

BOOK REVIEW

***Musical Aesthetics: an Introduction to Concepts, Theories and Functions* by Jonathan L. Friedmann. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018 ISBN 978-1527509405**

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Jonathan L. Friedmann's book promises a contemporary reflection on musical aesthetics, its theories, concepts, and functions. He approaches his task in several 'essays', although in practice these are typically very short: a page or little more. The target audience is the lay reader, although the author suggests that "scholars and musical sophisticates should also find the discussions profitable" (p. 8).

From the outset, Friedmann adopts an experiential understanding of aesthetics, drawing a distinction between appraisals of music based on instinctual liking and those he ascribes to "the rarefied tastes of music critics, theorists, historians, and other professionals" (2018, p. 3). The dualism between the human instinct and the "rarefied" – elsewhere characterised as that between the "living auditor [and the] cold tools of theoretical analysis" (p. vii) respectively – also reveals the author's ambivalence towards the latter (which he ultimately disaggregates from experiential aesthetics with the label – never satisfactorily explained – "intellectual aesthetics" [p. 5]). This stance pervades the text but is eventually unmasked on multiple occasions where personal opinion compromises balanced critical evaluation. The author repeatedly refers to any music after the early 20th century as 'modern' and tends to discount it altogether but for the most cursory of notices, from the canon of Western classical music: "works spanning more than three hundred years – from Bach to Prokofiev *and beyond* – are grouped together in concert halls..." (p. 131). Although he acknowledges that personal opinion might occasionally intrude into his writing (p. 8), his rationale for some of these instances opens up an opportunity for scholars of music and aesthetics to interrogate the critical validity of the work. He argues that

[the] ubiquity of four-square melodies is not merely a product of collective cultural conditioning. Rather it shares organic roots with the biological affinity for symmetry. Just as a balanced figure signals strength and reliability, so does a symmetrical tune evoke comfort and stability. The limited appeal of modernist music, which among other things rejects conventional phrasing, further makes this point. Our ears are endlessly pleased by four-bar patterns. To update a Shakespearian phrase: "But hark, what music? The music of the squares. Most heavenly music!" (p. 110)

To claim that anything is ubiquitous in music is dangerous territory, but the elision of symmetry, repetition, stability and the natural in this passage of Chapter 5 (Aesthetics of Nature) is contentious. Numerous theories of aesthetics would dispute that art and/or music is a natural phenomenon (Lukács, Hanslick, Adorno); there are symmetries aplenty in modern repertoire (twelve-tone serialism offers just one example) but repetition and symmetry are different things, and the one does not presuppose the other. Ostensibly, the six chapter headings under which the materials are gathered offers an opportunity to explore the less-often broached aesthetics of performance (Chapter 2, though disappointingly brief) and listening (Chapter 3) as well as the more traditional compositional perspective (Chapter 4); these collections are framed by the first and probably the most successful chapter on the aesthetics of emotions, and Chapter 5, probably the least, on the aesthetics of nature. The final chapter, Aesthetics of Commerce, focuses mostly on popular idioms, including folk music, and here more than anywhere the author misses an opportunity to add something new to the literature, particularly since this is an area riven with polemics, from Adorno's theory of mass culture to Simon Frith's *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (Frith, 2007). Although Friedmann does draw on Frith's work to argue that popular music is or can be aesthetically valuable, he restricts his discussion of commerce to contemporary popular styles, whereas perhaps a more broad-ranging, context-setting articulation of an aesthetics of commerce could begin with reflection on artworks like the *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1555, attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder) and recognise that the critique of marketization began long before the advent of popular music as we understand it today. Friedmann once again institutes a binary opposition and a further act of conceptual elision. There is popular music that "sells out" and that which is "not always as cookie-cutter as the harshest critics contend" (p. 118); meanwhile "aesthetic stability" is equated with a degree of unoriginality, and once again repetition is a synonym for both: "emphasis on innovation is the exception not the rule" (p. 118). These apparently interchangeable concepts lead the author to one of the most bizarre statements in the book (if one is not already left agog at the speculation about future alien reception of human music a few pages earlier), as he seeks to characterize the guild system of medieval Europe:

[Masters, apprentices and journeymen] worked as an anonymous collective, and their products were valued for adhering to set formulas. With the rise of Renaissance Humanism, individuals began seeking their own recognition. They became known as "artists", while those who stayed in the guild were called "artisans". This marked a separation between craft, where accurate copying is the highest aesthetic ideal, and art, where uniqueness is key. [...] Part of the issue when it comes to popular music is that the work "artist" is overused. Giving everyone the title of "recording artist" sets the bar too high, and understandably rubs some critics up the wrong way. Perhaps it is better to think of pop musicians as craftspeople, and their music as songcraft. (p. 118)

Yet, according to Friedmann, “the experientialist position holds that reactions to musical stimuli are more immediate and more important than the terms used to describe them [...] We intuitively appraise music based on its appropriateness for a specific situation” (p. 6). It is thus logical to assume that the book’s organisation arises out of this functional understanding of music: it practises a kind of eclecticism of thought that has the potential to be a welcome format offering new ideas and perspectives in a now well-trodden disciplinary context. Friedmann confirms as much when he explains that “the wildly varied nature of music and musical experiences warrants an unsystematic journey into musical aesthetics. Instead of applying a central thesis or comprehensive framework, this book engages a variety of ideas and interdisciplinary insights” (p. 7). He characterises the micro-essay format as “fluid” and asserts that it will not “satisfy all readers”. The problem here is that even in this characterisation, the implicit prod at the “intellectual”, “meticulous” (p. 5), “exhaustive” or “hard-nosed” (p. 107) enables Friedmann to sidestep bigger, more fundamental objections to his favoured approach. Surely one of the points of aesthetic and artistic study is to engage with the ‘otherness’ of art in our lives as precisely that which defies our diminishing capacity for sustained engagement, in an age of instant brevity in Tweets and Snapchat.

The short sections are grouped together according to ‘family resemblance’, although this is difficult to discern at times, since successive sections seem to have nothing to do with one another. They are presented as “self-contained excursion[s], complete with background, propositions, conclusions, and implications” (p. 7). Taken together, “they suggest the possibility that conflicting viewpoints can possess a bit of truth” (2018, p.7). This hints at a fragment format, in which what is left unsaid is as suggestive as what the brief textual bursts themselves propose: the problem is that what *is* left unsaid is so wide-ranging that it confers on the whole a sense of superficiality rather than the intended stimulus to further thought. This impression is further consolidated by the sweeping statements, generalisations and straw men that litter the volume. Ultimately, one is left frustrated at unexplored avenues and a suspicion that experiential aesthetics – at least as it is articulated here – abdicates the responsibility to engage with long-established aesthetic theories. Friedmann quotes Hegel’s attack on eclecticism (“nothing but a superficial aggregate” [pp. 6-7]) and claims that his subsequent chapters “implicitly challenge these assertions” (p. 7). But the lack of coherence or guiding principles in that challenge renders the endeavour susceptible to the same passive eclecticism against which it sets out its stall.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned appendix of texts in aesthetics and a substantial bibliography, and following the clear opening précis of the historical bifurcation of knowledge and sensation, form and expression, beauty and *aisthesis* – which, had it been sustained, might have made this book a crucial text for students of musical aesthetics for years to come – Friedmann references a curiously limited range of source materials, several of which are dated and chosen in preference to more up-to-date exemplars. Whilst there is sense in citing Deryck Cooke’s foundational *The Language of Music* (Cooke, 1959), Friedmann does not give the reader a sense of the wealth of scholarship that has erupted since and superseded it; nor is this an isolated lacuna.

In addition, sweeping, uncorroborated statements meant to announce a new section or polemic instead arouse scepticism in the informed reader regarding what follows. The first chapter begins boldly, claiming that “[m]usic of all genres and sub-genres can be reduced to

formulae and equations” (p. 9); this is then unpacked a little with reference to the ‘mathematics’ of rhythm, counting, time-signature, overtones, and so on, prompting a comparison with the raw, unfiltered (‘primal’, according to Aaron Copland) experience of emotional responses to music. A few pages later, again:

Unlike the overly expressive music of the Romantics, which expands harmony, dynamics, and form to transmit intensely personal sentiments, Classical and modern works, while sonically light years apart, share an air of impersonality. Construction precedes and produces expression, rather than the other way round [...] The broader issue of whether feelings originate within musical sounds or are grafted onto them seems almost moot. *Not to sidestep the debate entirely* [emphasis mine] but the *experience* remains emotional all the same. (p. 14: emphasizes the author’s)

Further examples of statements not backed up by reference to existing research or critical reflection include the claim that “the earliest human-made patterned sounds were likely imitations of sounds from the local habitat [...] By mimicking these sounds, humanity could achieve psychological control over them, and, in turn, hear their own sentiments expressed in nature” (p. 26).¹ A lack of historical contextualisation leads to questionable assumptions regarding the roles of performer and composer. Friedmann cites the “non-spontaneity expected of classical musicians, who work tirelessly to actualize a composer’s vision. Their performance may add a subtle interpretation, but the fear of wrong notes results in general sterility and solidifies the separation of composer and performer” (p. 56). In addressing the misconstruals underlying this: as with ‘intellectual aesthetics’, a lexicon of terms is invoked nearly every time classical music is mentioned, contrasting the supposedly labour-intensive nature of this musical experience (at least for the performer and composer) with the easy fluidity with which musicians improvise: “sonic strokes are applied to a canvas of silence and time, coalescing into a piece of music” (p. 59). The by now familiar binary strategy is present again in the ensuing discussion:

There are cases where creation for the moment and creation for repetition intrude upon one another. These ‘violations’ take the form of transcriptions of improvisatory solos, recordings of jam sessions, embellishments in classical compositions, and the like. Purists shun such rule breaking: improvisers guard the ephemeral nature of their craft; classical musicians shield the notes on the page. (p. 59)

The issue with these binary oppositions is that they do not function as opposing ideas brought together to stimulate debate. Instead, they gloss over important nuances, frustrating the reader with curtailed or plainly contradictory statements. A section that is disappointingly undernourished is entitled *The Semiotics of Music*. For at least twenty years this has been a major field of musicological research, yet the cursory mention it is given will leave the student more confused than enlightened. The statement that “[m]usical meaning relies on non-linguistic systems, such as signs and indexes” (p. 85) conveys a fundamental misreading of the

¹ Friedmann also discusses infants’ musical perception, but again without reference to published research in the field (2018, pp.42-43).

very premise of linguistic studies, glossing over an unacknowledged wealth of literature exploring music, meaning, and the possible relationships between linguistics and musical 'language'.²

Had the writer's more astute observations been elaborated beyond the brevity afforded by his self-imposed format, the various chapter headings might have given readers of all stripes more to contend with conceptually. For example, Friedmann proposes an enhancement of the composer-performer-listener triangle, proposing a tetrahedron model "that funnels sound towards the listener" (p. 33) whilst acknowledging that the roles of composer and performer are rarely entirely separable. He envisages that "at one end is a wide opening, which receives music of all sorts: live, recorded, electronic, manual, composed, improvised. At the other end is a narrow opening, through which the music empties into the ear" (p. 33). A potentially interesting topic that is again glossed over without deeper reflection is The Exclusion of Smell (pp. 20-21), in which Friedmann suggests that a foundation of art is direct pleasure, but that smell is excluded from even the broadest categories of what constitutes art or aesthetic experience because it resists systematic organisation (p. 21). Smells are, he argues, "received in their entirety at the moment of perception" (p. 21), quoting Monroe Beardsley who asks how a project of determining systematic, repeatable combinations might be undertaken that would be harmonious and enjoyable as complexes (p. 21). Whilst Friedmann refers to the convergence of pleasure and form in recipes (and oil paintings, ballet, and symphonies), he does not mention that there exists an example of 'smell aesthetics' in wine tasting, a field in which experts habitually refer to 'structure' and 'bouquet' and characterise in their terminology in precisely the kind of complexes that Beardsley assumes are evasive. Joris-Karl Huysmans goes even further in his 1884 novel *À rebours* [Against Nature], casting his main character des Esseintes as

... an expert in the science of perfumes; he maintained that the sense of smell could procure pleasures equal to those obtained through sight or hearing, each of the senses being capable, by virtue of a natural aptitude supplemented by an erudite education, of perceiving new impressions, magnifying these tenfold and co-ordinating them to compose the whole that constitutes a work of art. After all, he argued, it was no more abnormal to have an art that consisted of picking out odorous fluids than it was to have other arts based on a selection of sound waves or the impact of variously coloured rays on the retina of the eye; only, just as no one, without a special intuitive faculty developed by study, could distinguish a painting by a great master from a paltry daub, or a Beethoven theme from a tune by Clapisson, so no one, without a preliminary initiation, could help confusing at first a bouquet created by a true artist with a potpourri concocted by a manufacturer for sale in grocers' shops and cheap bazaars. (Huysmans, 2003, p. 105)

My point here is far from frivolous: Huysmans' story draws attention to the essential combination of instinct and learning in the creation of art. One of the most significant discords struck by Friedmann's book is his acknowledgement of art's inextricable humanness – it is *made* – whilst claiming that "the extent to which artistic conceptions are natural is demonstrated by melody. Certain elements are present in almost every Western tonal

² For example, Michael Spitzer's book (2003), and his work on music and emotion more generally, such as the editorial for the Emotion issue of the journal *Music Analysis* (2011).

melody from Baroque to mariachi to soul to grunge” (p. 87). Because so little context is offered through which to evaluate this statement (no mention is made of the Frankfurt School on dialectical historical, material theory of form, and content of artworks), it falls to the reader to ‘do the work’: the short essay format, with its inherent contradictions and elisions (rather than productive tensions) asks more questions than the volume delivers in return.

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