

REVIEW

Musical Representations, Subjects, and Objects: The Construction of Musical Thought in Zarlino, Descartes, Rameau, and Weber

Jairo Moreno

Indiana University Press, 2004

xii+232 pp.

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When Foucault's *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*) came out in 1966, it became, implausibly enough, the closest thing to a smash hit a heavy-going academic tome can be. *The Order of Things* became required reading for the French educated class, far beyond the usual confines of its intellectual elites. How many of its enthused readers actually understood the highly demanding treatise in historiography and epistemology is a different question.

Foucault's concern in *The Order of Things*, the pinnacle of his "archaeological" phase, centered on the concept of the *episteme*, which can broadly be defined as the rules underlying a period's systems of thought, which transcend individual fields of knowledge but are themselves subject to change over time. In *The Order of Things* Foucault is particularly interested in the discursive formations and relations between three fields of inquiry, which we would now generally call language, biology, and economics. Like its contemporary American correlate, Thomas Kuhn's "paradigm" ([1962] 1970), to which it is often (though not quite correctly) likened, the concept of the *episteme* is attractive for historical study insofar it makes possible a historical model that defines a system of conceptual possibilities independent of the consciousness of individual subjects. Unlike Kuhn's model, however, which studies the mechanisms underlying the shift from one paradigm to the next in the restricted field of history of science, Foucault's *episteme* is marked by radical dis-

continuities and presumes to demarcate the boundaries of thought of a given period on a much more global level.

Critics soon weighed in on the shortcomings of Foucault's concept of the episteme—above all, its all-encompassing nature, and its inability (or refusal) to account for the transformations from one episteme to the next. And so, after an attempt at methodological correction, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*—quite possibly Foucault's most arid book—which already modified and replaced the all-embracing *episteme* with the more nuanced and localized *archive*, Foucault moved on to other words and things.

The history of music theory, meanwhile, has persisted with this model. It seems the first such music-theoretical commitment to Foucault is found in Brian Hyer's 1994 review of Thomas Christensen's *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*. More recently, Foucauldian histories of music theory have been proposed by Leslie Blasius (2003), Karl Braunschweig (1997), Nicholas Cook (2003), Kevin Korsyn (2003), and others. Indeed, as the recent *Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* amply demonstrates, it would be no exaggeration to claim that the history of music theory, as currently practiced in English-speaking countries, is unthinkable without Foucault and particularly his *Order of Things*.

Against this background, Jairo Moreno's *Musical Representations, Subjects, and Objects* is a book that has long been waiting to be written. In four trenchant chapters, Moreno explores the music-theoretical episteme across the ages in four more or less canonical bodies of texts: he revisits Zarlino's 1558 *Istitutioni harmoniche* (supplemented by the less well-known *Sopplimenti musicali* of 1588), Descartes' *Compendium musicae* (1618), Rameau's *Traité* (1722), and Weber's celebrated analysis of Mozart's "Dissonance" quartet (1832). These texts correspond roughly to Foucault's epistemic categories—Renaissance, Classical and Modern—with Descartes' *Compendium* positioned on the cusp between the two earlier epistemes and Weber's analysis straddling the two latter ones. Moreno complements these Foucauldian categories with heightened attention to the musical subject formation—the emergence of the "modern listener" as implied by the theoretical texts.

To flag the parental advisory right at the beginning: this is not a text for the conceptually faint-hearted. Moreno, unflinchingly committed to his intellectual project, dispenses with any of the anecdotal niceties that are typically used to enliven the arcana of the history of music theory. No old chestnuts are reheated here—there is none of Descartes' quaint opening gambit (a wolf apparently still scares the living daylights out of a sheep, even after both animals are made into drumskins), no introduction to Zarlino's *senario*, no biographical tidbits about Rameau. This is a history of music theory that takes no prisoners. Moreno means business.

It may at first appear like a sign of the lingering power of non-Fou-

cauldian history that the four theorists under consideration are partly chosen along very traditional lines, following patterns of influence and lines of tradition: Zarlino's teachings set the standards for Descartes, who was crucial for Rameau's age, whose theory was the major model for Weber's generation. But one among these four theorists stands out: where Zarlino, Rameau and Weber have earned their place in the music-theoretical canon, Descartes' youthful treatise has had very little impact in the field of music theory (not least because although it was written as early as 1618, it was not published until 1650). Yet Descartes' name resonates more strongly with the concepts of epistemology and ontology that are so central to the concerns of this book. For only a few years later, Descartes would subject the latter to the former, in his three momentous Latin words: *cogito ergo sum*. For Moreno, the impact of this music-theoretical Descartes can be summed up in four other Latin words that he cites throughout the book in constantly varying translations: *huius objectum est sonus*.

Moreno's story begins with the question of order in the age of Zarlino, under the regime of the Renaissance episteme. Zarlino's work has a strange modern reception history: while the latter two books, the practical parts on modes and counterpoint, are available in English translation, the speculative first two tomes have only been translated into German, which may well be a reflection of the respective biases of the two national academic traditions. For Zarlino—and this might come as a surprise to his English-language readers—the maxim *huius objectum est sonus* was not valid in an obvious way: the Renaissance episteme with its network of endless cosmological correspondences—epitomized by the ubiquitous “great chain of being” (Foucault 1994, 81)—located sound between number and music. Moreno's chapter on Zarlino is a textbook case of successfully applying the four types of correspondence, which Foucault's identifies in the Renaissance episteme, to Zarlino's writings, particularly the less well-known earlier part of the *Istitutioni harmoniche*. In many ways, it is instructive to read Moreno's chapter on Zarlino side by side with the relevant sections of Cristle Collins Judd's recent *Reading Renaissance Music Theory*: where Judd humanizes Zarlino, Moreno intellectualizes him.

As long as Moreno's Zarlino is concerned with the speculative parts of music theory, the Renaissance episteme, and its semiotic system of limitless correspondences, serves him well. However, as Moreno argues, as soon as Zarlino moves on to practical matters things get more complicated. Zarlino stumbled over discrepancies between, on the one hand, the supposedly cosmic nature of consonance and dissonance (whose proper treatment happens to coincide with Adrian Willaert's practice in mid-fifteenth-century Venice) and, on the other hand, the alternative derivations of consonances that became prevalent among Zarlino's empirically

inclined contemporaries, especially from the Florentine Camerata. While for Zarlino “truth continues to reside in the indivisible ontology of sounding number,” (47), his disciple-turned-critic, Vincenzo Galilei, concluded contrariwise that number “is mute, being only a means of description, a unit of measurement” (48). To salvage his transcendent epistemology, Zarlino has to take recourse in two categories that are added as almost as an afterthought but that are to take on momentous proportions: historical change, and the listener—the *soggetto ben disposto*—which set us off on an intellectual journey that invests an increasing amount of authority on the listening subject and, simultaneously, locates the meaning of sound in ever-changing authorities outside of the sounding object.

While in Zarlino the ideal listener was born of necessity, the concept takes center stage in Descartes’ *Compendium*. With Descartes, Moreno introduces a new system of signification, corresponding to Foucault’s classical episteme of representation, which operates according to an unmediated, transparent relation between signifier and signified. Or, put simply: in the classical episteme, to represent was to know. This is, after all, the age of maps (see Blasius 2003), of the *Encyclopédie*, of grand classification systems, and of mental representations.

For Descartes, sense and pleasure become central categories, inextricably connected with his understanding of sound. Descartes’ representations are mental operations, intuitions, while subjectivity for him is tantamount to the capacity for active and conscious introspection. The early-twentieth century musicologist Heinrich Bessler may have exaggerated when he claimed that with Descartes, “for the first time . . . [a music theory] proceeds not from the music itself but rather from the hearer” (quoted on p. 58). But what is true is that Descartes presents a new musical epistemology of perception and cognitive evaluation, one where the perceiver is “extricated from all observation and becomes in fact the observer of his own observation.” (49). Moreno is particularly intrigued by the circumstance that the *Compendium* presents Descartes’ thought before it became Cartesian, and his reading traces carefully how Descartes’ musical thought anticipates some, though not all, of the features that were to determine epistemology for years to come.

Rameau synthesizes, in this account, theoretical and practical traditions with a Cartesian *mathesis universalis*. In a sharp and exhaustive reading, Moreno homes in on a specific point of Rameau’s theory of harmony that has long puzzled his modern commentators: the rules of Rameau’s progressions rely on the notion of *sous-entendre*—the interpolation of implied dissonances (dominant seventh, *sixte ajoutée*) by the listening subject, thanks to which chordal functions become identifiable, even where these dissonances are not sounded in the chord. For Moreno, this theoretical peculiarity becomes the arena for the full emergence of the listening subject. In fact, as Moreno argues, Rameau’s subject partic-

ipates fully in the process of signification: only through the agency of the listener can the sonic signifier be turned into a meaningful cognitive representation. More than that, it is thanks to the intervention of the imagination—forging the link between the inaudible seventh and the realization that this implied dissonance should be followed by a bass motion down a fifth—that cogent harmonic progressions are set into motion. Where Descartes disavowed the notoriously slippery faculty of imagination, Rameau's theory was based on it, marking the turning point “from an epistemology of sound toward the epistemology of music” (112).

If that is so, the last chapter—on Weber's analysis of Mozart's Dissonances quartet—moves from an epistemology of music to an epistemology of the musical work. The listening subject is fully absorbed by the musical experience: Weber's post-Rameauvian musical epistemology serves primarily to come to terms with the activity of listening in time. Moreno's Weber marks the turn of music theory toward an ironic mode—Weber presents a thoroughgoing phenomenological account of our listening activity, but questions its own validity at every turn. Moreno reads the basis of Weber's conception of harmony as the lingering vestiges of the Classical episteme, in the guise of Weber's Roman numeral taxonomy, but one that also employs a distinction between *empiricities* (in brief, particular objects of study within a given field of knowledge) and *positivities* (strategies for determining relationships between *empiricities*), which are operative in what Foucault calls the modern episteme.

It is noticeable that during the journey on which Moreno takes us in his book, as musical subjectivity emerges ever more clearly, the Foucauldian framework gradually recedes into the background. By the end of the book, its two main concerns—the Foucauldian episteme and the construction of musical subjectivity—stand in sharp relief, to the extent that the firmly anti-teleological discontinuity which underpins Foucault's archaeological project threatens to undermine Moreno's continuous teleology towards an ever-increasing interiority and psychologization of musical epistemology. And it is easy to see why: while Foucault's structuralist universe of discourses offers little or no place for agency, Moreno's approach to musical subjectivity becomes increasingly predicated upon the very agency of the listener. In the Epilogue, the archaeological framework is all but dropped, in order to salvage a sense of overriding epistemological coherence. Instead, Descartes finally emerges as the real hero of music-theoretical subjectivity. This rather surprising peroration, Moreno argues, is “motivated by my belief that in some sense the Cartesian idea of self-staging constitutes the dominant form of subjectivity in music theory and analysis” (165).

Against this declaration, the succession of the book's four chapters suddenly reads very differently: from the vantage point of an abiding prevalence of a Cartesian epistemology, Zarlino becomes relegated to a

prehistory, Rameau—who “marks the entry of music theory into the modern age” (88)—becomes something of a Messiah to Descartes’ John the Baptist, and Weber finally leaves us with the shards of post-Cartesian subjectivity.

But in fact, this double history, and the uneasy cohabitation of scientific music history and subjectivity has been with us throughout the book. Moreno explains, a propos Rameau: “It is a key issue for the history of theory that precisely at the crucial moment in which there arises a ‘science’ of harmony founded on, of all things, nature, there also arises the need for the intervention of the subject’s most elusive faculty”—the subject’s imagination. (88) In this sense, it should not surprise us that Moreno finally comes down firmly on the side of the imagination—even if this is at the expense of his historical model.

Perhaps, indeed, this is the only mode in which to write the history of music theory today—not only by acknowledging the importance of post-structuralist thought, without which History of Theory could not have become “HoT,” but also by dropping these intellectual crutches at some point and moving on. In doing so, it seems Moreno finally puts Foucault’s spirit to rest—he exhausts what Foucauldian archaeology has to offer to the history of music theory, and simultaneously creates an arena for a re-humanized music-theoretical discourse. Weber’s extraordinary analysis—which Ian Bent (1993, 2:158) considers both “experiential” and “intentional”—may well be read as the starting point of a new music-theoretical project, one that is still trying to come to terms with that pesky musical subjectivity that is inextricable from its very status as theory.

Moreno shows us that music theorists are much more than teachers or practitioners: they propose, promote, and perpetuate modes of thinking and being. It is almost coincidental that these epistemologies happen to take hold in the musical realm. The strength of Moreno’s book is that he reads central music-theoretical texts afresh, supplements them with less well-known documents in the service of a thorough intellectual contextualization. *Musical Representations, Subjects and Objects* is less a deconstruction of music theory than a look at the big picture through close readings. It is an ambitious and impressive attempt to bring the whole weight of the Western epistemological tradition—stretching back to Aristotle and Plato—to bear on music theoretical texts, to bring them back into the fold of Western thought, and to lend these classic theoretical texts a new relevance.

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