music historian, sided with the Italian musicians of his day rather than with those eminent French contemporaries, among them Rameau, whose compositions and writings bore melancholy witness to the prevalence of harmony over melody.

Such a reading is guided by normal standards of interpretative truth, logic, consistency and respect for authorial intentions. Derrida accepted the necessity of those standards; but he argued that there may be elements in the text – sentences, passages, entire chains of reasoning – that are not fully under Rousseau's control and give rise to a pattern of repeated conflicts between manifest and latent sense. Thus Rousseau may self-evidently wish to say that melody is more 'natural' than harmony, that nature has been corrupted by culture, that communal values are threatened by the encroachment of 'civilized' artifice, and that language has suffered the decline from its original (authentic and spontaneous) role as a conveyor of human passions to its present (all too sophisticated) use for the purpose of concealing our true sentiments and desires. However, there are numerous passages (very often passed over, naturally enough, by mainstream commentators) where Rousseau is constrained by the logic of his own argument to state (or imply) just the opposite. Thus nothing could count as a language in the absence of those 'artificial' structures – lexis, syntax, speech-act conventions, devices for semantic cross-reference etc. – that enable speakers to communicate on a basis of mutual understanding. In the strictest sense these are the conditions of possibility for knowing, possessing or sharing a language, as indeed Rousseau has to acknowledge in those proto-deconstructive passages where his argument comes most visibly under strain.

By the same token, there is no possibility of appealing to a 'natural' (organic) state of society that would antedate all the various structures – political, social, civic-institutional, familial, gender-based etc. – that define the character of social existence and are hence presupposed in every attempt, like Rousseau's, to re-draw the line between 'nature' and 'culture'. In the case of music it is likewise a fallacy (a self-deconstructing argument) to propose that there must have been a phase of development when melody alone was sufficient for all expressive purposes and harmony would not yet have come to exert its artificial, corrupting influence. Thus there is no melody without harmony, in the sense that even the simplest melody (folksong, plainchant, monodic improvisation etc.) would not be perceived as such in the absence of implied harmonic or cadential structures; also there is the fact of the overtone series, which prevents any single note, or sequence of notes, from being heard in pristine isolation. Moreover, it is impossible for Rousseau coherently to advance his idea of a stage in musical history or development when music remained somehow untouched by the forces of time and change.

Such is the 'logic of supplementarity' that Derrida found in Rousseau's texts. What, according to Rousseau, ought to be the case is that nature, speech and melody belong on one side of a clearcut binary distinction that sets them apart from such bad 'supplements' as culture, writing and harmony. But in fact he demonstrates the failure of his attempt to hold that distinction in place and the way that those 'supplements' turn out to inhabit the very point of origin. Thus there is no conceiving of nature in the absence of cultural predicates, of speech as apart from those attributes that it shares with writing, or of melody in the absence of harmony. Sometimes Rousseau contradicts himself through statements

that cannot be reconciled with other (more typically 'Rousseauist') themes and ideas. Elsewhere it is a matter of complex, even tortuous, grammatical constructions and strange twists of tense logic combined with shifts from the indicative to the subjunctive. What thus stands revealed in Rousseau's texts, despite and against his avowed intent, is the impossibility that music can exhibit (or that it might, could or should once have exhibited) the character of purely spontaneous, passionate utterance that Rousseau wishfully ascribes to it.

Derrida's reading has attracted the notice of music theorists, since it raises questions not only about textual criticism but also about musical language, form and history. What is chiefly of interest from a deconstructive standpoint is the way that these terms have figured in discourses of music scholarship and criticism over the past two centuries. Several writers (including Goehr, Kerman, Solie, Subotnik and Street) have discussed the powerful ideology of 'organic form', an important concept in Western aesthetics since Aristotle but a central idea for 19th-century composers, critics and music theorists. In this view great works of art are those that manifest a complex yet integrated structure, that is to say, a capacity for containing and reconciling such otherwise discordant values as unity and multiplicity, form and content, structure and development, 'background' and 'foreground', or thematic coherence and the kinds of inventive, unpredictable detail that break with established, period-specific convention.

Along with this goes the Hegelian belief, again deeply rooted in 19th-century idealist thought, that certain world-historical artworks or genres represent a consummate expression of the *Zeitgeist*, a species of 'concrete universal' which reveals the innermost spiritual truth of its epoch while transcending all mere particularities of time and place. Among the chief candidates for this privileged status was the great (pre-eminently German) line of musical descent from Bach to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and beyond. What emerges most clearly is the close relationship that exists between aesthetic values – of complexity, unity, organic form – and the idea of art as an autonomous realm of expression where freedom can be reconciled with the knowledge of a higher necessity. On Hegel's account this knowledge is arrived at through an epochal process whose upshot (or final guarantee) is the selfconsciousness of universal Spirit. Nevertheless it is a process that tends to manifest itself, from one epoch to the next, in decidedly culture-specific or nationalist terms.

Such, for instance, was Schoenberg's well-known claim to have secured the continued pre-eminence of German music through his discovery of the 12-note compositional method as a way forward from the impasse of late Romanticism. Implicit in that claim were the three main tenets of 'aesthetic ideology' that deconstruction sets out to challenge (see de Man; Norris, 1988, 1989; and Korsyn, 1993). First, there is the concept of musical history as governed by certain deep-laid laws of development – of formal evolution, thematic complexity, the progress beyond traditional (key-related) distinctions between consonance and dissonance etc. – analogous to those that define the nature of 'organic' musical form. Secondly, there is the idea that any such development must be 'natural' in the sense of somehow deriving (as Schoenberg thought) from the sound-material itself, that is to say, from a method that explored the farther reaches of the overtone series (thus bringing about a liberation from classical tonality) yet claimed to represent an inevitable, preordained stage of musical advance. Whence, thirdly, the notion of music as playing a privileged, even world-historical role by expressing the spirit of the age as defined, ironically enough, in terms of some particular (culture-specific or language-based) national tradition. All the more ironic that Schoenberg was himself driven into exile in consequence of just such a bid for world domination on the part of that culture whose musical hegemony he had sought so zealously to promote.

Deconstructive approaches in music criticism have mostly been concerned with these three kinds of 'aesthetic ideology'; more specifically, they have sought to show how certain deeply acculturated (hence quasi-natural) conceptions of musical language, form, style, history, development and value can better be viewed as artefacts of a certain 'discourse' whose seeming naturalness works to conceal its often unwitting ideological investments. This deconstructive enterprise takes various forms according to the critic's particular interest. In some cases it is chiefly focussed on the emergence of a canon of 'great works' and the extent to which the relevant selection criteria – unity, complexity, formal coherence etc. – reveal not so much a process of 'pure' aesthetic valuation as a socially influenced (even ideologically determined) procedure for imposing hegemonic values (see Bergeron and Bohlman, 1992; Goehr, 1992; Stradling and Hughes, 1993). Where this approach differs from other, e.g. Marxist or 'straight' sociological, accounts is in its greater attentiveness to the various stress-points – the contradictions, non-sequiturs, conflicts between avowed and implied meaning – that are held to characterize the discourse of mainstream musicology. Other theorists, among them Kerman, have questioned what they see as the mutually supportive, circular relationship between an aesthetics of organic form and a canonized version of musical history based on closely analogous ideas of cultural development and growth. Such thinking evokes the Hegelian conception of history as a process that unfolds through successive phases of dialectical conflict and synthesis which finally issue in a moment of achieved self-knowledge when consciousness becomes present to itself in all the forms of its development to date. To deconstruct this version of aesthetic ideology is to focus on those various discrepant details – anachronisms, structural anomalies, hybrid genres – that put up resistance to any such organicist view of the relation between history and art.

In similar fashion Subotnik and others have sought to deconstruct the discourse of received (high-cultural) music criticism by questioning both its canonical judgments and its reliance on concepts of structure, unity and integral thematic development which are taken to define what shall count as great music or an adequate understanding of it. Here again, it is argued, there is a self-confirming process of circular definition. If value in music is equated with structural complexity, then value in reception is defined by 'structural listening' at the expense of surface detail or personal response. Such listening concentrates rather on long-range (relatively abstract) matters of thematic transformation, motivic development, progressive tonality etc. What typifies the deconstructive approach is the lesson it has learnt from Derrida in locating value-laden polarities – structure/texture, form/content, analysis/appreciation – and showing how these encode hierarchical values and assumptions by which the second term in each case is systematically downgraded. Thus analysts in the broadly Schenkerian tradition take it for granted that complexity and unity are the chief (indeed defining) virtues of musical form, and that the measure of a truly adequate, successful or profound analysis is the extent to which every detail can be shown to relate to some underlying matrix of generative themes or germinal motifs (Narmour, 1977). This consorts with the quasi-evolutionist idea according to which the eminent line of descent is that which runs (with various disputed claims along the way) from the First to the Second Viennese Schools, and thence to those high modernist successor-movements which sought to extend serial techniques to every parameter of musical organization. It is no coincidence that 'analysis' happens to work so well when applied to music which lends itself ideally to just such formalist treatment.

Deconstruction may thus be viewed as a part of a wider post-modernist reaction against the values and priorities of a musical culture that has raised the pursuit of formal complexity and the perception of structure above the pleasures of straightforward musical experience. However, deconstruction would

itself warn us against accepting any notion of 'experience' (let alone 'straightforward' experience) at face value. It is also the case that deconstructive writings about music tend to concentrate on works (and analyses of works) that belong to that same tradition of 'high' canonical art forms. Such writings are complex and demanding in a way that scarcely invites comparison with current styles of postmodern, minimalist or neo-Romantic music. (A similar complaint is voiced about deconstructionist literary critics who denounce the elitist values enshrined in the 'great tradition' of canonized texts while continuing to produce sophisticated readings of those same texts and the mainstream commentaries on them.) Where the emphasis does fall differently is in the kind of 'structural listening' that these theorists propose. Thus they tend to favour works such as song cycles, fantasies, miniatures and hybrids of various sorts whose generic affiliation is in doubt, or that challenge conventional (organicist) modes of analysis.

This difference is clear in the exchange between two analysts on the subject of Brahms's *Fantasies* op. 116. Jonathan Dunsby interprets them not as a sequence of loosely related character-pieces but rather as a complex, integrated, 'organic' whole whose unity is established by numerous instances of allusive cross-reference, tonal development and subtle thematic linkage. For Alan Street, conversely, there is no ultimate principle of aesthetic value that could justify the quest for structural coherence despite and against the music's resistance to any such merely abstract formal imperative. To this latter way of thinking, espoused also by Kallberg, Korsyn and Scherzinger, many works often praised for their integral ('organic') qualities of style and form can in fact be shown, on a closer deconstructive analysis, to manifest those kinds of generic ambivalence or heterodox structure that find no place within the standard analytical conventions. They should rather be heard, these critics argue, as resistant to that dominant idea of musical tradition that assimilates work to history (and history to work) through a range of naturalized organicist metaphors connoting predestined development and growth.

Other theorists, such as Neubauer and Barry, have pursued a related enquiry into the notion of 'absolute' music that gained ground among critics and aesthetic philosophers from the mid-18th century. In particular they have pointed to the shift away from an earlier mimetic or representational philosophy of art where literature was thought of primarily in terms of its capacity for presenting vivid images (*ut pictura poesis*), and music valued chiefly in so far as it served to express or communicate the meanings contained in some sacred or secular text. These values underwent a sharp reversal with the rise of genres, such as the symphony or string quartet, whose formal structures were increasingly divorced from any reliance on textual or programmatic sources. This development coincided with a renewed interest in the 'sublime' as a category of aesthetic thought, that is to say, with the idea of art as somehow 'presenting the unrepresentable', or giving access to a realm of transcendent experience beyond the furthest reach of prosaic or everyday knowledge. Music was thus elevated from an ancillary role, subservient to text, to the status of highest art form, one that seemed capable of breaking altogether with such commonplace referential or extra-musical constraints. At its most extreme this belief gave rise to the symbolist doctrine that poetry should 'aspire to the condition of music' by renouncing all interest in mere thematic content and striving to attain an absolute purity of diction and form.

From a deconstructive standpoint this is another symptom of the 'aesthetic ideology' that values works of art for their power to transcend the limiting conditions of quotidian (prosaic or timebound) human experience. Most influential here has been Paul de Man, a literary theorist whose texts were mainly devoted to unmasking and resisting this delusory belief. Thus the task of deconstruction is to exercise a rigorous, self-critical intelligence which prevents philosophy and criticism from falling into the

typical post-Romantic error that would take such claims at face value. On this view, exemplified by mainstream interpreters of Romanticism and also (supposedly) by post-Kantian idealist philosophers such as Hegel and Schiller, aesthetic experience belongs to a realm beyond those of mere sensuous cognition or abstract conceptual thought. It is the idea of language as somehow consubstantial with processes or forms in the natural realm, thereby equating the highest achievements of art with a power to overcome the vexing antimonies of subject and object, mind and nature, word and world. This leads to the high valuation of tropes such as metaphor and symbol, conceived as giving access to imaginative truths of a visionary, transcendent or eternal order.

De Man both denies that this can be the case – since language is inherently a non-natural and a temporal medium – and considers such ideas the source of much confusion in criticism and philosophy. Moreover, he shows that the texts where such claims are most insistently raised are also very often texts whose rhetorical complexity manifests a kind of counter-logic, a self-deconstructive moment of resistance, at odds with their overt or professed intent. Thus a theorist may argue that the language of symbolism excels that of allegory, since the latter involves a merely conventional ('arbitrary') relationship between sign and meaning or form and content, as well as belonging to a temporal order where everything is mere prosaic succession – one episode after another – affording no access to the realm of transcendent truths. However it is de Man's claim, borne out by close readings of considerable subtlety and power, that these texts are themselves allegorical in so far as they reveal the strict and absolute impossibility that language should ever achieve that wished-for condition. Furthermore, he takes music, and Rousseau's writings on music in particular, as his instance of a 'language' that cannot be construed as pointing towards such a consummate union of the sensuous and the spiritual, content and form, or their various correlative terms. For in music we encounter the paradigm case of an 'empty' sign whose structure and meaning cannot be grasped other than allegorically since it resists all attempts to specify its content in naively referential (or high-toned symbolist) terms.

De Man thus differs from Derrida in regarding Rousseau as the least deluded, most critically self-aware of writers, one whose texts hold out against mystified (mainstream-romantic) conceptions of meaning and form. That is, Rousseau uncannily anticipates everything the canny deconstructor might wish to say concerning the nature of aesthetic ideology, its sources in the 19th-century discourse of philosophical reflection on art, and the fallacies involved in any premature leap to symbolist-inspired notions of musical or poetic language. More than that, such notions are deeply seductive and can easily acquire the kind of wider (historical and socio-political) resonance that de Man and others have linked to the rise of a 'national-aestheticist' mode of conceiving the relation between art, politics and culture (see also Lacoue-Labarthe). Hence the idea of the nation-state, unique and whole, as embodying those same sublime or transcendent values. Nor will such arguments appear far-fetched if one considers the role of music in Nietzsche's early philosophy or in Wagner's conception of opera as the ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the union of music, mythology and stage spectacle in a prophetic vision of German national destiny. At the very least these ideas may be said to have exerted a potent force in the emergence of totalitarian creeds that envisaged the nation-state as itself a kind of artwork or ideal projection of the great leader's will expressed through forms of mass political mobilization.

In short, there are some large, even violent, things behind this current attempt by critical theorists to deconstruct certain deep-laid assumptions about language, art and aesthetic value. De Man puts the case most forcefully in a passage concerning Schiller's idea of 'aesthetic education' and its appeal to a state of harmonious balance or reconciliation between the various human faculties. Thus 'the "state"

that is here being advocated is not just a state of mind or of soul, but a principle of political value and authority that has its own claims on the shape and the limits of our freedom' (de Man, 1984). To grasp what is at stake, he suggests, we should look to those crucial passages, in Rousseau and Kant especially, which on the one hand have given rise to a history of 'aberrant' (naive or uncritical) readings but on the other can be seen to resist or deconstruct the interpretation placed upon them by less attentive readers. It will then become clear how close is the relation between aesthetic ideology and those forms of organicist thinking that can all too easily carry across from the literary or musical to the socio-political domain.

In this respect deconstruction makes common cause with that strain of 'negative dialectical' thinking developed by Adorno and his Frankfurt school associates. That is to say, it manifests a kindred suspicion of any philosophy, such as Hegel's, that holds out the prospect of a grand dialectical synthesis wherein all contradictions would at last be resolved and consciousness attain a viewpoint (that of Absolute Knowledge) beyond all the partial or limiting perspectives of its progress to date. For Adorno, such thinking was complicit with the drive toward a 'totally administered' society – that of late capitalism – which reduced every aspect of present-day life to the dead level of conformist popular 'taste' as dictated by a culture industry given over to the purposes of mass indoctrination. In so far as there remained any hope of resisting this process, it belonged to those stubbornly intransigent forms of artistic production – like the music of Schoenberg or the writings of Samuel Beckett – that held out against the blandishments of a falsely affirmative culture.

Thus deconstruction can be seen as continuing Adorno's critical project, albeit with greater emphasis on those moments of textual *aporia* (contradictions, paradoxes, ideological stress-points) that emerge in the discourse of mainstream musicology. At present it remains a somewhat specialized area of research and one whose appeal is mainly to the younger generation of music theorists. However, its influence is already apparent in the widespread questioning of analytic methods, Schenkerian procedures especially, which take for granted such values as structural unity, thematic coherence or organic form. Meanwhile there are others, 'old-style' analysts among them, who have risen to the deconstructive challenge by developing more refined and sophisticated versions of the formalist approach. What these debates make clear is the fact that all parties continue to practise some version of 'analysis', whether with a view to upholding traditional (work-based or organicist) norms, or in order to deconstruct those norms by revealing their covert ideological agenda. Where they chiefly differ is on this point of intrinsic versus extrinsic criteria, or structural features imputed to the work itself – in its presumed formal autonomy – as against those aspects of our thinking about music that may be subject to analysis in the deconstructive mode. Nevertheless it seems fair to conclude that analysis in some form continues to provide the best, indeed the only adequate, basis for addressing these complex issues.

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See also

Collage

Form

Analysis, §II, 6: Since 1970

Structuralism, post-structuralism, §3: Post-structuralism