

City University of New York Graduate Students in Music 12th Annual Symposium
“Representing Music—or—Music Representing”

THE RIDDLE UNRIDDED

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The chiasma of our title is meant to catch two current leading interests in the interpretation of music which can seem to display an inverse or retrogressive relationship. On one side there is an interest in *overcoming* the long standing and wide spread belief that language is inadequate to catch the experience, the effect, the qualities, the character of music, that language necessarily falls short in that effort, beyond what it can achieve in nailing down the relationships and configurations of music’s “technical” parameters. In short, an interest in attending to the effects, qualities, character of music through language, out of a conviction that attention to the compositional parameters alone falls short of understanding. But these categories are too sharply circumscribed.

To cite a distinction that has been in our tradition since Aristotle, the effort to overcome the idea of music’s—*especially, uniquely*—music’s “ineffableness”, entails the claim that music is accessible not only through the language of *science*, but as well through the language of *poetry*. The distinction is itself worthy of critical attention, and provokes inquiry into the theory of language—how language relates to the things, the phenomena, the experiences that it references in general.

As is suggested by that distinction this side of the chiasma itself harbors a polarity of attitudes revealed by familiar remarks, slogans or titles in our literature: “the shabby aesthetic of feeling” (Hanslick), “How we got into Analysis and How to Get Out” (Kerman), Kerman’s general plea for “criticism,” “Beyond Analysis” and “Schubert’s Promissory Note: An Essay in Musical Hermeneutics,” “Behind the Beyond” (Lewin), and very significantly, Allan Forte’s characterization (in the Introduction to his translation of *Der Freie Satz*), of Schenker’s “polemical and quasi-philosophical material” in his early writings: “Almost none of [this] material,” Forte notes, (Ian Bent characterized it as “Hermeneutic”) “bears substantive relation to the musical concepts that he developed during his lifetime, and, from that standpoint, it can be disregarded”; Krims and Klumpenhouwer’s *Musicology/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic*.

This last, which represents a campaign that has been driven also by Gary Tomlinson (see his response to Lawrence Kramer’s “The Future of Musicology” in Current Musicology), calls attention to an aspect that on this side of the chiasma the focus is on the music itself, whether in the language of “science” or of “poetry.” The campaign opposes the

“aestheticization” of music, the “work” aesthetic, the “canonization” of music, the “absolute music” concept, the notion of music’s “autonomy.” All of that.

On the other side of the chiasma the focus is on music as signifier, music representing, standing for, something; meaning. But here, too, there is a difference: between music understood to signify something musical (the work of Meyer, Agawu, Tarasti, Hatten; “semiotics”), and music signifying something outside itself—societal, cultural, political, cosmological (Adorno and his followers, Subotnick, Lawrence Kramer, McClary, “hermeneutics,” [or “exegetics”] ancient Chinese and ancient Greek writers [ethos]). But, as Tomlinson observed in the essay cited, much of this sneaks back around to the aestheticization and canonization of the musical work. And so it goes.

Three other dimensions suggest focuses for papers. First, all the doctrines, distinctions, and categories alluded to here have histories that should be brought into our discussions—e.g. the doctrine of music’s unique ineffability, the distinction between “technical” and “affective” properties and the linked distinction between “analysis” and “hermeneutics”, the distinction between “musical” and “extra-musical” “meanings”. Second, it is not only through language that the properties or meanings of music may be represented. How else? Third, Have our several subdisciplines been drawn to particular aspects of what has been sketched here in accordance with their special interests?