

Review: All Too Human?

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# All too human?

Debilitated by an excess of New Musicology,  
IVAN HEWETT welcomes three stimulating  
celebrations of timeless critical values

**A**ESTHETICS and criticism have become jealous bedfellows, always wanting a bit of the other's half of the bed. The philosopher gets impatient with generalities about form and content, style and language, and can't wait to tell us why he thinks Brahms is a bad composer. Similarly the critic wants his or her insights to shed light beyond their target; an observation on Donne's use of metaphor soon turns to a meditation on metaphor in general, and thence to the roots of what intelligence and perception consist in. But the relations aren't quite symmetrical. Philosophy knows it needs criticism; but criticism has often assumed it can do without philosophy. Critical books from that long-ago era before Barthes are utterly unperturbed by philosophy, as if terms like 'beautiful' and 'true' are as innocent and unquestionable as axioms in geometry. In a book like Kenneth Clarke's *Introduction to Rembrandt*, the avoidance of 'theory' and philosophy shows the same reliance on instinct and good taste that the author finds in his subject. This gentlemen's agreement has long since dissolved, not least because of the arrival on the scene of female critics impatient of gentlemen's agreements. People are now wary of terms like beautiful, though it is now being cautiously welcomed back into polite company. Charles Rosen is certainly unembarrassed by it; indeed it's his favourite term of approbation.

And yet there is a philosophical problem lurking at the heart of the critic's enterprise. The insights we gain from a critic seem so rooted in the particularities of an individual piece that relating them to other pieces is always problematic. To do so means invoking some higher-level category of description – a harmonic movement, say, which this moment in this piece shares with many others. These may then become instances of some law-like generalisation, to which the individual cases relate sometimes in a straightforward way, sometimes in an interestingly oblique way. Without any terms of comparison criticism is apt to fall into a mere series of stammering effusions, streams of purple prose which really amount to little more than saying 'I like this a lot'. And yet the instant a critic imports a general term, and some over-

arching theory into which the term fits, the sensuous contact with the 'shining surface of the idea' presented by the music starts to become veiled and indistinct.

It was to put critical judgements of music on some apparently objective, 'scientific' basis that the discipline of Analysis was born, though all too often the critical impulse was lost in the mass of statistics. Music criticism had hardly absorbed the shock of this invasion before it was beset by another, this time from literary studies. It was called Theory, a term whose portentous capitalisation masked a disciplinary confusion; all kinds of approaches to criticism, from deconstruction to gender studies to post-colonialism, rode under its banner. So great is the intellectual distance between Analysis and Theory that they can hardly engage in conversation; instead they rub along in polite disdain of each other, and if analysis seems to be on the wane it's only because it's less fashionable.

Standing to one side, and looking on the debate with a mixture of exasperation and amusement, are the old-style humanistic critics. The authors of these three books could certainly be described as such; they're all from the generation that matured long before New Musicology was even thought of. The books by Rosen and Meyer are critical, and the remaining one philosophical; but there is plenty of musing on the aesthetics, the cognition, the hermeneutics of music in the former two, and plenty of robust *ex cathedra* judgements on individual pieces in Sharpe's book. This is the odd one out, in that it deals with puzzles about music that go beyond, or beneath, the puzzles that beset the critic. The philosophy of music digs deeper, 'problematizing' – as the jargon has it – music all the way down to its atoms ('what is the stuff of music?') and all the way up to its metaphysics ('what is the nature of musical time?'). Sometimes, indeed, the problems seem mere chimeras that exist only in the professional philosopher's imagination. Whoever thought there was a problem in identifying musical works until Roman Ingarden wrote *The problem of the musical Work and its identity?* RA Sharpe is robustly commonsensical on that topic, saying that music-

**Music and humanism: an essay in the aesthetics of music**  
RA Sharpe  
Oxford UP  
(Oxford, 2000);  
ix, 221pp; £30.  
ISBN 0 19 823885 1.

**The spheres of music: a gathering of essays**  
Leonard B. Meyer  
University of Chicago Press (Chicago & London, 2000);  
x, 316pp;  
£35 / £14 pbk.  
ISBN 0 226 52153 2 /  
0 226 52154 0.

**Critical entertainments: music old and new**  
Charles Rosen  
Harvard UP  
(Boston & London);  
336pp; £19.95.  
ISBN 0 674 17730 4.

al identity is necessarily fluid and that it's no good making an Indian raga answer to the identity criteria of a Beethoven symphony. In fact he's robustly commonsensical throughout, and often very shrewd. His main puzzle is how music comes to express something, and how we can come to an agreement on what that meaning is. In pursuing that topic, and examining its particular problems in modern music, he behaves like an old-style analytic philosopher, energetically hacking away at philosophical dead wood, as if the mere act of clarifying concepts will lead to enlightenment. That's a very dated view, but Sharpe shows there's still life left in it. The view he wants to combat is that music is expressive 'inasmuch as it causes certain states in us'. Instead he espouses cognitivism, the idea that music is always heard 'under a description, say, "sad" (as opposed to having the music cause us to feel sad)'. (This is a familiar theme in much contemporary musical philosophy – Peter Kivy insists on the same definition of expression.) But once you admit that music's emotional import is read into it, rather than simply felt as one feels shock-waves from an explosion, then a gap opens up between listener and music, and between one listener and another. That gap allows for many different readings of one piece; but how does one decide which are valid and which can safely be called 'misreadings'? Sharpe has a very conservative answer to that question: 'the limits of viable interpretation are given by the limits of what the author or creator could have intended in the culture of his time.' The intention here is surely to eliminate 'producer opera', about which Sharpe makes some acid remarks. The trouble is that it eliminates practically any production that goes beyond slavish historical reconstruction. That sentence points to a conservative cast of mind, very much evidenced in the author's discussion of new music. That discussion is the target at which the whole book aims, though the most interesting and shrewd points aren't to do with that agenda at all. At one point Sharpe confesses to reading the newspaper while listening to Haydn (and how refreshing it is to hear that, so different to those relentlessly high-minded philosophers like Richard Wollheim, who in *Painting as an art* tells us that he once spent three hours absolutely motionless in front of one picture). Sharpe sees no sin in this, remarking that 'it is neither surprising nor regrettable that music rewards different degrees of concentration in different ways'. He defends the use of expressive predicates to describe music on the grounds that 'they allow new listeners to be drawn in. They are a means to making music convivial.' He attacks Nicholas Cook's assertion that the real goal of listening is pleasure (a view asserted more than once in Rosen's book, as we shall see). Sharpe says that 'Cook fails to distinguish between pleasure and

interest' – interest being the kind of enjoyment that comes with prolonged acquaintance with music, when one starts to have ideas about it, conversations about it, and finds that it is woven in numerous ways into the fabric of one's life. This leads to an important insight into the moral dimension of music, a dimension that the emphasis on pleasure misses entirely. 'When a writer like Malcolm Budd identifies artistic value with

the intrinsic value of the experience the work offers', he does us a disservice. The stress on experience seems to me to misplace the centre of our interest in the arts. I certainly would not say that I value my children or a friend for the intrinsic nature of the experience they offer; rather, I value them for what they are. Equally it misrepresents my valuing the music of Janáček to say that I value it for the experience it gives me. I value it for what is [...] the valuing of the experience is not identical with valuing the work.

It is passages like these that persuade you that the philosophy of music is worth bothering with. There are many of these illuminating moments in Sharpe's book, and at the mid-point he starts to gather them into a coherent thesis; unfortunately this is where the book loses its way.

Sharpe's main point is that music is losing its status as a humanist art because it has been captured by a pernicious ideology of formalism, an ideology which, by a great historical irony, prevents music from behaving like a language – and music is humanistic only to the extent that it is language-like. He observes, rightly, that 'formalism is incompatible with important areas of judgement, such as that music is sincere or insincere'. True enough, but how real is formalism's triumph, outside journals of music analysis? How many listeners really obey Hanslick's austere injunction to hear only the 'play of sounding forms' in music? Sharpe says, *à propos* the way audiences listen, that 'formalism has triumphed', which makes you wonder how many concerts he's been to lately. And when he starts vigorously to flog the dead horse of Schoenbergian serialism, in his eyes the grisly apotheosis of the formalist ideology, you wonder also how much new music he's heard. He points to the lack of memorability and the poverty of the expressive predicates that can apply to serial music, but hasn't got much time for the new tonal music either: 'The contemporary music which can be followed, or which can sustain the range of predicates we can apply to say, a symphony of Mahler, sounds marginal. It verges on the jokey or pastiche.' So that's it; the game of art music is up, because, as the last sentence puts it, 'Present-day composers have been dealt a rotten hand by history'. This is presumably meant to be a tragic dying fall *à la* Spengler, but

it feels like a feeble flunking of the issue. The book ends just as it should be getting into its stride.

**L**EONARD Meyer doesn't have much time for new music either, even though, like Sharpe (and Rosen, come to that) you get the sense he doesn't listen to very much of it. At one point he takes a swipe at John Cage: 'John Cage's aleatory music tries to foist auditory innocence upon us. But his romantic enterprise is an exercise in futility.' Futile because perception will always find a pattern and a meaning, even in sounds from which those things have been carefully purged. Xenakis also gets dismissed: 'For what, after all, is the explicitly statistical music of a composer such as Xenakis (or that of countless electronic composers) but Mahler without any syntax whatsoever?' It is the importance of syntax, and the immense subtlety of its workings in art music, that Meyer celebrates in this book. It is a collection of essays from the last twenty-five years of exemplary rigour and scrupulousness, where the patient analysis of tiny details leads often to startling insights. These have to do not so much with the meaning of individual works as with the workings of our perceptual and cognitive powers. It is the ability of certain works of music to call forth those powers to the maximum degree that marks them out as great; but that implies that greatness is, after all, only a matter of degree, and that the same qualities that make a Beethoven melody great will be found also in a World War 2 ditty. Meyer actually makes this comparison in his essay on 'melodic process and the perception of music', where the melody of the finale of Beethoven's quartet op.18 no.4 is revealed to be based on the identical changing-note pattern to 'Hinky-pinky parlez voo'. (It's touching to see how war memories have appeared recently in books by other academics of the same generation – Wayne Booth, Joseph Kerman, Richard Wollheim, Clifford Geertz; interesting too that the same books lament the passing of the idealistic spirit of post-war academe, and its replacement by 'citation-mania').

The discovery of structural identity underneath two vastly different appearances seems like a scientific way of thinking, and Meyer's book is peppered with *obiter dicta* which do have precisely that quality of 'law-like generalisation'. For instance, in the essay on 'Universe of universals' – a bold attempt to formulate universal perceptual and cognitive constraints on musical creation – he remarks that 'Implicative tensions of syntactic processes and the bodily tensions of statistical processes (e.g. insistent durational patterns, unusual speed, intense dynamics, extreme registers, etc.) seem to be inversely related to one another. The more forceful one is, the less compelling the other. This may be why a plaintive adagio seems

more "emotional" than a persistent presto' Once you've fought your way through the thicket of technical terms, the thought is a striking one; it takes something that we've probably all noted at a preconscious level and gives it a hard, even mathematical form. A statement like this sounds like the prelude to a statistical comparison of many examples which would confirm or disprove the theory; but Meyer no sooner rouses this expectation than he knocks it on the head, by focusing, like the good critic that he really is, on one particular example. But my unease with these statements isn't just that they're not subjected to test. In the middle of a close (an unbelievably close) analysis of the Trio of Mozart's G minor symphony Meyer refers to the supertonic as 'one of the most mobile degrees of the scale'. So immersed are we in the particular that it's easy to miss this momentary switch to the general; but once it's spotted, you want to ask: mobile in which direction? Under what stylistic circumstances? Or take the law-like statement in 'Grammatical simplicity and relational richness': 'In general, the more alike successive events are, the more separate and discrete they appear to be.' (Notice that inverse relationship again.) There's something odd in this formulation. If these 'events' are describable as such, they must already be 'separate and discrete'. So 'being alike' isn't a necessary feature of two things being 'events', which must hinge on other factors – being set off from its surroundings by silence, say. But if the degree of 'separateness and discreteness' varies in strict inverse proportion to the degree of 'likeness', the relationship seems necessary, like the one between the temperature of an enclosed gas and its pressure. The tension alerts to the fact that, in music, there can be no purely formal definition of words such as 'alike' and 'event'; they only exist relative to some set of linguistic and stylistic norms. The irony is that Meyer's apparently abstract definitions themselves require a particular stylistic context to make sense. Meyer's 'norm', the place where he feels most at home, and which is clearly a touchstone of value, is Viennese classicism. Nowhere else in the wide world of music is talk of 'events' so apt. (Where are the events in a Josquin Mass-movement, or in a pop song, or a gamelan piece?)

The trouble with these generalised theories is that they're suggestive and illuminating only as long as you don't try to 'apply' them to real pieces of music; you can't explain the workings of an individual piece by appealing to them, the way the workings of a car can be explained by the laws of thermodynamics. Meyer is acutely aware of this, and insists that it is the individual features of the art-work that count. 'I am an antediluvian empiricist who delights in discrimination, distinction and diversity [...] I am not a denizen of obscure or abstract depths – a diver after cosmic

conceptions and unconfirmable hypotheses.' The really interesting things in Meyer's work happen at the middle level, where cognitive connections can be made between surface events that appear to be unconnected. It is the potential for different 'levels of description' within a piece of music, and the play of tension and resolution between them, that for Meyer marks out the special territory of art music. Meyer notes in Mozart's later music an interesting co-ordination between 'process' – the unwinding of some replicable action like a sequence or fourth-species ('suspension') counterpoint – and the architecture of the music, what he calls 'morphology'. In many cases – more than can be accounted for by accident – the length of a 'morphological' unit like a transition turns out to map exactly on to a 'process' – even where, on the surface, it appears not to. What Meyer found in many cases is that when the process is mechanically spun out beyond the point where Mozart dropped it, it arrives at its natural closure at exactly the point where the morphological unit ends. It's as if Mozart wanted to avoid the predictability of total co-ordination between 'process' and 'morphology' at the surface level, but was obliged to obey it at the deeper level. One of his examples, from Mozart's D minor Fantasia K.397, shows a chromatic descent from a high A launched in bar 18. It appears to vanish in bar 19, but if you continue the descent at the same speed it joins up with the bass A in bar 20. Like many of Meyer's insights, the observation springs from close observation but leads away from it into more general thoughts – this time about the 'hidden hand' (of what? Stylistic constraints? Cognitive universals in the human animal?) in Mozart's music. Meyer's scrupulousness as a critic won't allow him to follow those thoughts into 'unconfirmable hypotheses and cosmic conceptions', but he can't resist following them just a little way; and it's that tension that makes him so endlessly rewarding to read.

**C**HARLES Rosen too has a suspicion of unconfirmable hypotheses, but in his case it's not so much theory as Theory that draws his scorn: 'the most pernicious theories are the ones that seem to work only too well, the tools of analysis that can be applied with such facility to any work of music, the techniques of posing a question that always come up at once with the right answer – and generally the same answer.' What he has in mind are the deconstructionist, feminist or otherwise ideologically motivated theories of the 'new musicologists'. In one of the essays gathered together in *Critical entertainments* he welcomes these as a 'breath of fresh air', but this is only the formal bow before the rapier is applied. Of Susan McClary he says that she has 'faith, not always misplaced,

in whatever comes into her head', but his subsequent demolition of her analyses of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto and the cantata 'Wachet auf' suggests that her faith is very much misplaced. Rosen accuses the New Musicologists of failing to appreciate 'the inherent instability of musical meaning', by tying the meaning of a particular piece of music down to the social and ideological matrix that produced it.

The effort of the new musicologists to escape from the formalist view of music by what they all "contextualisation" [...] can be vitiated at the outset by the failure to realise that throughout history, music has resisted, and has been intended to resist, such constraint. It is, in fact, a historical distortion to anchor music too firmly in history.

Another area of musical experience where Rosen and the New Musicologists disagree is pleasure. For Rosen pleasure is a *sine qua non*: 'I think it is not always understood that in the criticism of the arts, pleasure is a prerequisite for understanding.' And also its terminus: 'Musicology can and should be read for the pleasure that it gives, not for how radically it has changed our vision of the music.' That is a dig against the New Musicologists, who would indeed like to change radically our vision of the music; but not all of them agree that that aim rules out pleasure. Gary Tomlinson does, insisting that we 'dredge up our usual impassioned musical involvements from the hidden realm of untouchable premise they tend to inhabit'. Lawrence Kramer disagrees, saying that close reading (which in Rosen's view is an unavoidably sensuous and intellectual pleasure) is essential if we are to 'trace out the interrelations of musical pleasure, musical form, and ideology.' Rosen applauds this, but the problem, for him, is that pleasure in New Musicology is not a neutral category; it's the sign always of an unruly element in music, something threatening of social or formal norms – something 'transgressive', to use the current jargon. Rosen wants to cling to pleasure's innocence, which leads him to a much more conservative reading of, say, those extraordinarily tumultuous bars that begin the recapitulation of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Susan McClary hears 'one of the most horrifying moments in music, as the carefully prepared cadence is frustrated, damning up energy which finally explodes in the throttling, murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release.' Rosen demurs at the image of Beethoven as rapist, reminding us that Wagner considered him the greatest female sex organ in the history of music, and says: 'I hear the passage as if Beethoven had found a way of making an orgasm last for sixteen bars.' He's kept the sex, but got rid of the sexual politics. Rosen's favourite opening gambit when disputing with New Musicologists is: 'a more natural explanation would be'.

But of course in their eyes there are no 'natural' explanations, everything needs to be 'unmasked'.

It is the acceptance of 'nature' that makes Rosen so convivial a critic, despite his formidable brilliance and erudition. Being so magnificently at ease with himself and his material, we 'naturally' feel at ease in his company. What prevents ease and naturalness from slipping into complacency is the way Rosen's powers of observation always shine a light beyond their target. 'Depth' in Rosen is not something set over against 'surface'; it springs from the very qualities of that surface itself, without the need for any justifying theory or hermeneutic scheme. As Borges once wrote about Paul Valéry, every sensation immediately leads to a thought, and in Rosen's case that thought is often another sensation. The essay on plagiarism in Brahms is a good example of the concrete nature of his thinking. He draws parallels between the finales of Beethoven's C minor piano concerto and the Brahms' D minor concerto not via some hypothesised abstract factor held in common – as Meyer would – but directly between the works themselves. This fusion of thought with sensuous immediacy is gratifying to read; we feel that Rosen is taking many things 'as read', leaving the reader's powers of imagination to complete the argument. Compare this with the stupefying detail of Meyer's analytical essays, where absolutely nothing can be taken as read, and the strident tone of New Musicologists, determined to root out false formalist consciousness not just in their subject matter, but often, one feels, in their readers. Rosen's complicity with the reader allows for a vivid use of metaphor which Meyer is too purist to countenance; for instance in the essay 'Brahms the subversive' Rosen remarks that 'in Brahms the relationship of consonance and dissonance is constantly eaten from within as if by termites.' Like all the best critics, Rosen approaches his readers with a tact that contains a mixture of flattery; he makes us feel that we're as clever as he is. When Rosen does venture a generalisation, it's often in the form of some witty inversion of a truism, as in this remark from 'The rediscovering of Haydn':

Luigi Dallapiccola's acid remark about Vivaldi, often repeated, is misleading. He claimed that Vivaldi wrote not five hundred concertos, but the same concerto five hundred times. This really ought to be stood on its head [...] it would be more accurate to say that Vivaldi had five hundred ideas for a concerto and that none of them was ever fully worked out.

This epigrammatic style is fun, but if repeated one becomes aware that it points as much towards the author's cleverness as the subject in hand; which is unfortunate given that most of the time Rosen's style is so wonderfully impersonal.

There are things one could quarrel with in these essays. The one on 'The irrelevancy of modern

music' is a curious piece of special pleading on behalf of the post-war avant-garde. Its curious detachment from the realities of contemporary music (a fault Rosen shares with the other two authors under discussion here) is encapsulated in the following extraordinary sentence: 'What the enemies of modernism cannot accept is the way the avant-garde have taken possession of the mainstream of the great Western tradition.' Quite what the evidence is for this 'possession', beyond the ubiquity of Pierre Boulez on the conductor's podium, is hard to see. And though Rosen scores many palpable hits against the New Musicologists, he doesn't always carry the field, even when it's one he's chosen himself. At one point he mocks Susan McClary's startling interpretation of the duet between the Soul and Christ in Bach's cantata 'Wachet auf'. Rosen says the repeated invocations of the Soul to Christ are 'merely' conventional; McClary says that these repetitions reveal the Soul to be 'a nagging, passive-aggressive wife, insecurely whining for repeated assurances of love and not hearing them when they are proffered'. Is it right to follow Rosen in dismissing this as 'comic'? If musical meaning is, as he asserts, 'inherently unstable', one cause of that instability must be that conventions eventually become opaque. Instead of being a transparent window on to the music's meaning, they take on meanings themselves (whether they were totally 'transparent' in their own time might in any case be open for debate). And if one wants to root one's interpretation of this piece in its time, then one could point to the long tradition of regarding the soul in general as feminine, regardless of whether this or that particular soul belongs to a man or a woman (Jung made much of this, counterposing feminine Soul against masculine Spirit).

But these are minor quibbles, which leave the edifice of Rosen's criticism untouched – because of course there is no edifice, no theory which 'generates' the particular insights and which therefore starts to look vulnerable as soon as those insights are challenged. Without an overarching theory, criticism is bound to be an *ad hoc* affair; analysis, 'close reading', cultural history, polemic, prejudice, sarcasm, wit, pathos, all go to make up the rich fabric of these marvellous essays. If Meyer's essays are less pleasurable, it is because their fabric is less rich, not because it is different in kind. As he puts it: 'humanists' – of which he counts himself one – 'generally make liberal use of unsystematised common-sense reasons – often in conjunction with principles of a more formal sort. They do so because there is no viable empirical basis for a rigorous theory of the arts'. So science won't lead us to the promised land; and Theory is looking increasingly in trouble. With writers as good as Meyer and Rosen on the scene, humanism might be heading for a comeback.

Ivan Hewett is writing a book entitled *New century music*.