Musical Worlds and the Metaphysics of Analysis: Response to Cochrane and Smoliar

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[1] I would like to begin these brief remarks by thanking Stephen Smoliar and Richard Cochrane for their thought-provoking and carefully considered responses to my essay; it is certainly one of the great benefits of the online journal format that works-in-progress can receive such immediate and stimulating critique and commentary. I have found both responses extremely helpful as I continue to consider the issues discussed in that essay. At the same time, however, I find that each response raises new questions that were either not addressed in my essay or, if they were, need to be considered at greater length. Thus I would like to focus these remarks on what I take to be two issues that arise in the responses. The first concerns what philosophers in the hermeneutic tradition often call the "critique of metaphysics"; the second has to do with the ontology of "worlding."

[2] One of the central concerns of Heidegger's *Being and Time* is the destructuring of the Western philosophical tradition. [1] Heidegger returns again and again to the argument that there exist certain biases within that tradition that are so deeply inscribed, so much a part of the way in which things are thought, that they are effectively transparent. It is precisely because these biases so saturate our ways of thinking—and in so doing overdetermine (and limit) the types of solutions at which we can arrive—that uncovering them is such a difficult philosophical task. But because Heidegger is convinced that the crucial question of being has been forgotten due to these biases, his strategy for retrieving even the ability to consider the question properly is to "sound out" what he considers to be the metaphysical "idols" of the Western philosophical tradition, to use Nietzschean terms. [2]

[3] One notion on which Heidegger especially focusses in his destructuring of the Western philosophical tradition—in his "critique of metaphysics"—is the Cartesian subject/object split. And my essay was concerned with exploring the consequences of sounding out Cartesian dualism as it plays a role in musical analysis. Heidegger's argument is that the Cartesian split is derivative of a more fundamental experience, and I make a similar claim for the musical experience: we experience music within the context of some musical world which is made up of some large body of works, though these works are not objects in the metaphysical sense. The assumption of Western metaphysics, however, is that the Cartesian split is the primary state, and that interpretation is derived from it. This metaphysical argument is the one I take Stephen Smoliar

to be making in his response. Referring to vision, Stephen states: "Confronted with the stimulation of the retinal field, eventually the cerebral cortex has to draw some conclusions about *what* objects are there" (paragraph 2). In considering the aural experience, he proposes that we "distinguish *signals*, *sensations*, and *perceptions*" (paragraph 5). He considers signals to be "unabashedly Cartesian objects," but argues that through our sensory apparatus we come to perceptions that are clearly the result of interpretation: " . . . a musical experience induces a mental state which, in turn, governs the interpretive act of perception" (paragraph 6).

[4] On a very broad level, Stephen and I are argreeing: we both take all of our cognitions to be the result of some kind of interpretation. But Stephen's model, it seems to me, falls victim to the very Cartesian metaphysics that my essay is trying to uncover. It is important to note, however, that my critique of Stephen's model as metaphysical *does not* take anything away from the pragmatic power such models can have in our scientific dealings with the world (or, indeed, in our analytical dealings with music). Still though, Heidegger's position is founded in the notion that man's ability to know is finite: we cannot escape the interpretive basis of all our knowing; there is no way to get outside and enjoy a "God's eye" view of our own conceptual goings-on. Thus any model we construct that places us in such a position must necessarily derive from some more primordial mode of being. [3]

[5] Richard Cochrane, however, stays very much within Heideggerian thought when he draws our attention to the notion that a musical world may be "a space created by *experiences* of music, engagements with music as 'equipment,' as environment" (paragraph 8). Richard posits this as a friendly refinement of my definition of musical worlds by stating: "the musical world cannot be precisely as it is described here since, if it were, the condition of possibility for works would simply be other works, which leads to an ontological infinite regress and a hermeneutic circular- ity" (paragraph 7). I would argue that Richard and I are addressing different concerns, and that a consideration of our differences leads into very interesting issues. To begin with, I argue for "musical worlds" in the plural; that is, I am not attempting to uncover a single musical world that underlies all our musical experiences, but rather to uncover whatever musical world is operative *in any particular experience*. I am also not attempting to outline an alternative way of hearing music (one that is perhaps closer to a "phenomenological hearing" in the sense of the work of Judy Lochhead or Thomas Clifton), but rather I am trying to destructure the way in which we typically understand and derive meaning from music within the cultural environment in which we are situated. This is one reason why I take *Being and Time* as my central text; in this work Heidegger offers a critique of Western philosophy from *inside* that tradition. Correspondingly, I offer my critique of Cartesian dualism from within the discipline of music theory and analysis.

[6] But Richard's commentary really takes us into some of the main concerns of Heidegger's later thought, so I think it might be appropriate to focus our differences around a famous example from Heidegger's important essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." This essay is notorious- ly complicated, and I will thus only address one minor detail that arises with regard to our concerns with musical worlding. [4] In a lengthy discussion of a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh ("Les Souliers"), Heidegger writes: "On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field path as evening calls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. . . . This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman." [5]

[7] I will side-step the topic that is really at stake for Heidegger in this passage—the topic of "earth" and "world"—and merely point out that in his entire discussion of this painting Heidegger never once mentions another painting to which this one might be related in some way. It is clear Heidegger is not at all concerned with situating this painting within a world made up of other paintings; for Heidegger, this work does not so much relate to other paintings by Van Gogh or his fellow artists as much as it relates to the world of the peasant woman. The obvious reason why such a painting can be interpreted in this manner is because the context it which it is situated is one that is knowable from our own lives (at least within Western culture). While it is certainly possible to interpret this painting in terms of other works and not in terms of the world of the peasant woman, I would like to stress that Heidegger is able to offer a very compelling interpretation that makes no reference to any "body of works" whatsoever. To return to Richard's remarks, I take it that he would like to accomplish a similar kind of interpretation for musical works. [6]

[8] The problem that such a project faces is not simply the question of whether music is representational or not, though this is already a substantial issue with which to deal; it is very difficult, for example, to come up with a musical example parallel to the peasant shoes painting that does not require an interpretation that invokes other pieces of music. [7] It is, rather, more a

question of whether or not one chooses to engage culturally prevalent interpretations of musical meaning. To take the path that Richard suggests, one moves beyond destructuring our typical listening experience—which is the issue I address—and pushes further into an experience that challenges our notions of what actually constitutes music at all. Any project that would work toward uncovering "a" musical world, however, risks falling into the kinds of metaphysical traps that Heidegger took such great pains to expose.

[9] Staying within the Western tradition of music, however, I find it hard to imagine how any experience with music could not be founded on an experience of pieces of music (even tapping on the piano or improvising a tune tends to be thought of in terms of an intended—even if unsuccessful—piece). As one considers styles outside the art-music tradition (rock or jazz, for instance), it is clear that the notion of "the musical work" becomes increasingly problematical; I can think of the Beatles' "A Day in the Life" as a song, but not really as a work (though I do have a curious tendency to think of *Abbey Road* as a work). But my point is not that one could never be successful at hearing a piece in a way that is free (relatively, at least) from reference to other works; rather I want to argue that in Western culture we tend—tacitly but overwhelmingly—not to value such an interpretation very much. My project is an attempt to uncover what is going on in those kinds of interpretations that we do value highly. I want to open up a tension between the Cartesian mode that we typically use in our music-analytical thinking and the primordial, experiential musical mode from which such dualism is derived. I do not want to reconcile these two modes with one another or reconcile my musical worlds with those of "other minds" (which would be driven in either case by a metaphysical compulsion), but rather I want to encourage and maintain the tension that plays out between these two modes.

[10] When the musical work is thought of within the context a musical world as I define it, its "sharply defined edges" as an object are increasingly dissolved by its situatedness within the musical world at hand. The pieces that make up the world are likewise not objects with clearly defined boundaries either. When focussing our attention on a musical work, we are always confident that there is a definite work "there," but where it ends and other works begin is a distinction that is impossible to draw. In fact, thinking about a world of musical works in this way begins to break down the ocular metaphors that are so central to Western metaphysics. To the extent that one finds it difficult to "en-vision" such musical worlds, one has begun to break free of the hold of metaphysics.

[11] The responses to my essay from both authors suggest a number of other issues. With regard to Stephen's remarks, one might consider to what extent technology and technological thinking has affected the ways in which we model musical experience. With regard to Richard's commentary, one might enter into the debate concerning whether or not it is ever possible to "overcome" metaphysics; could we ever posit an approach to musical understanding that completely avoids the biases of metaphysics without in the process of doing so creating a second metaphysics? I will leave those issues, however, for future discussion.

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Footnotes

1. In a recent study, Jeffrey Andrew Barash explores Heidegger's destructuring of Western philosophy within the broader context of German philosophy in the first three decades of this century; see his "Heidegger's Ontological 'Destruction' of Western Intellectual Traditions," in Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren, eds., *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in his Earliest Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 111–21.
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2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 465. Though Heidegger interprets Nietzsche's philosophy as the end of Western metaphysics, many writers have pointed out

the ways in which Nietzsche's thought anticipates key issues in Heidegger's writing; see, for instance, Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
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3. The rejection of a possible God's-eye view is an important aspect of Richard Rorty's argument in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), as is the critique of metaphysics generally. John Caputo argues, however, that Rorty does not take the next step—as Heidegger did—and undertake a retrieval of the primordial; see Caputo's "The Thought of Being and the Conversation of Mankind: The Case of Heidegger and Rorty," in Robert Hollinger, ed., *Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 248–71.
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4. For a careful interpretation of this essay in the context of Heidegger's later thought, see Gerald L. Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements: Language, Truth, and Poetry in the Later Writings* (New Haven: Yale Univerisity Press, 1989), 27–51.
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5. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 34. This essay originated in 1935 as a lecture and was expanded in 1936 to three lectures; Heidegger later revised the essay for its first publication in 1950 and later added an Addendum in 1956.
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6. Whether or not I have properly understood Richard on this point, Lawrence Ferrara definitely attempts to model one aspect of his analytical approach—his "referential analysis"—on Heidegger's essay; see his *Philosophy and the Analysis of Music: Bridges to Musical Sound, Form, and Reference* (n.p., Excelsior Music Publishing, 1991).
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7. Ferrara's attempt to discuss reference in a musical work is, in my opinion, problematic on just this point; see his *Philosophy and the Analysis of Music*, pp. 179–87 esp.
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