

NOT ART, NOT SCIENCE

Music- theory, -analysis, -aesthetics, -meanings, etc.

between

SKYLLA and CHARYBDIS

by Hans- Jürgen Nagel

With regard to an ontological difference, the philosopher Wittgenstein, who died in 1951, described the difference in thinking between the Anglo-American tradition on one side and the Romanic – and German speaking tradition on the other side as follows:

“The one wants to prove, how the world is, the other, that the world exists.”

The philosopher Nietzsche, who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spoke of the “tragic man of culture and his attempts for gravity and horror, who is in need of a kind of metaphysical consolation.” The opera was regarded by him as a product (good) of culture of the “theoretical human being.”

I am trying to present a fragmentarily collection of the present discussions on music theoretical issues,

which might be relevant for some cogitation for the teaching of music.

The saying of Wittgenstein, which I quoted at the beginning, indicates already, that there exists a difference in scientific thinking between the countries and regions, I have mentioned.

It is admitted, that there is no binding truth for any side.

Or, as Lessing said :” The fundamental secret of science seems to be, that the scientist

is more interested in finding the truth than in the truth itself.”

The purpose of my paper is also, to shed light especially on the complex dialectical relationship between the musical trade and the scholarly music analysis, even if the facts might be not new! This happens also with respect to the ability of students and

their expectations in music studies.

Marcello Sorce Keller tried already some weeks ago to incite a discussion on the matter.

1

In the eighties appeared two publications in the English speaking regions:

“ The living work” by Ruth Solie in 1980 and “Contemplating music” by Joseph Kerman, five years later.

Both scholars attacked the idea of a universal meaning of music and stated, that the “idea of

an organic unity” could not be a universal standard of music, but seemed to be more a historical construction with limited possibilities of applicability.

The request for “unity” had been a goal of music theory and the methods of analyzing music, and leaving no space for speculative projects.

As a result, the basic hypothesis, which was responsible for this understanding of music theory, was reduced to not more than a “wrinkle” in music history and aesthetics

- to use a saying by Michel Foucault.

Nicholas Cook had already stated, that “the main problem was the lack of a conceptual

theory, showing how music could cope ( or not) with the meanings, which are attributed to it ( see also different quotations to the term “meaning” at the end of this paper.

2

In most English speaking countries, musical analysis is focused on the research of sources (originals), on the history of classes and the description of form and structure.

Music is regarded as an “empirical artifact” (art product), similar to a scientific object

The aesthetics are not reflected and are on the brink, whilst musical analysis is regarded as a central part of musicology. At the same time, the empiric research is often

based on an ideological, empiric and positivistic approach to the Object without reflection on the Subject.

A look at the concept “musical meaning” reveals for instance already the dilemma, because it is based on the hypothesis, that music is similar to language and that it can be interpreted

by e.g. hermeneutic definitions, which is very debatable!

As already mentioned, scientists have claimed, that this is a “universal” condition.

It follows another example for the dilemma:

The term melodia/melody has on one hand a meaning analogous to different historical periods and on the other hand it is based on a different understanding of time.

At the same time, the attribution “unmelodical” is often used as a criteria for the breakings of the contemporary music with the traditional syntax . This should not be interpreted

in an ideological anthropological sense by e.g. determining how human beings have to behave or how they are depending on so-called “natural laws”.

A question with regard to the methods of musical analysis could be e.g.: Why is this tune exactly in this position and which meaning does it have in this particular context?

### 3

In contrast to England and America, music theory has not been established as a scholarly discipline at the universities in German speaking countries.

After the war a strict division was made regarding higher education in music:

scholarly training was received at the university while artistic training was

received at the music conservatories, with music - history being appropriated

to the conservatories as an “artistic subject.”

Beside this we must consider, that after the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war the Subject was excluded by science

because of ideological reasons. With reference to Plato, who had described the human senses as a result of corruption, the Subject was regarded as being corrupt. Accordingly even music-history was regarded as being “without subject”

The system of norms of the music theoretical thinking is limited in realizing the concret and individualization.

But music as the object itself is the cause, - the concept is the effect!

E.g. in the Greek tragedy, the dionysian delirium is the fundament, and represented by the music, as the most direct possibility of manifestation. The tragedy itself becomes a kind of symbolization of the music.

Music theoretical concepts are based on theoretical thinking and cannot be more than an orientation in western culture. E.g. in practice, “allegro” does not mean anything without being able to understand the whole musical context.

Strawinsky always claimed: “ I did not ask for interpreting my music, I asked for a correct reading of the musical text.”

According to the scholastic philosophy, music is the “universalia ante rem”, the concepts are the “universalia post rem” and the reality is the “universalia in res.”

4

Philosophical aesthetics has traditionally a huge lack of “Music” and

musicology a lack of aesthetics. The self- understanding of musicology as a subject of empiric history is so fundamental, that aesthetic formulations of questions are similar to a dark continent.

There exists a huge gap between the “esoteric” forms of analysis and the acoustic presence of music. As a fact the consuming of music is most popular and based on the “empirical reception”. At the same time, music, as a form of art, seems to be not worth for discussions or recognitions.

As already indicated, music theory is often blamed of being separated from history or providing a deficiency in historical knowledge. In England and America, where the productive theory of Schenker is in favour, the music theoretical thinking is criticized for being carried away by an engagement for systematic completeness, without respect for a historical

reference or differentiation.

But we should adhere to the fact, that music theory and –analysis are not exclusively occupied by Schenkerism. This would be a prejudice.

Another detail:

The “figured bass” lost its importance already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But the correct connections between chords became the basis for the teaching of Harmony. Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was regarded as being not more than an exercise in writing. The only advantage was, that the student could provide a complete composition/structure in numbers, but without any idea, how it might sound.

With regard to music analysis we have to ask ourselves, how for instance the music of Wagner or Mahler could be analysed with the traditional methods? In the introduction to his opera Lohengrin, Wagner begins the introduction with “empty chords”, i.e. without a reference to any tradition, just a sound which comes into being from somewhere and which is similar to compositions of the contemporary composer Ligeti, who lived almost 100 years later than Wagner. After those chords Wagner turns back in his composition to the past and especially to the concept of Beethoven`s 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, where he had discovered the basics for what he later defined as the “music drama of the future”.

Mahlers music is based on the projection of different social levels of his time. It is not possible to analyze his music with the traditional methods at all.

The music of Beethoven can be more comprehended as a “musical expression” and at first hand better be understood by a “knowing ear” than by the attempts of analysis. The paradox of Beethoven`s art is, that it wants to be consumed by the intellect on one side, but on the other side receives its decisive impulses by emotions: “ from heart it should go to heart.”

The music researcher Adolf Sandberger wrote 1924 with regard to his research on Beethoven “ The last secrets of his art cannot be unraveled by the means of words; only the accomplished artistic performance can fulfill this: “if you don`t feel it, you cannot chasing it!”

## 5

An example for a compromise between scientific analysis and the musical trade is the creditable “Harmonielehre” by Diether de la Motte. Here the harmonic language is presented in relation to its historic development. His scientific approach has found even a more precised differentiation by other scholars, as Wolfgang Budday and Siegfried Eipper etc.

Recently one can observe a tendency towards a new historical positivism in the development of music theory and musicology, which tries to replace the funktions theory and the cadence harmony by an “authentic contemporary music theory.”

The music theoretical Neopositivists claim, that

- only a contemporary theory is able to give evidence for the music of a respective period,

which results to a synchronism of theory and practice.

- there is an identity between theory and compositional thinking. Therefore only a contemporary theory could be relevant.

- every systematic theoretical concept which is based on a historical superposed context, as the functions theory, the Urlinie theory of Schenker or other “linetheories”

are unhistoric and false.

## 6

For the curriculum of music at the university, it seems to be most relevant, to recognize aesthetics as a relevant subject for the process of understanding music, by excluding

- any non historic depreciation of the idealistic aesthetic tradition ( work, autonomy, avantgarde)
- any outwarded fusion between form and lifestyle or with advanced art
- any commercial entertainment industry

Aesthetics have to be engaged for

- alternative tendencies and interests, e.g. for the intelligent postmodernism
- concepts of media theory
- music sociology
- aesthetics of perception
- a cultural history of listening
- music and metaphors
- attempts for a psychological and system-theoretical interpretation of music

I think, that the famous dispute between Adorno and W. Benjamin “on the art in times of possibilities of its technical reproduction” is still topical with regard to those mentioned requests.

7

Art cannot be regarded at all as the last remains of an exclusiveness, preserved from the symptoms of the negativity of the market. It reflects and reproduces its possibilities and means, according to the social form of knowledge ( meaning).

An aesthetics of so-called pop music is a desideratum. Unfortunately Pop music holds little aesthetic

interest for traditional music philosophy. – The distinction between serious music and light music is still valid, even though for serious music it has long been declared obsolete.

According to Adorno, music classified as “light” remains “bad without exception.”

Adorno claims, that the light music is bad and cannot be qualified as art. It is just a social phenomenon. His judgment is based on a phenomenological concept on the base of social divisions and not on the level of its aesthetic meanings. Adorno: “Social criticism on music, especially with regard to its efficacy, must be understood according to its specific aesthetic meaning, otherwise it is just a product of social agencies. The meaning of art is just a reflection on the same rules, which are responsible for the meaning of the market.”

The theorization of pop music may have succeeded in enhancing its status, but aesthetic aspects have been left out of consideration and there is too much focus on the socio cultural context. Here the concept of musical subcultures helps us, first in a descriptive way, to find our bearings. Within the musical subcultures, - which are not automatically compatible with the kind of music spread through the media as pop –

a separate development logic, even a form of subhistory, has, in the meantime, developed together with criteria for a specialist opinion. But this is only the beginning to formulate aesthetic questions; answers can only be outlined.

It is often required, not to be only concentrated on the teaching of western music. This request is not seldom free of an approach without any care for declaring the “unknown”

to the “own”. The uncritical presentation of an unknown musical language can result to a recognition of oneself in everything. The unfamiliar seems not to be unfamiliar at all, because what we know, can be transferred in any case to the apparent unfamiliar.

A critical approach to non – european music requires knowledge of the respective language, - culture, and –history. The aim of teaching should not be the serving for more quantity, but to develop critical awareness, open for the unfamiliar and respecting its differences. Otherwise we are approaching the dangerous concept of “world music,” which is often based on market interest and tries to project

the world as a kind of huge grocery shop, where individual needs for “exotica” can be satisfied or where the western needs and wishes for “esoterics”, as the last enhancement of a cultural imperialism, deprives the unfamiliar of its last remains of autonomy.

The musical results are very often more than superficial.

In the following, I would like to have a look on the systematic theory of the sociologist Nicholas Luhmann, who attracts great attention in the academic world with his publications since 1986.

The sytem theory of Luhmann is justified with respect to the aesthetics and sociology of music in two ways: On one hand, it attempts to meet the universalist claim to a modern “supertheory.” On the other hand, it seeks, through its own contribution, to join in the art - theoretical debate in the related science, to which also musicology belongs.

Luhmanns hypothesis is as follows: The general theory of social systems replaces the thinking in identities with the paradigm of the discrepancy of system and environment. This basic discrepancy is the fundamental prerequisite for the formation of socalled

“autopoetic systems”. Autopoetic systems generate their elements of which they consist through an implementation of the system/environment discrepancy. Art is an autopoetic

subsystem of society which reproduces itself, i.e. its elements, through the implementation of the specific discrepancy beautiful/ugly. The basal elements of the system are works of art. These are no identities but programs of communication. In art,

communication as a basal of the autopoiesis of social system aggregates solely as an end itself. Autonomous art thus seen as aesthetic communication is the paradigmatic fulfillment of society per se.

Lets have a look, for example, at the “Eroica” symphony Beethoven`s.

On the occasion of its premiere, Beethoven`s “Eroica” was understood, as being based on the fact, that it could be differentiated from the “natural” acoustic environment. The claim for being a piece of art was supported by the institutionalized frame of the “concert”. Neither the commercial aspect, e.g. the economic background of the music as a product, which Beethoven had to sell in order to be able to finance his living and composing, nor the psychological environment of the music as an expression, which Beethoven created in order to philosophize in tunes, should have been relevant for the answer to the question, if the “Eroica” was a piece of art.

It was decisive for the success of the premiere, that Beethoven`s offer for communication was understood, i.e. that the compositional process from tune to tune, from measure to measure, from phrase to phrase, as a kind of “form which was moved by sounds” could be observed. The condition for this was, that B. related to known patterns of the symphonic music (redundant) with the aim, to find a new kind of formula for it (variant). The Eroica advanced to a piece of art, by the way, how B. was able to make the formal side of the information understandable. The duty of the contemporary critics would have been, to perceive the detailed structure of the symphony through the ways of musical analysis

as a successful or unsuccessful communication. Questions e.g. with regard to the contents, the semantic meaning or the existing idea had no relevance for the judgments

Accordingly the Eroica would be the result of a more or less incidental and not aimed historic development and not the result of artistic work, which is based on the transforming of emotions and consciousness, “because the consciousness cannot communicate” (Luhmann). The communication happens through the reception of music, based on the fact, that social and psychic systems are linked with each other at the same time. But on the “operative” level both systems remain separated, and “especially this is responsible for the meaning of art.”

The one who experiences music by this way, is able to receive a paradigm of the modern, functional – differentiated society – but not more.

The strength of Luhmanns sociology lies in the theoretical and historical description of the process of art for an autonomous subsystem of society. The weakness of Luhmanns aesthetics is, that it restricts the general meaning of art and the specific meaning of individual works of art to their historical gain in autonomy. For many scholars L. theory is regarded as a successful attempt, which offers possibilities for a rethinking of music historical self understanding, opposite music aesthetics and music sociological formulations of questions.

L. regards the evolution and development of art as an autonomous process, independent from the process of consciousness in the traditional sense of the idealistic subject- philosophy.

With reference to this, the question for a music historian would be, can we speak of a musical progress with regard to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as to the aims of music historical developments?

While Hanslick for example, one of the strong representatives of the form and autonomous aesthetics, did only deny the possibility of a scientific objectivity, but not the basic context between the composer, with his poetic idea on one side and the music as a form on the other side, - for Luhmann the intention of the composer with regard to an understanding of the importance of a work, as a basic element for the system of music, is not relevant. He regards the meaning of art as disclosed, not on a semantic level, but on a formal level and independent of the "psychic environment" of an art system, which is based on "autopoiesis."

10

Musical meaning: ( quotations)

U. Eco

" I think, there is no truth, which is not the result of an interpretation and of a social contact. There is something in the "reality", which says "No, you cannot say that."

Kant

"Music itself does not have a meaning."

Nietzsche

" Music is basically not deep and full of meanings. The intellect itself has put the meaning into the sound, as it has put meaning to the relations of lines and masses in the architecture, but which are unknown to the mechanical laws.

## Schönberg

“There are only a few people, who are able to understand clearly what music has to say. The presumption, a piece of music should evoke imaginations, and, when it does not happen, this would be an indication for bad quality or for a lack of understanding of the music, is such a common place, as only the false and the banality can be circulating.”

### Conclusions for the teaching of music:

1. Western music is a part of our cultural memory. It tells us about the past and about respective future developments. We have to find clues to talk and write about it, before we go to analytic details.
2. Music teaching at the university should offer a choice between an artistic- and a scholarly training. This is in the interest of the students, their talents, abilities and intellectual curiosity.
3. Both sides should enable students to discover their grammatical ability for talking and writing on music.
4. Priority must be given to the process of understanding a musical text and the relevance of its symbols for style, practice and aesthetics.
5. Students should have a choice between an artistic training in music ( including theory, aesthetics, history as an artistic subject) and a scientific approach for a personal research. A PhD or any other degree is not automatically a prove for an artistic qualification.

In the film “Maximiliana,” the reputed surrealist painter and representative of the DADA – movement, Max Ernst, opens his window and shouts “I don` t have a diploma!”