Embodiment

Two main threads relating to contextuality ran through the readings. Representing the first, Hisama (2001) and Straus (2011) both seek to understand music as a product of a composer’s individual challenges in society. Straus takes care to delineate between “impairment” and “disability.” The former is physical or mental condition; the latter is a social and cultural construction of the meaning of such impairment. Straus claims that disabled composers necessarily react to the cultural understanding of their conditions, and signs of this can be found in their music. He also investigates how critics in different time periods ignore or embrace, glorify or disparage these disabilities in their understanding of the music and its value. Hisama, investigating gender in musical modernism, analyzes Ruth Crawford Seeger’s String Quartet in light of Crawford’s place in a decidedly masculine field of modernism. Hisama explains that Crawford’s composition exhibits a “double-voiced discourse,” since Crawford operated both as an insider of a dominant group (having been trained in normative, modernist composition) and as an outsider (being a woman doing ostensibly “men’s work.”) As woman-outsider, Crawford exhibits disability in Straus’s terms: her gender was (and still is to a degree) a marked, culturally stigmatized bodily difference from a masculine norm. Through both Hisama’s gendered understanding and Straus’s lens of disability, a composer’s interaction with his/her surrounding culture plays a vital role in the musical product.

The second contextual thread is on the other end of the musical experience, in the listener (and/or the theorist). As Guck (1994) explains, an analysis is always a personal account. It must necessarily be conditioned by what the analyst thinks is important, which can vary drastically
depending on cultural inclinations. This reminded me of the Harrison letter (2000/2001) we read for the first week of class, in which he explains that theorists are the kind of music scholars who get excited by things like chord usage. Those who don’t (N.B. that this is defined in the negative) are necessarily separate in their methodology and intent. And the “founding principles” of each camp “are self-sufficient.” (Harrison, 30) Though they may interact for enrichment or growth, theorists and musicologists (or traditional theorists and those engaged in postmodern pursuits of feminism or criticism) should remain in their separate communities; friendly neighbors rather than intimate friends.

In any case, Guck’s concern is not to understand a piece of music as a token of a general type. She is concerned with her interaction with a piece of music; concerned with how it sounds rather than why it is there or how it relates to general systems. Guck wants to augment music theory with personal experiences of music, to show how each analysis grows out of a relationship with individual pieces. The analyst shouldn’t strive to be the omniscient observer. Guck wants to bring the analyst into the analysis.

This desire to change what counts as music theory grows out of a general sense that the field is traditionally masculine and, hence, a normalizing and often marginalizing enterprise. As an outgrowth of the logical empiricism of the mid twentieth century, the “Schenker and sets” approach to music analysis took root in the “scientistic” methodologies of Babbitt and Forte, especially. As Maus (1993, 2004) describes, the receptive act of listening in music inevitably casts the study of it in a feminine light. The music is in charge of the situation when one is listening. The music gives the listener pleasure or pain in its ability to penetrate, through perception, to a listener’s emotions, intellect, etc. To compensate for this perceived feminine
receptivity, Maus claims music theorists initially sought to harden up their enterprise by taking control of the music by using “scientistic” technologies.

Instead of engaging with pieces as individual entities, theorists have traditionally explained music in its relationship to a normative type. Conventional formal and voice leading models provide a standard that pieces must be judged against. Maus analogizes the normal/abnormal distinction to categories of sexuality and gender. The deviant parts of music need to be normalized, brought under control. Analysts seek the amount of conformity a piece exhibits. Those that stray too far from the norm are denied equal respect and status. Straus puts the thought in organicist terms. Schenker and Schoenberg exemplified the notion that a musical work is a body, an autonomous being whose parts must be well-formed. This comports well with a medical model of disability, where distinctions are made between the statistical, desirable normal and the abnormal which needs to be overcome (or at least rationalized).

Guck, Hisama, Maus, and Straus all suggest a larger scope for music theoretical discourse that includes a diverse range of views and conceptions of what is important in music. In his afterword, Maus (1993) problematizes the traditional notion of centrality (Schenker and sets) and marginality (everything else) in the discipline of music theory. To replace it, he advocates a scholarly field that expresses diversity, even to the point of mutual incomprehensibility between constituencies. It seems to me that this desirable diversity represents a “plural-but-equal” type of cultural nationalism within music theory.

Such a thought immediately brought to my mind a rhizomatic conception of music theory, as opposed to a more traditional arborescent model. The family trees of Schenker and Babbitt, the masculine lineages that Guck and Maus describe, continue to govern much music theoretical discourse. But a set of distinct, diverse quanta (like the works of Boretz and Randall
that Maus advocates) can be connected in a different way, without being a branch on a hierarchized tree. The concept of rhizomes as mediating or mapping structures of cultural entities comes from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, especially in their book, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Deleuze and Guattari explain that, “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21) A rhizome is non-hierarchical, plural, heterogeneous.

To me, this perhaps explains how we interact with music in contemporary “shuffle culture” of all-encompassing music accessibility. We can make connections between seemingly disjoint objects. So why shouldn’t it be how we, as music theorists, understand the metatheoretical aspects of our discipline? Instead of conforming to an assimilatory and normalizing culture proposed by those theorists steeped in logical empiricism, contemporary theorists are able to draw on a diverse array of relationships. Perhaps I am a little naïve, but it seems as though theory has partially moved away from the organicist/masculine model of early practitioners, or it has at least fostered an acceptance of alternative and creative postmodern methodologies. I believe any good humanistic inquiry inherently promotes diversity, and music theory is no exception.