Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory

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reviewed by

J. DANIEL JENKINS

When I was in graduate school, I became frustrated that the first few conference proposals I submitted were not programmed. I had what I thought were pretty convincing analytical results, and I couldn't understand what I was doing wrong. I reached out to another Ph.D. student in my program to ask for advice. After reading my proposals, he said, "You have to show them that your analysis means something. Otherwise, they're going to wonder 'what's the point'?" I countered with, "Yeah, but what if there aren't any larger consequences? What if I just want to tell people about this cool thing I found in the piece?" He said, "I get it. You love analysis. I love it, too. But that's not going to be enough."

I had completely forgotten about the now twenty-year-old exchange recounted above until I was reading chapter 2 of *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory*. In this chapter, James R. Currie, critiques today's goal-oriented, neoliberal academy, where academics are pressed to show that their research "means something," i.e., that it may have (economic) value to society. In the context of the North American academy, then, Currie argues that a practice of queer music analysis would be "a self-validating activity—one performed for the tautological reason of the pleasure to be gained from performing it" (62).

The idea of music analysis as pleasure is something I think a good number of music academics could identify with, no matter their sexuality. Why then is this act particularly queer? Throughout the scholarly literature in queer studies, "queer" is not used solely to refer to someone's sexuality, but as a way of identifying. It indicates how such an identity, whether adopted by an individual or imposed on them by others, leads to ways of being that are outside the heterosexual mainstream. As David M. Halperin has written, queer is "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1995, 62).

As the authors in this book show, queering music, music analysis, and music theory has tantalizing consequences for the field of music theory as it is practiced in the North American academic context. But how does the "queer ear" in the book's title relate to what we might call "queer music theory"? In his introductory chapter, editor Gavin S. K. Lee provides helpful definitions:

> *Queer ear* refers to a non-normative practice of listening that may be adopted by people inspired by the queer ethos (non-normative musical practices can be learned regardless of one's identity); however, this is to be distinguished from research on specifically *LGBTQ+ listeners and music-makers*, which I will refer to as *queer music theory*. It is worth pointing out that a writer does not need to be queer to engage in queer music theory; conversely, queer writers are naturally free to pursue any kind of research, queer or otherwise. In the following, the specific meaning of 'queer' (as identity, as ethos) will emerge from the relation between contingency and generalizability (8).

The collection Lee has edited is unquestionably the most comprehensive and valuable resource to date on the relationship between queer theory and music theory. After an introductory section, which also includes a discussion among Lee, Philip Ewell, and Robert Hatten, the chapters in the book are grouped into three sections: queer music analysis (chapters 1–5), queer temporality (chapters 6–8), and queer narratology (chapters 9–11). Each chapter provides a different model of how an author might approach a music-theoretical task from a queer perspective. Taken together, these chapters form a wonderfully rich collection of thought-provoking, question-asking scholarship that requires as much, if not more, from the reader than it provides.

It should perhaps not be surprising that the first chapter in the book devoted to a work of a single composer would engage the music of Franz Schubert. Maynard Solomon's (1989) hypothesis that Schubert and those in his circle were homosexual, Rita Steblin's (1993) vehement argument to the contrary, and Susan McClary's (1994) take on the subject, all published within five years of one another, was surely one of the most oft-discussed topics of "the new gay and lesbian musicology" of the 1990s (see Brett, Wood, and Thomas 1994). In his analysis of "Der Atlas" in chapter 3, David Bretherton neither sidesteps nor focuses on the issue of whether Schubert was gay: "It is not necessary for Schubert to have been homosexual for us to offer queer readings of his music" (101). Bretherton provides an overview of the song's structure, noting that the modulation from G minor to B minor (rather than the more normative B♭ minor) is marked and "relatively rare in Schubert's songs" (79). In an effort to interpret the analytical details, Bretherton posits four readings of the song: a surface reading, a straight reading, a gay reading, and a disabled reading, showing how each one relies on different perspectives to interpret the text-music relationships differently. One of the helpful distinctions Bretherton makes is the difference between "gay" and "queer":

> I proposed a Gay Reading of "Der Atlas," which was constructed from the premise that the song's protagonist is homosexual. While this reading imagined the oppression the protagonist faced, it did not really interrogate heteronormativity; it was not queer. . . . [T]he Gay and Disabled readings may feature minorities, [but] their message is far from politically radical or progressive. . . . In short: a "Gay Reading" is not necessarily a "Queer Reading." . . . And in this sense, while one can queer readings of "Der Atlas," I am not sure that a compelling Queer Reading of "Der Atlas" is particularly plausible (97–98).

While Bretherton is open to the idea that "Der Atlas" may or may not be autobiographical, and reflecting either Schubert's sexuality, his disability, or some intersection of these, Federica Marsico (chapter 4) is much more interested in tying biography to musical composition. Unlike the case of Schubert, the sexuality of composer Hans Werner Henze is well known. Henze left Germany in 1953 because of homophobia and settled in Italy with his partner, Fausto Moroni, with whom he lived openly until Moroni's death in 2007. Therefore, when it comes to expressions of queerness in Henze's music, Marsico seems justified in writing that the composer's "very life experience was likely one of the major determinants of the occurrence and attributes of such subjects within his operas" (105). The chapter includes convincing analyses from three operas: *Boulevard Solitude*, *Il re cervo*, and *Der Prinz von Homburg*.

The analysis section ends with a chapter by Judy Lochhead (chapter 5) that offers a queering analysis of Chaya Czernowin's *Anea Crystal*. Writing of "ontological multiplicities," Lochhead recounts how writings from the late 1980s and 1990s of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Alain Badiou, and Sandra Harding questioned claims of "absolute objectivity." Summarizing Badious and Harding, Lochhead writes that "a truth then can be understood as universal within a situation, but it is also contingent since the logic of a situation may transform in a new situation," and that "any claim to 'objective' knowledge must entail a critical examination of the epistemic frameworks in which that knowledge is produced" (131–32). Lochhead shows how this work, which had a considerable effect on the development of queer theory, can have fundamental consequences for music theory, a field that has also prized objectivity.

The analytical approach to *Anea Crystal*, like that employed in Lochhead (2015), does not seek objective truth, but rather multiplicities and contingencies:

> As a music analyst my goals are to promote new modes of addressing music of the present because many of the long-established tools of music theory have proven inadequate to many types of music-making nowadays. These new modes or tools are intended to produce queering perspectives and to allow for a multiplicity of interpretive engagements, in keeping with the premise of music's ontological multiplicity. Music analysis, and any attendant music theories, should not limit interpretive possibilities but should allow them to flourish (136).

In keeping with the belief that she is not uncovering objective knowledge, Lochhead stresses that she offers "*an* interpretation" of *Anea Crystal* (136, emphasis in the original). She also stresses that while this work has a score, some of the compositions she analyzes do not, in which case her analysis is sometimes based on *a* recording. Being explicit about these contingencies allows her to situate her production of knowledge within a network of listeners, composers, theorists, and performers who have engaged or will engage with this composition. Her analysis is not the final word, but rather the

beginning of a discussion, and she is open to the idea that she herself may come to different analytical conclusions upon future study and engagement.

The chapters in section two focus on queer temporality. As J. Halberstam explains, "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2005, 2). Since music is an art form that unfolds in time, queer conceptions of time—those that are neither linear nor goal-directed—have potential consequences for the interpretation of music.

It is Bill Solomon's contribution (chapter 8) on musical chrononormativity where the effect of queer time on musical time is most easily understood. Solomon writes about the proliferation of the percussion ensemble on the west coast of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s and the fact that three important figures in this development—John Cage, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison—were queer men. Solomon argues that "ostinato forms proved to be a successful compositional model in this period due not only to its accessibility for audiences, but for performers, too. . . . As the ostinato became the primary building block of musical structures in the percussion ensemble repertoire, the ostinato can itself be understood as a vehicle for the construction of queer temporality" (211). One can see how ostinato, as resistant to goal-directed motion and chrononormativity, are well suited to be an expressive means for queer artists seeking to communicate queer time through musical time.

This is not to say that every time a composer employs an ostinato they themselves are queer or that they are intending for the music to be queer. To expect any musical object to mean the same thing regardless of context or culture is to fall into a positivist trap that has long had a strong sway over North American music theory. On the other hand, we should be open to the idea that those listening with a queer ear will interpret a musical work as queer not because of an obvious queer subtext or queer intent on the part of the composer but simply based on how the composer uses musical time or eschews a goal-directed teleology. Here, the Prelude to *Das Rheingold*, "Waldweben" from *Siegfried*, and any number of atonal compositions by Schoenberg and his circle spring to mind.

In chapter 7, Gavin Lee provides a queer reading of *Dichterliebe* that focuses on its queer temporality. Though the object of the *Dichter*'s affections is "ein Mädchen," the failure to participate in the chrononormative and heteronormative structure of marriage and reproduction over the course of the song cycle opens the space for a queer interpretation. Lee argues that *Dichterliebe* is "fundamentally queer," but that its "queer features are also part of heteronormative structures [i.e., the desire to fall

in love with someone of the opposite sex, to marry, to have children], resulting in an ambiguity that is very much in keeping with the [unusual harmonic trajectory] of the opening song" (187). Schenkerian analysis resists ambiguity: each composition is the composing out of the chord of nature. There is no shortage of published analyses of songs from *Dichterliebe* that take a Schenkerian approach, including by Schenker himself, but as Lee points out, the cycle sometimes presents challenges to those seeking to reconcile Schenkerian theory with Schumannian musical practice. Using a queer lens, Lee provides not only insightful analysis, but also a helpful critique of the applicability of Schenkerian approaches:

> What happens [in *Wenn ich in deine Augen seh'*] temporally speaking is a bifurcation into two histories: a fantasy and a reality. Musically, Schumann captures the bifurcation by pivoting from G major (with tonicization of the subdominant) in stanza 1 to E minor (lines 5– 6) and A minor (line 7) in stanza 2, before returning to G major in the final line, which is not, however, a simple return to fantasy. . . . Schuman's setting of the final line (bitter weeping in G major) gives rise to two interrelated but incompatible expressive meanings: (1) the fantasy of love in the G major of stanza 1, (2) the reality of heartbreak, with the E minor of lines 5–6 assuming a structural importance of such expressive magnitude that G major is displaced from a position of tonal primacy. . . . This representation that is weighted toward the poetry by the alienated poet Heine is of course unSchenkerian. Because of queer temporality (fissures, frays, reversals), *Wenn ich in deine Augen seh'* and *Dichterliebe* as a cycle remain opaque to linear-temporal trajectories, both of the heteronormative life (marriage and reproduction), and of the Schenkerian graph (190–91).

In the remaining chapter on queer temporality (chapter 6), Chris Stover describes how the "fabulated life" of Sun Ra exemplifies queer temporality and how this has consequences for his music making. Weaving together Deleuze's conception of "fabulation," Derrida's invocation of "invagination," and Sun Ra's particular mode of queer temporality, Stover lays down an analytical framework within which he investigates "how Sun Ra's specifically *musical* utterances express these creative genealogies, these what-ifs, these violations that extend or deepen the totality, that reconfigure history and open onto new futures" (168). Considering the Sun Ra Arkestra cover of "Queer Notions" by Fletcher Henderson, Stover notes some of the queer potentiality in the original musical materials: "'Queer Notions's harmony is composed largely of symmetrical structures: augmented triads, whole-tone scales, and derived shapes like dominant seven [*sic*], flat five chords. . . . The symmetrical chords in 'Queer Notions' unfold an up-back-down-back oscillation that creates a kind of stasis, a relentless sameness that is at the time same restless, ungrounded" (170–71). Sun Ra and his Arkestra do not alter the form of the song, but their performance reveals or invents "new layers of signification" by "speeding up, by cartoonishly exaggerating aspects of its texture, groove, and improvisational impetus, [and] by adding new musical strata

that in turn reinterpret the original material." In short, in Stover's estimation, the cover "is a drag show: an exhilarating camp exhibition" (175).

The final section of the book looks at queer narratology. In this section, authors Fred Everett Maus and Kristen Franseen provide penetrating and convincing scholarship on the history of queer studies and music. In chapter 9, Maus reconsiders the development of the study of music and narrative. Reflecting on the important contributions of Edward T. Cone and Anthony Newcomb, Maus notes that they were gay men who were out in their social lives but not in their scholarship, and unlike scholars like Phillip Brett, they did not participate in nascent queer music studies, maintaining what Maus calls a "personal/professional dichotomy." "Nonetheless," Maus writes, "I want to ask whether their pioneering work on music and narrative owed a debt to their gay male subjectivities" (242).

Maus's discussion of Cone's article, "Schubert's Promissory Note," serves as an example. Maus traces four narratives in Cone's analysis, from the most general to the most specific. The musical material at the center of Cone's narrative is an E-natural or F♭ that recurs in an A♭ major context in Schubert's *Moment Musicaux*, no. 6. Narrative 1 suggests that this is "the injection of a strange, unsettling element into an otherwise peaceful situation" (Cone 1981, 239). Narrative 2 interprets this state of affairs as "disquieting, but at the same time exciting, for it suggests unusual and interesting courses of action" (Cone 1981, 239). In Narrative 3, the excitement turns out to be "the effect of voice on a sensitive personality," which "begins as a novel and fascinating suggestion," but "becomes dangerous . . . leading to possible obsession and eventual addiction" (Cone 1981, 240). In Narrative 4, it turns out that, in Maus's words, "Schubert's sexual encounters and their horrifying consequence in syphilis" (247). What Cone lays out is a personal interpretation, but how does it relate to a "gay male subjectivity"? Situating Cone's article within the context of gay male life of the time, Maus deftly leads the reader through a network of connections that may have influenced someone of Cone's upbringing, class, and life experiences, and sheds light on just how personal this personal interpretation of Schubert's music may have been. In summary, Maus writes: "my question is not whether one can tell from Cone's writing that he was a gay man. Rather, knowing that Cone was gay, we can ask what aspects of his writing might make sense, indeed might be deeply meaningful, in relation to that" (252).

Franseen opens chapter 10 on the music critic and sexologist Edward Prime-Stevenson with a quote from his novel *Imre: A Memorandum*, privately published under the pseudonym Xavier Mayne. A character in the novel, Oswald, writes that among composers, two great queer figures were Tchaikovsky and Beethoven. In fact, "proving"

that these composers were homosexual, a kind of queer musical canon formation that was born out of necessity to uncover, discover, and recover a musical past that included "a love that dare not speak its name," is a theme in Prime-Stevenson's writings and in the history of queer studies in general. Seeking hidden and secret meanings in the music of Beethoven, and the biographical evidence to support these readings, was part of his project. In "Prince Bedr's Quest: As Hinted in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony?" Prime-Stevenson suggests a narrative to accompany Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the fictitious Prince Bedr as the central character. Franseen writes that Prime-Stevenson seemed less interested in "presenting 'Bedr' as a uniquely queer story (although Bedr's rejection of marriage and grasping the mystic's hand at his moment of enlightenment are certainly suggestive). Rather, Prime-Stevenson appears to be trying to find a way around the problems of evidence that continued to vex his queer musical project" (275).

Among the things Vivian Luong achieves in the final chapter is a careful and informative review of how musical agency has been theorized within music theory. The question of agents, "the elusive identity of who acts in musical experience" is a vexing one for the application of narrative to music (296). Luong shows that authors such as Seth Monahan (2013) and Robert Hatten (2018) respond to the indeterminacy inherent in determining musical agents by proposing human agents. Luong notes how both authors, in attempts to formulate an idealized music analyst as musical agent, set aside any questions of gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. Monahan does this by referring to analysts as "disembodied minds" who "rarely invite us to imagine them engaged in physical activity" (2013, 333n14). He notes exceptions to this generalization, including in the work of Marion Guck, Suzanne Cusick, and Alexandra Pierce, whose contributions, Luong writes, "are framed not only as 'rare,' but also as concerned with 'musical performance' instead of feminist critiques of the field" (305). Hatten tells readers that he imagines a normalized, generalized analytical agent because of "humankind's cognitive capacities to hear music as expressive," and at the same time, he explicitly states that "gender, . . . gender orientation, race, religion, nationality, and marginalized communities or cultural groups" will not be addressed (Hatten 2018, 6, 10). In seeking to "hierarchize and fix in place musical experience," the musical agents Monahan and Hatten construct are "presented as the commonsensical norm," but in the process, "minoritized experiences of agency are deemed uncommon or made invisible" (305–306). In response, Luong writes, "As a woman and queer music theorist of non-white and non-Western descent, I find that such descriptions of musical experience and analysis run counter to my own relationship to music and relations in the world" (307).

The way Luong positions herself and her musical experience at the center of the discussion is something several authors in this collection do. That such a rhetorical

move continues to be striking in the context of music-theoretical scholarship is but one of the reasons that, as the authors in this collection demonstrate, music theory needs not only queer theory, but also feminist theory, critical race theory, disability studies, post-colonial theory, posthumanist theory, and a number of other methodological and analytical approaches. Rather than seeking a universalized or generalized imagined listener or analyst, as is often the case in music theory, or pretending to remove the analyst from the discussion entirely, these authors continually emphasize that what they present are *their* interpretations and how *their* life experience informs their conclusions. Such an approach is not only queer. It makes us more honest about how who we are as individuals contributes to the theoretical and analytical decisions we make in our scholarship.

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