



On Getting Deconstructed*

Joseph Dubiel



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ABSTRACT: Ideas held by some of a special tension between the “new musicology” and music theory may depend on the maintenance—on both “sides”—of an ill-considered notion of structure. Rose Rosengard Subotnik’s discussion of “structural listening” is taken as a starting point for rumination on this problem. The terms of the alleged opposition are not shown to be essential.

[1] Originally I thought of making new music in the new musicology my brief for this session—actually the slighting of new music, while nineteenth-century expression remains the norm, something for which I think there may be significant reasons. But then I remembered how much I hate papers that make a big to-do about what somebody *doesn't* discuss. (A summer of reading scholarly polemic will activate that hatred.) The exception that I’m eager to acknowledge is Rose Rosengard Subotnik’s complex treatment of contemporary music, undertaken in the context of a wide-ranging exploration of different kinds of listening.⁽¹⁾ My engagement with her work has changed the focus of this presentation, to the issue of what she calls “structural listening,” which I see as a central issue for anyone concerned with music theory. That’s what I’m going to talk about. Broadly, I’m going to say that I don’t know how I feel about it; but it may take a while for this to become clear.

[2] Subotnik defines “structural listening” as “a method which concentrates attention primarily on the formal relationships established over the course of a single composition” [“Deconstruction,” 88]. But throughout her work the concept takes its identity from its position in a broad system of oppositions, at least as much as from any positive definition. In various places in her essays, structure stands opposed to all these things: “medium,” “sound,” “style,” the “sensuous,” and “the sensuous manifestation of values.” The last is from a provocative sentence in Subotnik’s paper “The Challenge of Contemporary Music” [*Developing Variations*, 265–93] that I’d like to use to invoke all of these oppositions together. Subotnik is talking about popular music here, but unless I misread her utterly, she would claim that the situation she refers to is only an especially stark version of one that is in fact quite general. “What the public hears in such music,” she writes, “is what is always heard, not autonomous structure but the sensuous manifestation of particular cultural values” [“Contemporary Music,” 288].

[3] What I find most provocative in this is the claim that values can be heard. This is a kind of hearing that we don’t usually investigate in our capacity as theorists, to say the least; indeed we shall have to work a bit at deciding what it would even mean. But if there is such a kind of hearing, then it should be within our purview somehow—or so I would maintain. Music

theorists had better be people to whom nothing auditory is alien.

[4] Let me tell you about an experience I had that I understood as an example of this sort of hearing—the day before I settled on this quotation as a talking point, as a matter of fact. In a way, it was the fortuity of this quotation shedding light on this incident that got both of them into this paper. Marion and I walked into a store in SoHo; there was music playing. Without particularly paying attention, here's what I could hear: a point being made of a thin sound in the leading lines, an almost simpering voice and an old-fashioned sounding synthesizer, exposing a more elaborately produced rhythm section in a way that suggested some flavor of dance music, even though the beat itself was not particularly intense; and then, against this, the entrance of a chorus whose utterances, while very quiet and brief, sounded remarkably full, heavy, and committed, in a way that immediately said “gospel.” For me this choral entrance was a nice moment: one that changed my hearing of the context in which it was embedded, bringing out an attribute of what preceded it that I hadn't particularly noticed—because really it was the *change* of tone that made me hear the initial tone of the thing the way I've described, as making a point of having a thin sound, not just happening to have one.

[5] Having mentioned gospel, I'm tempted to speak of this upgrade as the redemption of one sound by another. No doubt I was meant to: the words I could pick up were “sacrifice and love” in the solo voice and “up, and up, and up” in the chorus (set in exactly the way you'd expect). I can't tell you whether I was hearing a secular love song making a gospel reference or a religious song making use of pop styles or something more ambiguous. But I don't need to. What I mean to do is report an actual incident of musical perception, with its accidents, including its omissions; and to acknowledge how I found styles and their associations coming into play, in a flash, without much attention, and even though I have no particularly deep knowledge of, or intense interest in, the styles in question.

[6] I specifically mean to point out how these stylistic and social images were part of what I heard— what I *heard*, not just what I thought about what I heard. My sense of what the sounds were, and how they fit together—how they “worked,” as the saying goes— could not be separated from the cultural references I heard in those sounds. I consider it perfectly possible that acoustically the identical sounds, without these associations, might not have struck me as interestingly combined, maybe not even as competently combined. Certainly the move from one to the other would have had a different dynamic if all I'd been able to make of it was the entry of more voices. It's interesting that I didn't have to *believe* the styles' social implications to get the point; that is, without actually regarding dancing as corrupt or religion as redemptive, I could still pick up a musical dynamic that made use of those notions—that ran them together with sonic characteristics in a move from thinner to fuller, with the latter prompting reconsideration of the former. Thus, even at the level of compositional technique—of my so-called craft knowledge—what I noticed was shot through with these cultural associations. I wouldn't have a clue how to tell you what I heard and enjoyed without invoking them.

[7] I hope this gives some idea of what I think Subotnik is calling attention to in the quotation. Certainly my hearing of the song was affected by cultural associations of the styles in question. In that sense, it must have been an instance of the kind of non- structural listening that Subotnik challenges us to consider. But is it so clear that the features of the song that I've described should be considered not to be structural too? I've quoted a definition of structure as “relationships established over the course of a single composition.” Clearly my hearing of the contrasting sounds of the song's verse and chorus drew on knowledge from outside the piece. But what about the relationship I heard between them? Was the contrast between these sounds something that existed for me before I heard this piece? Not that I know. And what about the dynamic of moving from the one to the other? The change in tone, the enlargement of the sound—with an enlargement in the sound's sensed potential significantly exceeding the actual increase—all this happening in such a way that the second sound prompted a reconsideration of the first? Is it plausible that these relationships were established other than over the course of this single composition? When else? In short: why shouldn't I be able to say that a suggestion of gospel in the chorus is a feature of this work's structure—even though some aspect of its definition is extrinsic to this work? And even: how could I *not* say that it's a feature of the work's structure, given that its identity, its meaning for me as sound, is affected by the relationships in which it participates?

[8] The forcing of this question is a second respect in which I find the quotation from Subotnik provocative. “What is always heard” by “the public,” Subotnik says, is “not autonomous structure but the sensuous manifestation of particular cultural

values.” In light of the questions that my encounter with the song impels me to ask, I would prefer to read the either-or construction of Subotnik’s remark—and of much of the article in which it is embedded—as a deliberate exaggeration, for the sake of argument.

[9] Part of what Subotnik needs in order to stage what she describes as “A Deconstruction of Structural Listening” is a very narrow definition of structure. She takes structure to imply something “unchangeable,” such that “its internal components and relationships are presumed to have attained something like a status of necessity which disallows alternative versions” [“Deconstruction,” 101]. She appears to maintain that the kind of logic needed to sustain this “necessity” is available only in those few dimensions of music that Leonard B. Meyer would call “implicative.” And she means structural autonomy to entail the *total* absence of external influence, as opposed to just the presence of *some* regularities that are peculiar to the work.

[10] Just how narrow this concept of structure is may be most vivid from Subotnik’s definition of the most important of its opposites, which is “medium.” Medium is “a historical parameter . . . signifying the ongoing relationship of any composition to a public domain of sound and culture, from the time of its presentation up to the present . . . defined principally through the presentation of sounds, organized by conventional or characteristic uses . . . as objects of a physical yet culturally conditioned perception” [“Deconstruction,” 88]. Is there anything this leaves out?

[11] Curiously, Subotnik’s definition of medium reminds me of a definition of *structure* once given by Benjamin Boretz. Nelson Goodman had accused him of being “an ardent formalist,” for whom “the actual structure of the work is all that matters.” His cheeky rejoinder was: “since what I call ‘musical structure’ is just the coherent juxtaposition of *everything* relevant to the identity of the musical work, I can’t see what an exclusive concern with musical structure excludes”.⁽²⁾ That’s an exaggeration, of course, as I’m sure Boretz would agree; in my life, it happens to have been a more stimulating exaggeration than ones like Subotnik’s. What it has stimulated, above all, is a mistrust of the idea that attributing structure to a work means showing the work to manifest a self-contained logic of a predetermined kind; an inclination, instead, to try to think of anything that I hear in a work as open to audible interaction with anything else, in relationships that can affect its perceived identity, its meaning for me as sound.

[12] To help me in elaborating this, I want to cite something else of which Subotnik’s definition of medium reminds me. It’s a statement by David Lewin of what music theory is about: “the ways in which, given a certain body of literature, composers and listeners appear to have accepted sound as conceptually structured, categorically prior to any specific piece.”⁽³⁾ Like Subotnik’s definition of medium, Lewin’s project for music theory is explicitly concerned with the portrayal of social facts of a certain kind: “the ways in which composers and listeners appear to have accepted sound as conceptually structured.” Between Lewin’s concerns and Subotnik’s, then, I would see a difference in focus and direction of scrutiny, not a partitioning of territory. I might say that Lewin is specifically concerned to portray these social facts with their sonic side out.

[13] From my reading of Lewin, then—as from Boretz—I feel supported in saying what I wanted to say before: that the concepts by which sound was structured for me in my hearing of that song in the store included ones like “gospel” and “thin,” alongside “quiet” and “downbeat” and “triad.” Theorists may not be used to thinking of “gospel” as a category of sound, but we’re not used to thinking of most categories of sound. Absurdly, we like to stick to the ones of which we have something like formal theories—occasionally even to say that the ones of which we don’t have formal theories are dubious because they’re subjective. This line of thinking is so dopey that I can hardly talk about it; let me just express the conviction that devising categories of sound is fundamental theoretical work, and that creativity at this is something we ought to value more highly, and leave it at that.

[14] While saying that “gospel” is a category of sound, I of course would not want to say that it’s *only* a category of sound. My best reading of Subotnik’s exaggeratedly narrow definition of the structural is as a cautionary portrait of that mistake, a mistake that I would characterize as an effort to draw a hard boundary between the sonic aspect of “gospel” and its other resonances. But meanwhile my feeling that it is a category of sound—among other things—is what makes me think that it ought to be admissible somehow under any definition of structure worth keeping.

[15] A definition of structure worth keeping. Here I am brought up short by an ambivalence that for me is the real subject of this talk. Despite how I may have sounded in the last few minutes, I’m not sure that I think there is a definition of structure

worth keeping. Certainly I think that if there is, it is so little like the one criticized in Subotnik's article that keeping it would not have to count as resistance to her critique. Thus I find myself in the confusing position of wanting to endorse Subotnik's critique while rejecting its essential tactic of definition. And this presents itself to me not only as a difficulty in taking a position with respect to Subotnik's work, but as a difficulty in sorting out and articulating my own inclinations.

[16] This ambivalence strikes me most directly in my feeling the impulse to contest the definition of the term "structure" while it has long since dropped out of my own writing. (In a moment of positivism, I ran a check on the computer files of my articles and verified that this is the case.) I'm sure that I stay away from the word "structure" largely to hold off the connotations of it that draw Subotnik's fire. Yet I am reluctant simply to fall in with Subotnik's critique because I am not convinced that these connotations come in an indissoluble lump of ideological affliction. I think we have a freedom of definitional movement that her critique minimizes.

[17] The lump that most cries out for dissolution is the one that includes the concepts of logic and necessity, what Subotnik describes as the "presumption" that a work's structural "components and relationships" exhibit a "necessity which disallows alternative versions." The only sense in which I am ever interested in attributing logic to pieces is this sense: such-and-such a configuration of sounds is a reasonable one to have created, given the intention to elicit such-and-such an effect in such-and-such a listener. And this requires having something to say about the effect and about the listener. Elide these and you get nonsense: the claim that such-and-such a configuration of sounds is inherently reasonable.

[18] Thus the "necessity" that an ascription of structure might be supposed to entail for a work's "components and relationships" survives for me only as a tautology: if the components and relationships were different, then the work would be different. I mean significantly different, different in the identity we attribute to it, in what we make of it. I would never say that alternatives were "disallowed"; only that a change in the components and relationships that we have made part of our hearing would change the perceived identity of the work, would make the work different in some way that matters to us. In this sense a work's structure is not some quasi-objective property that keeps the work standing, but one kind of meaning that we read into it.

[19] Simply put, the structure of a work is *whatever happens in it*—whatever happens, as characterized through the deployment of whatever concepts help to make the work's identity specific and interesting for us. Period. To speak of a work's structure in this sense does not mean to find it self-enclosed and logical, any more than to speak of its style means to find it *chic*.

[20] Structure thus survives for me only as the designation of a certain direction of interpretive activity—the direction concerned with emphasizing the openness of each sound's identity to definition through the relationships in which we understand it to participate. An interest in structure in this sense corresponds to an anti-essentialist attitude toward sounds, a reluctance to let them be logos, whose significance is predefined and whose perceptible characteristics serve only to create an atmosphere about their referents. It is above all a determination to block the drawing of a distinction between sound and meaning. To hear sounds as particular music is already to attribute meaning to them; identity as perceived sound is meaning. Musical meaning does not end with the attribution of identity to sounds, but with this it has already begun. And it is to the meaningfulness of sound that I need my interpretive practices to be attuned: I want to be able to move easily among the various kinds of characteristics that I attribute to sound, regardless of the supposed internality or externality, the supposed rigor or contingency, of the factors that elicit these attributions.

[21] Subotnik defines the aim of her "Deconstruction of Structural Listening" in two phrases: "to reverse the conventionally assumed priorities" between structural and other listening, and "to undercut the distinction" between them ["Deconstruction," 88]. It puzzles me to see these offered as paraphrases of each other—to see the imagined end state of a distinction's being undercut so nearly identified with that of its terms being retained in a new ranking. Admittedly Jacques Derrida envisions deconstruction as involving both "a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system," the former indeed as a necessary condition for "*intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes"; he denies that it can "pass directly to a neutralization."⁽⁴⁾ But Subotnik seems less fastidious; in particular her proposal to present structural listening "in Derrida's sense as a 'supplement' to" non-structural listening ["Deconstruction," 88] so departs from the usual sense of these practices (the move she describes would be expected to be made, paradoxically, in a deconstruction of *non*-structural listening) that it comes across as expressing only a rough interest in which of the preexistent options comes

out on top. As a theorist, I would like to see the notion of structure that bothers Subotnik and me well and truly dismantled—not kept around as a whipping-boy. So I feel more solidarity with her project of undercutting than with her project of rehierarchization. ⁽⁵⁾

[22] Meanwhile, if my own adaptation of the concept of structure has denatured it to the point where it is no longer recognizable, that's fine with me. My wish is to affirm, by whatever conceptual means, our involvement as perceivers in the creation of our ontologies of sound, through the relations by which we imagine them to be configured. I see no obstacle in principle to our admitting to these ontologies entities and relationships that Subotnik places outside the realm of structure—*certainly* no obstacles worth respecting that are set up by the uncritically accepted connotations of the word “structure,” by which connotations I am at least as unimpressed as she is. The project to which I want to adjust my concepts is that of expanding as far as possible our awareness of what the realm of the audible can include, in the excited expectation that this realm ends only by opening out into further kinds of meaning, not by hitting a wall. This is an attitude that I would consider constructive.

Joseph Dubiel
Columbia University
Department of Music
Dodge Hall
New York NY 10027
jpd5@columbia.edu

Footnotes

* This essay was delivered by Professor Dubiel at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory in New York City, at an Invited Special Session entitled “Contemporary Theory and the ‘New Musicology’.”

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1. “Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky,” in *Explorations in Music, The Arts, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Leonard B. Meyer*, ed. Eugene Narmour and Ruth Solie (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1988), pp. 87–122; *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

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2. Goodman, “Some Notes on *Languages of Art*,” in *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1972), pp. 122–32; Boretz, “Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art* from a Musical Point of View,” in *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*, ed. Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), pp. 31–44. (Both papers are reprinted, Boretz with revisions, from *Journal of Philosophy* 67 [1970].)

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3. “Behind the Beyond: A Response to Edward T. Cone,” *Perspectives of New Music* 7/2(1969): 111–32.

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4. “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Gerald Graff, ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 21. (The translation is reprinted from *Glyph* 1 (1977); the original was first published in *Marges de la Philosophie* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1972).]

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5. Only in this paragraph does the present form of this essay differ from what I read originally. Through Martin Scherzinger’s trenchant questioning I have been persuaded that my resistance to the maintenance of a hierarchy of types of listening, as expressed on that occasion, generalized in the wrong way; I am grateful to him for his comments on this point, and on

others.

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