

Andy Hamilton. 2007. *Aesthetics and Music*. London and New York: Continuum.

Reviewed by Brian Kane

Andy Hamilton's *Aesthetics and Music* is an unusual concoction: one part history of the aesthetics of music, one part review of recent work in the Analytic philosophy of music, and one part original contribution to musical aesthetics. Published as part of Continuum's new series of introductory texts on art and aesthetics, Hamilton's book is more than a student text and less than a specialist's essay. Three historical chapters—which quickly survey the musical aesthetics of ancient Greece, Kant and the nineteenth century, and Adorno and modernism—alternate with philosophical chapters that treat some recalcitrant problems in a more sustained manner. These latter chapters—titled “The Concept of Music,” “The Sound of Music,” “Rhythm and Time,” and “Improvisation and Composition”—contain the substance of Hamilton's thinking. They also revisit ideas originally developed in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and other anthologies (Hamilton 1990, 2003, 2007a, 2007b).

A professor of philosophy at the University of Durham, Hamilton is himself an unusual concoction in the often stodgy world of Analytic philosophy of music. Trained as a philosopher of mind, Hamilton's deflection to aesthetics is perhaps no surprise considering that he is an amateur jazz pianist. Some readers may recall his work as a journalist and regular contributor to *The Wire*. One refreshing aspect of Hamilton's thinking is his commitment to contemporary improvisation as a key concern in the philosophy of music. This commitment is apparent in his other publications: an important set of articles on the aesthetics of perfection and imperfection (1990, 2003), and a book published by the University of Michigan Press simultaneously with *Aesthetics and Music*, entitled *Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser's Art* (2007c). In particular, the Konitz book rethinks many of the conventions of the ubiquitous jazz biography by assembling interviews with Lee Konitz and other significant improvisers in a topical format. The end result is a book that suppresses neither Hamilton's insightful questions nor Konitz's wit and intelligence.

On the opening page of *Aesthetics and Music*, Hamilton writes, “My approach to aesthetics is indebted to many writers but most of all to Kant and Adorno” (1). From the latter, Hamilton claims to have discovered the value of placing aesthetics in dialogue with criticism, analysis, and art history—essentially, an aesthetic theory that loses neither the art nor the

philosophy. From the former, he picks up the claim that aesthetic judgment is disinterested, demanding a special aesthetic attitude which is distinguished from purposiveness and self-interest. But upon reading the text a different influence eclipses Kant and Adorno. To this reviewer, *Aesthetics and Music* appears primarily indebted to Roger Scruton's similarly titled *Aesthetics of Music* (1999).

For example, Hamilton borrows Scruton's distinction between "sounds" and "tones." According to Scruton, music cannot be predicated merely upon an acoustical sequence of sounds; rather, it requires a human being to hear an intentional ordering within such a sequence. Tone, understood as the experience of hearing an ordering-in-sound, is the grounding upon which musical works are constructed. All musical hearing is really a kind of hearing-as, that is, sounds heard as tones. To hear tones means to hear something beyond the literal sequence of sounds—a metaphorical sense of virtual causality, animation, movement, or belonging-together that has nothing to do with the brute, material causality of sounds. This distinction allows Scruton to dismiss much modernist and avant-garde composition of the twentieth century as being merely organized *sound*, but not *music*. According to Scruton, "what we hear, in hearing Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, for instance, is precisely what we do not hear in a Beethoven Symphony: a series of sounds, produced by many different sources in physical space, as opposed to a movement of tones which summon and answer one another in a space of their own" (1999:281). The failure of *Gruppen* to meet Scruton's criterion of music is perhaps no surprise given his cultural conservatism. But Scruton coyly plays it off like a true philosopher when he writes, "It came a surprise that so dry a question as 'what is a sound?' should lead at last to a philosophy of modern culture" (1999:ix).

For those who actually enjoy *Gruppen*, like this reviewer, this is the infuriating fun of reading Scruton. He is a tremendous rhetorician who weaves together original philosophical claims with conservative politics. While some writers have taken the bait, like Lydia Goehr, who vociferously rebuts Scruton in her review of *Aesthetics of Music* in *JAMS* (Goehr 1999), Hamilton's response is surprisingly different. Having perhaps the most exposure to contemporary improvised music of any Analytic philosopher of music, Hamilton accepts Scruton's claims about the musical and the non-musical, but simply ignores their sting. He focuses on Scruton's philosophical claims, considering them independently of his cultural critique to the extent that this is possible. I find this to be one of the most intriguing aspects of Hamilton's work, one that stems from his genuine interest in both Analytic philosophy of music *and* current forms of experimentalism and improvisation.

In negotiating Scruton's claims, Hamilton posits a new category of "aural arts" (an analogue of the visual arts) in which music as an art of tones exists alongside a "non-musical sound-art" (45). Much of contemporary experimentalism and electronic music, from Francisco López to Sachiko M, would fall into this category of "sound-art." Still, Hamilton's supplemental category does not fundamentally alter the Scrutonian definition of music as an art of tones. In fact, Hamilton claims that "the tonal basis of music has been clarified" by sound-art's embracing of noise and electronic and mechanically reproduced sound (46). Instead of supplanting Scruton's definition, Hamilton offers a revision of Scrutonian tones and a gentle critique of the acousmatic thesis on which the claim is based. For Scruton, the difference between sounds and tones depends on an acousmatic separation of sounds *qua* intentional objects (tones) from their material causes. But Hamilton objects to this acousmatic difference, providing some persuasive reasons why music cannot be simply conceived of as relying upon metaphorical tones: music is felt as vibrations, as well as heard; virtuosity makes us concerned in a genuinely musical way with the physical bodies of the performers; timbre, and its relation to causality, matters musically. In place of an acousmatic separation, Hamilton suggests a twofold thesis, a dual consideration of the material and intentional properties of artworks, modeled on Wollheim's famous account in *Art and Its Objects* (1980). This is a promising idea, but Hamilton ultimately equivocates, claiming, "It is undoubtedly the case . . . that a more developed musical understanding tends towards the acousmatic," and citing Scruton's "persuasive account of music as the object of metaphorical perception" (111). This gentle critique does not ultimately threaten the reign of the tone as the musical sovereign.

Hamilton's book is based on two central commitments: an "aesthetic conception of music" (5) and a "humanist conception of music" (6). The first regards music as "a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic and which is the necessary object of aesthetic attention, with sounds regarded as tones" (10–11). For Hamilton, the purpose of the aesthetic is the "intensifying or enrichment of experience through active engagement" (56). Thus an aesthetic conception of music entails: (1) that the musical object is created for the purpose of such experiential intensification; (2) that its reception intensifies or enriches experience primarily; and (3) that the sonic material used to attain these ends is intentionally organized sound—in other words, that it is comprised of tones.

The question of "active engagement" is connected to Hamilton's second commitment, the humanist conception of music. "Music is a human activity grounded in the body and bodily movement and interfused with human life," he writes (6). Hamilton continually stresses the role of human action

in music and of music's origins in dance, ritual, and gesture, arguing against abstract (or extreme formalist) conceptions of music. The humanist conception depends on the role played by human intentionality and embodiment in the perception of tones and rhythm. Just as tones require human involvement to differentiate them from mere sequences of sounds, rhythm, as opposed to a mere succession of time-points, is infused with human gesture and grounded in the body. In an effort to acknowledge the rhythmic aspects of other arts, such as poetry and dance, Hamilton argues that rhythm is, in a sense, universal. While features like harmony and melody are specifically musical, rhythm is essential to music but not unique to it. In other words, rhythm is not specifically musical, but is essential to other arts as well.

In a lengthy chapter dedicated to issues of "Rhythm and Time," Hamilton proposes an organic definition of rhythm, derived from Plato's *Laws*:

Rhythm is order-in-movement or movement-in-sound that involves discontinuity, and is perceived through the senses; it involves the imposition of accent—whether by the performer or merely by the listener—on a sequence of sounds or movements . . . giving rise to a "feel" or pattern in which performers and listeners participate. (129)

The emphasis on a rhythmic order-in-movement parallels the intentional order-in-sounds that constitutes the Scrutonian tone. Here, again, Hamilton conceives of rhythm along Scrutonian lines. He quotes Scruton as follows: "Rhythm involves the same virtual causality that we find in melody. Beats do not follow one another; they bring each other into being, respond to one another, and breathe with a common life" (142). In other words, rhythms, like tones, create a metaphorical intentional order that is specifically human. And the parallelism continues: just as Hamilton poses a critique of the acousmatic thesis as a gentle objection to Scruton's wholesale identification of tones with metaphor, he poses a similar gentle objection here, arguing that the movement in rhythms is not simply metaphorical, but possesses numerous literal expressions: marching, dancing, the contraction or dilation of heartbeats, etc. Musical rhythms do not metaphorize bodily movement; bodily movement is *already* rhythmic. At the same time, this conception of rhythm, while it critiques Scruton's commitment to metaphoricity, is not incompatible with Scruton's more stringent claim. Both Hamilton and Scruton would agree that the order discovered in musical tones or rhythms is intentional and humanist, regardless of its metaphorical or literal status.

Perhaps Hamilton's account of rhythm could have broken from Scruton's orbit by a more thorough consideration of the topic. On the one hand, Hamilton claims that "discussion of rhythm rarely features in the philosophical literature" (121) and cites a few scant references: Plato, John

Dewey, Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard Meyer, Christopher Hasty. But this claim is simply inaccurate. For example, Hamilton mentions his surprise that Bergson, “the philosopher of time, has almost nothing to say about rhythm” (148), and therefore betrays a lack of familiarity with the significant role that rhythm plays in Bergson’s metaphysics.¹ On the other hand, perhaps Hamilton has construed “philosophy” too narrowly, and would benefit his argument by engaging with the significant work on rhythm done in fields beyond music theory and Analytic philosophy. For instance, rhythm is a central concept in the work of psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham and in the deconstructive literary theory of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Closer to Hamilton’s own interests, it is simply astonishing that he overlooks Emile Benveniste’s remarkable essay on rhythm (1971), a veritable *tour de force* which traces the Greek concept of *rhythmos* from its origins in Ionian philosophy all the way to the Platonic use of the term in *The Laws*—the very definition Hamilton cites.²

The last two chapters of the book finally break out of the Scrutonian orbit to treat the themes of “Adorno and Modernism” and “Improvisation and Composition.” In the former chapter, Hamilton attempts to summarize Adorno’s social dialectic of the modernist work of art as simultaneously autonomous and *fait social*. He repeats Adorno’s account of the growing autonomy of art during the bourgeois era, and of how this autonomy simultaneously afforded the possibility of art as critique of society and turned art into a commodity bound to the marketplace. Hamilton also spends some time trying to address the difficult concept of truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*), giving a brief account of its origins in Hegel’s aesthetics and its transformation into a social dialectic in the work of Adorno. Seeking to avoid the “insider quality” (160) of many discussions about Adorno’s work, Hamilton provides a clear presentation of some of Adorno’s major claims on autonomous art.

Given his commitment to an *aesthetic conception* of music, in which music acts as an intensification or enrichment of experience, Hamilton seeks to connect the freedom of the autonomous musical work—a freedom from the fetters of social utility—to music’s primarily aesthetic end. Simplifying Adorno, he argues that autonomous works can be analyzed as having both direct and indirect social functions. Hamilton bases his claim on a reading of this sentence from *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*: “In a society that has been functionalized virtually through and through, totally ruled by the exchange principle, lack of function comes to be a secondary function” (Adorno 1976:41). For Hamilton, direct social function simply means the social purpose for which the work was intended and through which the work must primarily be understood. For example, the direct social function

of church music is “religious—to uplift the spirits of the congregation and turn their thoughts towards God and so on” (183). But autonomous art lacks direct social function; contemporary music or sound-art does not possess this sort of social purpose. This music has only an indirect social function, in that its autonomy can also act as a critique of the society from which it frees itself.

Without becoming too involved in debates over Adorno’s conception of autonomous art, one can object that Hamilton’s construal of autonomy loses the full valence of Adorno’s usage. The notion of social function, or the way in which institutions and listeners mediate the utility of musical works, does not address questions of music composition—or production, as Adorno calls it. By focusing on the uselessness or functionlessness of the autonomous artwork, Hamilton places an emphasis on autonomy negatively defined—as autonomy *from* something.³ But he neglects to define a non-negative sense of autonomy, a sense which is crucial for Adorno’s account. Artistic autonomy also involves the freedom of the artist to gather socially mediated content (*Inhalt*) into artistic form. It is precisely the relationship between form and content that grants the artwork its power of critique. For example, Adorno writes: “What is socially decisive in artworks is the content [*Inhalt*] that becomes eloquent through the work’s formal structures. Kafka, in whose work monopoly capitalism appears only distantly, codifies in the dregs of the administered world what becomes of people under the total social spell more faithfully and powerfully than do any novels about corrupt industrial trusts” (1997:230). It is not simply Kafka’s autonomy from direct social function that makes his indictment more faithful or powerful than simple realism, but the manner in which social relations, alienated by artistic form, become legible in artworks and thus afford a site of critical reflection on society.

Hamilton’s exclusive emphasis on direct and indirect social function ultimately ignores this relationship of form and content. A reader familiar with Hamilton’s account only would not be able to understand why, for example, Adorno differentiates Schoenberg from Stravinsky in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*. After all, don’t the works of both composers lack a direct social function? Adorno’s criticism is nothing if not specific, for everything depends upon the movement between the philosophical claims and the particular organization of the works. In the passage cited above, it is no coincidence that Adorno invokes Kafka immediately after discussing the general characteristics of the artwork’s relation of form and content. In Adorno’s writing, examples are never simply examples. Adorno brings together aesthetics and criticism, analysis and art history, just as Hamilton claims. In other words, “art’s social character can only be grasped by interpre-

tation,” not simply by its function (Adorno 1997:232). The kind of practice Adorno advocates is not engaged often enough in *Aesthetics and Music*.

Thankfully, the final chapter on improvisation and composition proves to be an exception to this criticism. Drawing on the repertoire that he knows best, Hamilton argues for a new way of conceiving the relationship between composition and improvisation, and supports his case with prescient examples. He frames his argument in terms of two general positions: the “aesthetics of imperfection” and the “aesthetics of perfection” (193). The imperfectionist defends the virtues of spontaneity and process in musical production, arguing that improvisation is superior to notation in that it involves a direct, immediate transmission of the musical idea. On the other hand, the perfectionist emphasizes the timeless permanence of the musical work over and against its empirical manifestations as a performance of variable and uncertain quality. This latter view promotes an eidetic notion of the work as the sum of its internal relations. Hamilton’s insight is that “these positions share a common assumption” that improvisation is a form of “instant composition” (204). The imperfectionist eulogizes instant composition, while the perfectionist condemns it.

This leads Hamilton to the claim that composition and improvisation form a continuum of “interpenetrating opposites” (197). One could describe his model thus: on one extreme would be electronically fixed works without a performer (such as what used to be called tape music), and on the other, completely free improvisations. In the middle one could move from highly specific, notated modernist scores (say, Ferneyhough), to scores with less specificity (like Baroque scores lacking dynamics or even instrumentation), to improvisation with a high degree of pre-structuring (like the arrangements of swing-era big bands), to improvisations with a low degree of pre-structuring (like Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz*). The continuum is organized according to the degrees of interpretive or improvisational freedom involved in the live performance, calculated as inversely proportional to the specificity of the notation and the degree of pre-structuring involved. It positions improvisations on the same plane as compositions and thereby undermines the notion of “instant composition” and the subordinate status it presupposes.

As a corollary, Hamilton argues for the aesthetic relevance of improvisation at the level of reception. He seeks to overturn the kind of thinking which dismisses the genetic role of improvisation in the overall aesthetic effect of the music. In other words, he confronts the claim (made by Stanley Cavell and others) that improvisation is essentially musically extrinsic—that the only thing that matters is the musical result, regardless of whether the music is or is not improvised. For Hamilton, improvisation is intrinsic to the

musical result and fundamentally impacts the aesthetic effect. He states that there is “a genuine phenomenon of an improvised feel” —a “tensile strength” or “rough go-ahead energy” (202). Obviously, this is a difficult philosophical claim to explicate in Analytic terms, and Hamilton takes a risk in asserting it as a thesis. But the originality of the claim and the examples he uses to illustrate it, from Bill Evans to Ray Bryant to Lee Konitz, help to make it more convincing. These moments in Hamilton’s text more closely resemble Adorno’s method of developing an aesthetic theory by moving between general philosophical claims and particular artworks. For this reviewer, the claim seems intuitive, and corresponds to something in our experience of listening to improvisations that goes beyond the mere knowledge that the musical language-game we are listening to involves improvisation in a genetic sense. Using quotes from Lee Konitz and Steve Lacy, and reiterating material from his book on Lee Konitz, Hamilton argues that this improvised feel is related to the improviser’s “leap into the unknown” (206), a type of spontaneous preparedness to be unprepared.

In addition to the final chapter, a few other moments in the book stand out as genuine contributions to the philosophy of music. One topic close to this reviewer’s interests concerns the acousmatic distinction mentioned earlier. Hamilton’s discussion of the topic, which contrasts its use in the work of Roger Scruton with its initial appearance in the writings of Pierre Schaeffer, is clearheaded and well-informed. He is familiar with Schaeffer’s writings in more than a cursory way and treats the topic with a high degree of philosophical clarity and depth. His discussion of the differences between Schaeffer’s and Scruton’s usage of the distinction is critical for anyone pursuing this dimension of Scruton’s work, or for those trying to understand the significance of Schaeffer’s thinking to the philosophy of music. It is also the first truly philosophical treatment of this topic in the literature. Furthermore, Hamilton’s respect for and sincere interest in improvised music, experimentalism, and sound-art is a model for future writers on the philosophy of music. After the end of the work-concept, the philosophy of music must continue to engage the most recent, and most challenging, examples of musical creativity (or, should I say, of the aural arts) if it seeks to avoid ossified categories and moot distinctions. In Hamilton’s case, one need not worry about the onset of conceptual rigor mortis.

Notes

1. In the relevant passage from *Time and Free Will*, Bergson argues that rhythm puts the resistant powers of our personality to sleep and encourages a state of responsiveness in which we are highly suggestible and sympathetic (2001:14). The consequence is that rhythm, like the swinging of a hypnotist’s watch, defeats the personality. This claim helps to facilitate Bergson’s real philosophical commitments: intra-personal memory, duration, the virtual, etc.

2. Benveniste argues that the meaning of *rhythmos* changes dramatically with Plato. In the Ionian philosophy which preceded Plato, the term is closely related to the notion of form, i.e., *rhythmos* was “the most proper term for describing ‘dispositions’ or ‘configurations’ without fixity or natural necessity” (1971:286). *Rhythmos* sprung from the context of Classical atomism, where such configurations are momentary snapshots of atomic interactions, viewed against the background of a perpetual fluctuation. Plato ties *rhythmos* to the concept of measure (*metron*) and begins to conceive of *rhythmos* in relation to the human body, as an arrangement of figures (or limbs, as in dance) bound by measure, or a theory of proportion. Thus, when Plato writes in *The Laws* of an “order-in-movement” being given the name rhythm, “order” is not an intentional ordering, but rather a numerical or proportional organization and disciplining of motion.

3. Earlier in the text, Hamilton provides two definitions of autonomous art: “1. Autonomy from the non-artistic, including from emotional expression, and social autonomy. 2. Autonomy from other arts” (84). Note how “freedom-from . . .” is entailed in the structure of both.

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