



Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

Jonathan Pieslak



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[1] With ten reviews across three languages, Kevin Korsyn's *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* has been the focus of significant discussion in recent theoretical literature and also received broad attention from music historians.⁽¹⁾ This book has been examined in Dutch and German journals, has been the focus of a critical symposium in *Theory and Practice*, and, most recently, has fueled an exchange in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* between Martin Scherzinger and Korsyn himself.⁽²⁾ Certainly, much has been written for and against this book, which is not to suggest that further reviews would not yield lively, productive debate, but I do not claim to have unearthed new revelations about his ideas. One might also question if I am the best person to review *Decentering Music*. Korsyn's work has been influential upon my own research, and I may appear too closely tied to these ways of thinking to offer a sufficiently impartial perspective.⁽³⁾ These obstacles, however, are not crippling to my endeavor because I have no intention of offering a traditional review. Rather, in light of much of the substantive work that has already been written (and with which I will assume the reader's familiarity), I feel it is more productive at this point in the history of the book to comment on its reception.

[2] As I read each review (the one in Dutch being the only exception because I was not able find a useable translation), I was surprised to find such diverse readings of this text. A mixed reaction is not unusual by any means, but many of the reviewers of Korsyn's book seemed a bit more polarized than normal. There was little or no consensus regarding some very general issues, like the overall contribution of the book to the field based on the historical relevance of its arguments or an accepted understanding of the current state of musical scholarship. I began asking how one book could be interpreted so differently. The provocative and seemingly controversial ideas presented in *Decentering Music* have been warmly embraced by some scholars while unequivocally dismissed by others. It then occurred to me that, better than regurgitating many of the points already made, it would be more interesting to explore how and why critical reactions to this book have proved so divergent. In this sense, I offer a review of the reviews, or perhaps a meta-review—a task that aligns with the spirit of *Decentering Music*.

[3] The issue that is immediately apparent in a survey of Korsyn reviews is the opposing language used to describe the book

overall. In perhaps the most negative response, Peter Williams concludes, “It seems to me that the ‘crisis’ in higher music study as understood and outlined by Korsyn—the ‘struggle among factions that compete for the cultural authority to speak about music’ and ‘scholarly production [that] is forcing discourse towards increasing uniformity’—is only fostered by such a book as this. I am not sure what would be lost by simply ignoring it.”⁽⁴⁾ While Williams encourages us to ignore *Decentering Music* altogether, Lawrence Kramer endorses it on the jacket cover to the paperback edition, “Anyone interested in the state of the musicological art should find the arguments impossible to ignore.”⁽⁵⁾ Likewise, Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis finds the book, “. . . intriguing, maddening, and eminently worth reading.”⁽⁶⁾

[4] Another issue regarding the general reception of this study is the interpretation of the historical relevance of Korsyn’s arguments. Wolfgang Fuhrmann, for example, believes the book, “. . . comes at the right time. It is the first large-scale study to go beyond pro and con positions and grasp the situation as a whole,” and Phyllis Weaver describes it as, “. . . groundbreaking, making this one of the most important studies to reach the academic bookshop in recent years . . . Korsyn’s timely book poses provocative questions and is a useful starting point for engaging with questions about interdisciplinary scholarship and how it interacts with the professional world that surrounds and, on many levels, influences it.”⁽⁷⁾ But this reaction is sharply contrasted by Ruth Solie, who dismisses the book almost entirely based on her belief that *Decentering Music*, “. . . is an elegy for troubles that have by now largely resolved themselves.”⁽⁸⁾ To a far less severe degree than Solie, Patrick McCreless criticizes the book along the lines that many of the issues Korsyn raises have been addressed in previous scholarship.⁽⁹⁾

[5] Moving deeper, McCreless and Phyllis Weliver try to take Korsyn on at his own game, using the tools of critical theory to turn criticism back on the book. Both attempt to understand *Decentering Music* in terms of its discursive mode, but again, there seems to be a level of discord in how the two authors read the text. McCreless, for instance, considers *Decentering Music* as embodying one of Northrop Frye’s four archetypes of plot narrative (romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire)—a strategy adopted by Korsyn in his critique of musical scholarship (see Chapter 3). Although McCreless briefly considers the book as a romance, he spends a considerable amount of time explaining Korsyn’s narrative strategy as, more or less, a scholarly comedy, featuring Korsyn as the protagonist, in which a crisis unfolds and finally reaches some level of resolution.⁽¹⁰⁾ Meanwhile, Weliver uses another of Korsyn’s analytical tools, Hayden White’s theory of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony), to interpret the mode of discourse. She argues that Korsyn misunderstands his own position when he suggests a “certain irony” in the book. Rather, she feels that, “Korsyn’s thesis repeatedly returns to the desire for knowledge and insight—a continual process, a spinning out that resists closure, similar to definitions of metonym, not irony.”⁽¹¹⁾

[6] I hope the reader is starting to get a sense of the dramatically opposed interpretations of *Decentering Music*. Is it a scholarly comedy, resulting in an outdated “elegy” we should simply ignore? Or, is it a metonym based on imaginative tools of literary criticism whose timely arguments are impossible to ignore? I will suggest that not to read this book is to disregard one of the most provocative pieces of critical literature since Joseph Kerman’s *Contemplating Music*. As the similarities between the titles suggest, the mutual aim of each book is to change the field of musical scholarship, and any book that attempts such a feat is not to be missed. McCreless recognizes Korsyn’s bold intent to change the field, “The book is thus more than a little ambitious. But its ambition is backed up by a formidable intellect: Korsyn has an impressive command of musical scholarship of many stripes, and he brings to his task a formidable working knowledge and understanding of critical theory in the humanities outside the disciplines of music.”⁽¹²⁾ The reception of *Decentering Music* is also paralleled by that of *Contemplating Music*, which was quite controversial, possibly more than scholars recognize or remember, when it came out in 1985.

[7] I have a difficult time finding Korsyn’s ideas outdated. Perhaps because he engages dialogues between “old” and “new” musicology, reviewers may have assumed that he is talking about the “old” vs. “new” with the intention of giving one of these perspectives the authority to speak. But what Korsyn actually discusses is the pluralism that these arguments have generated and the lack of critical engagement in the subdisciplines.⁽¹³⁾ And this hasn’t been talked about. The criticism that Korsyn is addressing “old” vs. “new” musicology in the same way as authors in the 1990s or earlier overlooks the fact that those arguments sought to undermine the status quo of the “old” and situate the “new” musicology as a valid scholarly perspective. Korsyn is considering what has happened since the “new” musicology has been fully granted a seat at the table.

He does not affirm or reject one of these partisan sides, but, more significantly, explores the “decentering” complicity of opposing perspectives. The discussion in Chapter 3 about Kerman and Kofi Agawu most readily demonstrates this, but it is a continuous thread throughout the entire book. Others, like Mitchell Morris, seem to agree that the conflicts of the 1990s have continued to linger in frustrated ways, “Musicological tempers were short in the ‘90s, and only recently seem to have settled into a sullenness that still occasionally flares into the rancor.”⁽¹⁴⁾ For these reasons and in light of recent related publications by Jairo Moreno and articles by Paul Attinello and Rose Rosengard Subotnik in *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (2004), these issues are far from being decades old.⁽¹⁵⁾

[8] Even with a clearer idea about the historical relevance of Korsyn’s arguments, we seem to have, using Korsyn’s own language, a “radical plurality” of reviews. This is not to suggest that all reviews should engage a book in the same way, but here, I am tempted to consider some of them along further Korsynian lines, in light of the “Tower of Babel” metaphor Korsyn uses to describe the factionalization of musical scholarship. For example, a more conservative scholar like Williams argues from an outside perspective, viewing the book as an appropriation of inconsequential “litcrit,” wasting time by talking about how we talk about music. Given his opinion that we should ignore *Decentering Music*, it is probably safe to assume that he questions why one would bother with this sort of scholarship at all. Meanwhile, a more progressive scholar like Solie sees it as an attack on “new” musicology, and defends it in these terms. Korsyn, however, criticizes the “new” musicology from within; he uses the methods of “new” musicology to direct criticism back on itself (while critiquing “old” musicology as well). I think that one of the underlying reasons scholars have read *Decentering Music* so differently is that many of the ideas presented in it undermine their own positions. To accept these arguments is to accept a vulnerability of one’s own authority to speak, and this can make people very uncomfortable. We fight back using our familiar weapons of scholarly production (“old” or “new”), but this generates another “Tower of Babel.”

[9] It is also interesting that some of the criticisms of *Decentering Music* are anticipated in the book itself, which often attempts to predict the negative responses it evokes. Solie comments that, “. . . for all the polemical use Korsyn has made in the previous chapter [Chapter 3] of the writings of ethnomusicologists, this chapter takes entirely for granted a musical ‘composition’ in the European tradition, an object that can be represented and partitioned and discussed in stable spatial terms; it makes no reference whatsoever—nor does it allow for such reference—to any tradition in which music is conceived as experience or behaviour rather than object, in which no stability of referent is assumed nor Platonic form imagined.” But Korsyn appears to expect this type of criticism at the beginning of Chapter 4, “The Objects of Musical Research (1).” He writes, “Anthony Easthope has suggested a productive solution to this dilemma by invoking Saussure’s distinction between signifier and signified. A text has a relative identity as a collection of signifiers that can be transmitted in material form and repeated over time, but the signifieds can change . . . Easthope’s remarks illuminate not only literary texts but also all allographic arts, that is, all arts that depend on realization and exist in multiple performances. To specify the identity of anything that is subject to repeated performances, something must persist through all the different versions, remaining the same through time. But this invariant element is not a Platonic idea or essence, it is a set of signifiers. Thus even an electronic piece that exists in only one version would have only a relative identity, because its signifieds are also subject to change.”⁽¹⁶⁾ The refutation of competing ideas and criticisms as the book progresses is a refreshing strategy. Korsyn is fully aware that his own position can be deconstructed as easily as he deconstructs others, and he takes great efforts to address how his arguments can be turned on himself.

[10] There is another sense in which the book foreshadows the variance among certain reviews. McCreless disagrees with Korsyn’s assessment of the state of musical research, “Most pointedly, I simply don’t accept the ‘crisis,’ as it is instantiated in Korsyn’s Tower of Babel—neither the claim as to when it happened or is happening, nor the claim as to how dire it is.”⁽¹⁷⁾ On the other hand, Weliver believes, “The pioneering thought displayed in *Decentering Music* is so valuable because it can initiate larger discussion during a period when the international music research community faces visible threats. The ‘crisis’ is not just external but internal. We do need to rethink how we practice criticism and what our professional practices are; opening up is much more desirable than closing down.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Weliver finds the crisis multi-faceted, while McCreless denies there is a crisis. So, are we in a crisis or aren’t we? Korsyn speaks of the “crisis” of discourse in musical scholarship, and, indeed, the disagreements about the “crisis” and the contrasting ways scholars have read the book seem to affirm its existence. When Pascall concludes that *Decentering Music* will provide a “brighter musicological world . . . as a result of this brilliant, profound, compelling and important book,” and Furhmann believes, “. . . one will not easily find a more intelligent

and discriminatingly thoughtful discussion partner than Korsyn, who despite all commitment to a position never argues pro domo,” but Solie sees it as “Musicologists Behaving Badly” (a reference to the Oxygen network’s comedy series, “Girls Behaving Badly,” in which women play practical jokes on unsuspecting people), something seems wrong.⁽¹⁹⁾ Of course, disagreement is the backbone of scholarship, but we can’t seem to agree on some very basic things, like the current state of our own discipline or relevant topics for scholarly pursuit. How can respected, accomplished scholars find the book so completely different in so many ways? If these varied reactions do not, themselves, indicate the “crisis” Korsyn is talking about, it is at least, for me, confusing. It also suggests that the book is worthy of serious contemplation by all in the field; our most important works tend to generate this type of polarized response.

[11] The most valuable aspect of *Decentering Music* is also what has prompted its most passionate reactions. The book forces us to reevaluate our own scholarly positions by questioning the authority of different perspectives to speak at the expense and neglect of others. This will probably be one of the themes that stays with us the longest and has the greatest significance. Korsyn’s ideas may also find relevance beyond musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory. I have found certain concepts applicable to the field of music composition, and in her review, Margulis makes a number of insightful extensions of Korsyn’s ideas in relation to the field of music psychology and cognition.⁽²⁰⁾

[12] In 1991, the field of Ethnomusicology was undergoing a restructuring of its most basic disciplinary commitments, similar to the “old” vs. “new” musicology debates that were flourishing in Theory and Historical Musicology. Judith Becker described this paradigm shift through a story from Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*, “The story goes like this:

There is an Indian story—at least I heard it as an Indian story—about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle asked . . . what did the turtle rest on?

Another turtle.

Another turtle?

‘Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.’”⁽²¹⁾

Becker challenged the supplanting of traditional ideas of ethnomusicology by showing that, “Perspectivism forbids us to claim the last word, as the turtle story precludes a final turtle.”⁽²²⁾ If the “new” stood on equal footing with the “old,” it was supported by its own foundational shell. Since this time, we have discovered and discussed a lot of turtles. Instead of adding another, Korsyn seems to saying that there are no turtles—an idea that, however unsettling, suggests a new and exciting outlook for musical scholarship.

Jonathan Pieslak
The City College of New York
jpieslak@ccny.cuny.edu

Footnotes

1. See Marcel Cobussen, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Dutch Journal of Music Theory (Tijdschrift voor Musiektheorie)* 9.2 (2004): 157–60; Wolfgang Fuhrmann, [Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*](#), *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 2.3 (2005); Melissa Goldsmith, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Choice Reviews Online*, 2003; Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Psychology of Music* 33.3 (2005): 331–37; Patrick McCreless, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Theory and Practice* 29 (2004): 252–66; Robert Pascall, “New Rules of Engagement,” Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Theory and Practice* 29 (2004): 242–47; Martin Scherzinger, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59.3 (2006): 777–85; Ruth Solie, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Music and Letters* 85.3 (2004): 418–23; Phyllis Weliver, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Theory and Practice* 29

(2004): 247–51; Peter Williams, Review of Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, *Musical Times* 144 (2003): 62–63.

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2. Kevin Korsyn, “Communications,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60.2 (2007): 464–71.

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3. See Jonathan Pieslak, “Conflicting Analytical Approaches to Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Tonality: An Archaeological Evaluation,” *Theory and Practice* 30 (2006): 97–132, and Jonathan Pieslak, “The Challenges of Plurality within Contemporary Composition,” *The Musical Times* 146 (Spring 2005): 45–57.

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4. Williams, Review, 63.

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5. Korsyn, *Decentering Music*, jacket cover.

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6. Margulis, Review, 335.

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7. Fuhrmann, Review (“[Korsyns Buch] kommt zur rechten Zeit. Es ist der erste grössere Versuch, über die Position von Pro und Contra hinauszugehen und die Situation als Ganze zu überblicken.”); Weliver, Review, 247 and 251.

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8. Solie, Review, 418–19. Richard Kramer’s remarks on the jacket cover to the paperback edition offer an interesting counterpoint to Solie’s review, as both are former AMS presidents. Kramer is quoted, “A brilliantly irreverent, often profound romp through the mine-fields of poststructuralist thought and beyond.”

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9. McCreless, Review, 261 and 263–64

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10. McCreless, Review, 260.

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11. Weliver, Review, 250.

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12. McCreless, Review, 252.

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13. Korsyn, *Decentering Music*, 15. This point is grasped by authors like Fuhrmann, Pascall, and Margulis. Fuhrmann, for example, writes, “This transvaluation of all values [in the New Musicology] was accompanied by acute institutional resistance ... In the meantime the dust that was blown up has settled again; the messianic as well as the apocalyptic expectations have gone slack, and the New Musicology is itself in the process of institutionalizing its achievements.” Fuhrmann, Review (“Begleitet wurde diese Umwertung aller Werte von heftigem institutionellen Widerstand ... Mittlerweile hat sich der aufgewirbelte Staub wieder gelegt; die messianischen wie die apokalyptischen Erwartungen sind erschlafft, und die New Musicology ist selbst im Begriff, sich im Erreichten zu institutionalisieren.”)

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14. Mitchell Morris, “Musical Virtues,” in *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, Andrew Dell’Antonio, ed., (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 44.

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15. Jairo Moreno, "Subjectivity, Interpretation, and Irony in Gottfried Weber's Analysis of Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet," *Music Theory Spectrum* 25.1 (2003): 99–120. Moreno's article is, in fact, dedicated to Korsyn and developed from his ideas, many of which are pursued further in *Decentering Music*. Also, see Paul Attinello, "Passion/Mirrors (A Passion for the Violent Ineffable: Modernist Music and the Angel/In the Hall of Mirrors)," in *Beyond Structural Listening?*, 154–72; Jairo Moreno, *Musical Representations, Subjects, and Objects: The Construction of Musical Thought in Zarlino, Descartes, Rameau, and Weber* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "Afterword: Toward the Next Paradigm of Musical Scholarship," in *Beyond Structural Listening?*, 279–302.

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16. Korsyn, *Decentering Music*, 92–93.

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17. McCreless, Review, 257.

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18. Weliver, Review, 251.

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19. Pascall, Review, 247; Fuhmann, Review ("Denn einen klügeren und differenzierter denkenden Diskussionspartner als Korsyn, der bei aller Standortegebundenheit doch niemals pro domo argumentiert, wird man so schnell nicht finden."); Solie, Review, 423.

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20. Margulis, Review, 334.

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21. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1973), 28–29, as quoted in Judith Becker, "A Brief Note on Turtles, Claptrap, and Ethnomusicology," *Ethnomusicology* 35.3 (1991), 395.

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22. Becker, "A Brief Note," 395.

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