

Report on Karol Berger's "Aesthetics III: The Genealogy of Modern European Art Music"

Matt Wright, Oct 27, 2003, Music 200

The chapter "Aesthetics III: The Genealogy of Modern European Art Music" from Karol Berger's *A Theory of Art* is a history of European art music told from the perspective of various dichotomies¹ in the aesthetic goals of art music, including functional versus autonomous music, music emphasizing harmony versus music emphasizing expression and transmission of passions, the emphasis on harmony versus the emphasis on illustrating the meaning of the words, and finally, music for its own sake versus "mimetic" music. I will attempt to summarize his main points; I will also take issue with his related characterizations of popular and "real time" (i.e., non-notated) music.

Berger sets the context for his history by considering art music as a social *practice*, a term he uses very specifically according to a lovely definition quoted from MacIntyre (p. 111). The key elements are that a practice includes "goods internal to that form of activity" which both define and are defined by the practice's "standards of excellence." Berger describes three elements of a practice and their relationships: its *aims*, i.e., the goals motivating the practitioners, its *means*, i.e., how people attempt to meet the goals, and its *institutions*. From MacIntyre's idea of goods *internal* to a form of activity Berger emphasizes that *autonomy* is a necessary feature for a practice: "a practice is autonomous because it has aims of its own[;] it does not derive its aims from elsewhere, from another practice, that is, because its aims can be realized only by this, and not by any other, practice."

In the section "Functional and Autonomous Music" Berger attempts to locate the historical beginning of the practice of European art music. According to MacIntyre's definition, music created purely in the service of, e.g., "liturgy, political representation, or conviviality" (p. 116) is not a practice, because it serves external goals rather than goals intrinsic to the practice itself. His question² is therefore "[When] did European music acquire internal aims?" (p.115). To me this question is the same as "when did Europeans start a tradition of making music purely for intrinsic musical satisfaction?" Berger acknowledges that "we should look for features of partial autonomy in all music, features that cannot be explained by extramusical functions and that testify to the music's having been made in part for its own sake, that is, features that give the music an artistic character ('artistic' and 'autonomous' being synonyms³ in this case)" (p. 116).

¹ Each time Berger describes one of these dichotomies, he emphasizes that it is between two idealized extremes "that rarely, if ever, actually appeared in their true forms" (p. 116). and that actual practice tended to fall between the two poles.

² I believe this might be a good class discussion question for a seminar.

³ I don't understand why he considers 'artistic' and 'autonomous' as synonyms in this case; he asserts that Modern European art music is a practice in MacIntyre's sense but never explains why the practice-ness that is achieved by autonomy is what makes the music artistic. Later he turns the causality around, suggesting that music's "artistic character is the basis for [its] claim to autonomy" (p. 118).

But where can we “look” for these features? The only evidence that remains for modern scholars, of course, is in the form of written documents. For Berger the written documents are much, much more than just the only surviving evidence; he conflates music notation with the very autonomy that he has defined as a synonym for “art.” He claims “The central prerequisite for music’s acquisition of an artistic character was the emergence of composition as a process of music-making distinct from performance” (p. 116). I’m sure this will come as a surprise to, for example, connoisseurs of the Persian and Indian classical art music traditions, which are both based on improvisation within complex melodic and rhythmic structures (and which both substantially predate European art music). Both of these traditions are based upon an orally transmitted corpus of great works that is extended by the master musicians of each generation; music notation is a sometimes-tolerated but certainly nonessential modern tool.

But even within the European tradition there are plenty of other forms of musical autonomy besides pieces of paper. For example, I would say that there certainly must have been performers of music for church services who made expressive performances incorporating “purely” musical elements that served no additional liturgical function other than making the music itself more beautiful. I would also imagine that early musicians had a tradition of making music for its own sake in their “time off” from performing for services, dances, royal courts, etc.

Berger’s goes on to critique real-time music making. “A composer, not being forced to make music in real time, can afford to experiment, to try things out, to risk making mistakes, to an incomparably greater degree than even the most skillful performer and thus can make music whose artistic character is potentially much greater” (p. 116). This is exactly wrong; an improviser has much more facility to experiment and risk making mistakes than a writer and has the advantage of immediate musical feedback. There are many advantages to writing music not in real time, but Berger does not name any. A more apt distinction for Berger’s point would be between creating music in front of an (impatient, critical) audience versus creating music in private. But just because music notators have to do their work in private doesn’t mean that improvisers don’t also work in private, for example, experimenting with and refining musical material.

On p.118, though Berger acknowledges that art music and popular music were not strictly separated, he asserts that “the separation of composition from performance and the survival of the products of composition as written texts independent of performances are the two defining features of art, as opposed to popular music.” Even if we ignore this sentence’s glaring lack of the word “Europe,” Berger seems to think that all popular music is improvised instead of composed. Do catchy melodies materialize out of thin air? Are the masses so lowbrow that whatever spews out of a musician’s mind at any moment will be popular?

On the next page, Berger goes so far as to imply that music made in real time invites the listener not to pay attention or at least to be “drawn by [the music] in an attitude of passive identification.” Notated music (which in this case is honored by the title “work”) encourages “active contemplation from a certain distance,” i.e., to be studied as a written document. I believe that this dichotomy grossly misrepresents the way we listen to music.

Though it is certainly possible to “space out” and experience music as a series of disconnected momentary impressions as Berger describes, it is also possible to pay attention, to remember, to recognize musical material, to appreciate a piece’s development over time, to build mental models of its structure, to listen “actively” and try to predict what is coming next, etc. Perhaps for “professional music historians” (as Berger identifies himself on p. 110) there is a special joy in analyzing notated music, and there is certainly plenty of European art music whose secrets are more or less imperceptible to the ear and apparent only upon study of the score, but I claim that all music, whether “art” or “popular”, pre-composed or improvised, notated or not, can be “actively contemplated” in real time while listening to it.

Prejudice towards notated music is not Berger’s alone, and he eventually gets back to the more solid ground of his narrative, describing the historical shift towards this prejudice in writers about musical aesthetics. He notes the rise in the 14th century of the appreciation of a composer as an individual and the idea of treating their (notated) works as “models for imitation no less th[a]n the classical works of poetry” (p 117). He quotes Tinctoris’ effusive praise in 1477 of his contemporary or near-contemporary composers, which includes Tinctoris’ statement that he imitates the style of counterpoint of these revered works (ibid). Berger then quotes a 1537 music primer by Listenius expressing the view that composition is a musical activity independent of performance and naming *musica poetica* as crafting a “perfect and absolute work” (p. 118) that lasts beyond the death of the composer.

Berger begins the next section “The Rise of Mimetic Music,” by summarizing ancient Greek and Roman ideas about music from Plato, Aristotle, Macrobius, Boethius, etc. “What [modern European musicians] found in those texts were two basic ideas about the nature and aims of music: the idea that music was the sensuous embodiment of intelligible harmony (*harmonia*) and the idea that music was capable of making humans feel various changeable passions (*pathos*) and thus⁴ capable of forming a person’s enduring character (*ethos*)” (p. 120).

Berger then points out that, in practice, the emphasis of European art music until the middle of the sixteenth century was polyphony, in particular, consonant vertical pitch relationships, which were understood to be related to the mathematical proportions of the astronomical “music of the spheres.” Although writers on music continued to claim music’s ethical powers, the surviving treatises and compositions both emphasize harmony. By the middle of the sixteenth century there arose the idea that the so-called *ars perfecta* style of polyphony had indeed reached perfection, that the means of the practice had fully met the goals.

⁴ I’m not sure that the ability to cause people to feel various passions is either necessary or sufficient to allow a composer to improve a listener’s ethical character; Berger never explains or quotes any explanation of this connection. Although writers have acknowledged a connection between music and emotions for centuries, the specifics of how this works (e.g., “fast music makes us excited while slow music calms us down”) seem incredibly simpleminded. I believe that this is a ripe area for modern scientific music perception and cognition research.

Therefore, asserts Berger, “European art music experienced its first paradigm shift... [The] idea of music as capable of stirring passions and forming human character began to be taken seriously” (p. 122). Berger singles out Vincenzo Galilei, a musician, music theorist, and historian of ancient music theory influential in the 1570s and 80s, as an important advocate of the emphasis of ethics over harmony. Somehow, Galilei’s teacher Mei believed that only register and tempo, not harmony, had expressive powers; Galilei therefore advocated against vocal polyphony on the grounds that it not only made the words harder to understand but also confused the ethical effects by presenting contradictory pitches and rhythms at the same time and for the same words. Berger connects these “reforms” to the development of new musical textures such as monophonic song with instrumental accompaniment and the new genre of opera (p. 125). Even among composers of polyphonic vocal music, for example, Monteverdi, the emphasis shifted from the older practice, with its strict rules for consonant pitch relationships, to a newer “second practice” that allowed dissonance as “an independent expressive means” (p. 126) to serve the text.⁵

Scientific developments in the 16th century also undermined the cause of pure harmony. It turned out that the motions of the celestial bodies aren’t really governed by the simple integer relationships of just intonation.⁶ Near the same time they discovered that just-intoned thirds and sixths, though they exhibit a mathematical elegance that supports their being considered empirically consonant, are incompatible with the intonation of the other notes of a diatonic scale.

This dichotomy of harmony versus expression (or “mimesis”) of passions (through musical support of language) was still central in the mid-eighteenth century in Rousseau’s polemic against Rameau, the main point of which was that Rameau’s overemphasis on harmony lessened music’s connection with speech and therefore “deprived music of its moral power” (p. 128).

Berger’s final dichotomy is between mimetic and abstract music. He brings back his dubious themes of popular/art music, real time/score studying and passive/active experiencing of music, putting mimetic music on the popular/real time/passive side and abstract music on the art/score studying/active side. He characterizes the 17th and 18th centuries as the heyday of mimetic/popular music, especially opera but also instrumental “program music” based on an explicit or implied linguistic component. “But between, roughly, 1780 and 1820 another paradigm shift [towards abstract music] ... completely revolutionized the practice of music in Europe” (p. 133).

⁵ The logical connection between stirring passions and text is not obvious. Of course vocal music with words can use the techniques of poetry and rhetoric for emotional effect (and the emotional powers of music can be used to support these effects), but music without a text can also stir passions and music with a text can avoid stirring passions.

⁶ The exception is a phenomenon known as “tidal locking” that is responsible for the fact that the same side of the moon always faces the Earth, i.e., that the frequency of the moon’s rotation around its axis and the frequency of the the moon’s orbit around the earth are in a “unison” 1:1 ratio. Because of the same phenomenon Mercury’s motion embodies the Pythagorean perfect fifth: it orbits the sun twice in exactly the time it rotates three times about its axis. (!) But neither the ancients nor the astronomers of the Middle Ages were able to observe the phase of Mercury.

The romantic view, without analogizing music to any “harmony” in the physical/astronomical world, saw music as “a medium capable of giving expression to an essential metaphysical region inaccessible to language” (p. 135). Berger refers to the influence of Kant’s philosophy of the “noumenal,” i.e., things that are known to exist only in the abstract world of thought, not actual experience, and of the view of music as being a gateway into this infinite space. The struggle between mimetic and abstract music comes out on the side of abstraction by the 20th century; Berger quotes Stravinsky, Schönberg, and other great composers as being firmly against mimesis, against even listening to the meaning of sung lyrics.

Although I have major problems with Berger’s ideas about “real time” music and popular music, I believe that his dichotomies are quite profound and penetrating viewpoints for understanding the history of aesthetics in European art music.