
Book Review

LEVINSON, JERROLD. *Musical Concerns: Essays in Philosophy of Music*. Oxford University Press 2015, 176 pp., \$45 hardcover.

Reviewed by Caterina Moruzzi

Musical Concerns collects twelve essays written by Jerrold Levinson between 2006 and 2014. The value of this collection consists in providing insights both into traditional discussions of the philosophy of music, such as the music-emotion relation, and into alternative and emerging ones, such as the idiosyncrasies of jazz and the values possessed by music.

In the first essay, “Philosophy and Music,” Levinson highlights the beneficial results these two disciplines can obtain from mutual engagement. In addition to the more traditional interrelation between composers who look to philosophical theories to get inspiration for their works and philosophers influenced by musical works, he identifies three features common to philosophy and music: the search for completeness (9–10), their nature as forms of thought (10–13), and their deep usefulness despite superficial impracticality (13).

“Indication, Abstraction, and Individuation” contrasts a theory developed by Levinson with formalist theories that identify the nature of musical works with their pure form and structure.¹ Levinson’s musical contextualism ascribes ontological importance also to contextual factors such as composer, time of composition, and instrumentation. The creation of the work is carried out by an act of artistic indication, the result of a deliberate choice that sets the standards for the performance of the work itself (50), which assigns to the author’s creation the status of artwork. The next essential step after the creation of a work is its reception by an audience: “The Aesthetic Appreciation of Music” deals with different kinds of appreciation the audience can experience by listening to music. Particular attention is devoted to the elements which constitute our aesthetic appreciation of musical works, i.e., musical form, inner motion of music, and gesture (24). If correlated with the bodily response generated in humans by experiencing an emotion, musical gesture gives rise to the feature of musical expressiveness. The expressive quality of music and its capacity to arouse emotions is exemplified through the analysis of the first movement of Fauré’s Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 15 (26–28) and through the connection between music and dance as it is tackled by Roger Scruton (29–31).

¹ See Jerrold Levinson, “What a Musical Work Is,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 5–28.

In “Concatenationism, Architectonicism, and the Appreciation of Music,” the role of emotion in the experience of music (35) is examined through two different views concerning the appreciation of music. Levinson counters Peter Kivy’s musical architectonicism, according to which the perception of large-scale form plays an essential role in the appreciation of a work (38), arguing that music is a process which can be appreciated moment by moment (33) and not as a whole. This view, known as concatenationism, is backed up by results of psychological tests (41–43) and, according to Levinson, accounts for the enduring appeal of single excerpts of music extracted from the main work they are part of (43). The perception of a work as a whole or as a succession of single instants is obviously related to the function played by the variable of time. “What is a Temporal Art?”, written in collaboration with Philip Alperson, analyzes the ways in which time interacts with the production and appreciation of artworks. Music is traditionally considered the temporal art *par excellence*, but time is related to every art form according to object-based, experience-based, and content-based criteria (165), in line with the aspect of the work with which time is related in the most influential way. The issue gets particularly interesting when considering how our perception of time is modified by artworks, musical works in particular, and how this perception has changed in modern times with the advent of systems of digital recording and reproduction (159).

In this book Levinson extends his attention from the analysis of the features which make up the musical work as an entity to considerations regarding musical content and value. “Musical Beauty,” “Values of Music,” and “Shame in General and Shame in Music” are concerned with whether music has an extra-musical as well as an internal content. In order to counter the formalist claim according to which music cannot convey any kind of knowledge, Levinson wants to demonstrate that musical works possess peculiar features in virtue of which it is possible to deem them valuable. One of these features is beauty, which is characterized as a specific kind of musical excellence (58) with the potential to be both remarkably expressive and novel and to convey pleasure. Levinson then identifies a large number of extra-musical values fulfilled by music (80–85), all of which go beyond the aesthetic and artistic value we usually assign to musical works on the basis of their perceptual and historical qualities.

“Popular Song as Moral Microcosm” acts as a bridge between the discussion about the value of music and a more detailed account of the specific features of jazz explored in “Jazz Vocal Interpretation” and “The Expressive Specificity of Jazz.” Levinson addresses the issue of the ascription of different kinds of moral force to music, claiming that music possesses an inner moral quality which contributes to its artistic value in virtue of its expressiveness (116). The moral quality of music and the ways in which it can be enhanced by the conjunction with lyrics are analyzed by Levinson through the consideration of jazz songs with a moral impact on listeners. He then identifies the particular relevance of the performer’s interpretation, the contribution brought to the work, and its special expressiveness as the specific features which make it possible to distinguish jazz from other musical genres. The analysis is remarkably illuminating for the attention devoted to the many different ways in which the performer manipulates, molds, and presents the material offered by the composer.

“Instrumentation and Improvisation” considers the relationship between performer and instrument and the issue of improvisation. Levinson argues against Alperson that, even if the relation that bonds a musician and her instrument together is deep and close, the two components remain detached from one another and what emerges is instead an higher-order instrument made up of the two parts (146). This connection has obvious repercussions for the way performers handle improvisations. Improvisation is an issue which has raised profound debates in musical ontology; the analyses by Levinson and Alperson, however, are not concerned with this ontological puzzle but rather with the expressive musical intelligence displayed by an improvisation and with its ethical dimension as a mindful call to an unbiased appreciation of the present moment (150–151).

As in his previous collections of essays, Levinson manages to address profound issues in an accessible and engaging but also informative way. *Musical Concerns* is therefore suitable both for the scholar who wants to have a grasp on the latest developments in the arguments addressed and for the non-specialist reader who is interested in understanding why music plays such an important role in our lives.

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