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Contemporary Music Theory and the New Musicology: An Introduction*

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ABSTRACT: Continuing tensions between contemporary music theory and the new musicology suggest the need for music theorists to step back and look at their discipline in terms of the fresh perspective that the new musicology offers—a task that the following essays by Scott Burnham, Marion Guck, Matthew Brown, Joseph Dubiel, and Kofi Agawu undertake. The introduction provides an intellectual context for the essays by reflecting on the short history of modern American music theory, beginning around 1960, and by reading the relationship of contemporary theory and the new musicology in terms of Michel Foucault'ss work on power and knowledge.

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[1] What best captures the spirit in which the following collection of essays was conceived is the little connective in the title: "Contemporary Music Theory *and* the New Musicology." Not, mind you, "Contemporary Music Theory *or* the New Musicology," "Contemporary Music Theory *versus* the New Musicology," "Contemporary Music Theory *in spite of* the New Musicology," or "Contemporary Music Theory *instead* of the New Musicology," but "Contemporary Music Theory *and* the New Musicology." Not that we should deny the reality of the tensions that characterize our current situation and engage in a game of denial—a game, as our therapists tell us, that our whole family can enjoy for now, but that will bring us all to ruin in the end. For it is no news that music theory, and especially theory-based analysis, has often not fared well under the critical eye of many new musicologists. Nor is it news that such critiques have engendered among theorists a wide variety of responses—from outright horror to mere bemusement, from outraged cries for primitive justice (a Schenkerian tooth for a Foucauldian eye), to a reexamination of our fundamental principles, to, in a few cases, outright spiritual conversion. And, of course, it comes as no news to any of us that if the new musicology had come to praise music theory and celebrate its intellectual triumphs, the new musicology would not be what it is today, and we would all have something better to do than ponder the curious relationship between contemporary music theory *and* the new musicology.(1)

[2] It is this last point—that the new, "postmodern" musicology carved out space for itself, if not at the expense of music theory, at least in the context of music theory—that can offer us some insight into that relationship. For to conceptualize the matter in this way is to conceptualize it in terms of disciplinarity, and if these essays are about anything, they are about disciplines: how and against what models they define themselves, how they create themselves as ways of thinking and bodies of knowledge, and especially how their knowledge colludes with their power. Or, as Michel Foucault put it, "There is no

power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."(2) It is easy enough to read the relationship of contemporary music theory and the new musicology in Foucault's terms.

[3] Consider the birth of contemporary music theory, which, I shall argue, defined itself in two critical historical moments in the past few decades. In each of these moments, music theory—and here I mean the modern, and indeed distinctly American version of music theory—defined itself against what it perceived to be a repressive regime from which it sought liberation. Its first defining moment was the late 1950's and early 1960's, a time aptly described by Milton Babbitt in a reminiscence in his *Words About Music*:

> I really think of our professional theorists beginning with the generation of Allen Forte [that is, in the 1950's]. The notion of professional theory is almost totally new. There were virtually no professional theorists in this country [at that time]. There was no such thing as a professional theorist at any university that I can think of when I began becoming involved with universities.(3)

What there was, instead of the professional *theorist*, was the *music theory teacher*, a pedagogue who represented whatever remnants of the great European theoretical tradition that had survived the trip across the Atlantic. And what the new theorists of the first generation of the modern discipline aspired to was the continuation and revitalization of that tradition. They thus rejected, and defined themselves against, the "mere" theory pedagogue.

[4] This theme is a constant refrain in the early issues of the *Journal of Music Theory*, which was founded in 1957. For example, on the first page of the first issue of the first volume of the journal, we read the following in the opening essay by the Yale theorist David Kraehenbuehl:

> In centuries past the formulation of laws regarding the practice of music was regarded as the highest aim for a musician; and, in many instances, musical laws were the inspiration or the source for more general laws regarding material or spiritual experience. Music was the image of the universe, hence, a source of truth; and it was the music theorist who sought, discovered, and expressed both natural and divine law. But in our own time it is the rare musician who knows how his art offers a key to universal understanding. Music theory has become a discipline in stylistic definition or, still less, a system of nomenclature and classification that offers no valid laws even regarding music. It is to the restoration of music theory as more than a didactic convenience, more than a necessary discipline, as, in fact, a mode of creative thought that this journal is dedicated.(4)

[5] And so, contemporary music theory was born when Babbitt at Princeton, Forte at Yale, and others elsewhere began to treat music theory as a legitimate academic discipline rather than as a service discipline for conservatories and university music schools. It was a discipline that hitched the rigors of twelve-tone and a soon to evolve pitch-class-set theory to the artistic and intellectual force, as well as the European pedigree, of Schenker, in what William Benjamin has aptly called a "marriage of convenience"(5), in order to stake a claim for admission to the modern academy, and especially to the modern research university. Contemporary music theory, throwing off the shackles of its old pedagogical self, opened up for itself a disciplinary space that was at one and the same time a new knowledge and a formidable appropriation of power. Out of the music theory teacher was thus born the music theorist.

[6] The second defining moment in the history of contemporary music theory was 1977, the year of the founding of the Society for Music Theory. Here there were two established disciplines against which the new American music theory reacted: composition, to which theory had long been subordinated in the job market and academic power structure; and, more importantly, musicology. For it was by splitting off from the American Society for University Composers, and more particularly from the American Musicological Society, in a move that still at times reverberates through the crowded halls of joint AMS/SMT meetings, that the Society for Music Theory created a place for itself. And what music theory at that time—in the late 1970's—most emphatically was not, was what it perceived musicology as being: manuscript study, watermarks, composer biography, ever more detailed studies of ever more obscure composers, description rather than analysis, the study of genre, and worst of all, the study of style and stylistic change. What *we*, as theorists understood that the

musicologists reputedly did not was *music*—dare I say, music itself: the score, the sound, the structure, the work, and how "it" "works".

[7] Having in these two defining moments constituted itself as a discipline, what has contemporary music theory accomplished? Now what Foucault teaches us about disciplines is that, if they are in some respects repressive—the disciplines that he chose to study (the hospital, the asylum, the barracks, the prison) certainly were—they are also *productive*. Whatever else they do, they produce, or better: they enable production. Or better still, knowledge and power pull each other up by the bootstraps to produce more knowledge, which lays further claim to power. Contemporary music theory's new knowledge (its use of original or revitalized systems of analysis to explicate the individual work) secured its admission to the university. But admission to the university meant that it had to submit itself to the well-known academic machinery that forced it to produce. And produce it did: new theories, countless analyses, essays, books, new journals, conferences, conference papers—in a word, a "product," a new knowledge, a veritable industry, one that has been successfully exportable back across the Atlantic, where contemporary American theory serves as a model for theoretical and analytical journals in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and beyond. Yet music theory's knowledge is inseparable from its power, for just as academic jobs in the discipline require the creation of new research and new knowledge, so does that new knowledge create more jobs, more representation in music curricula, more graduate programs, and so forth. Contemporary music theory, with its concern for rigor, for analysis, for structure, for the work, has thus produced a way of knowing, a knowledge, along with a disciplinary structure to support that knowledge. And ultimately, what it has produced is *us*, today's "music theorists"; or, more appropriately, it is that which has enabled us to produce ourselves.

[8] Strange, then, that it was music theory's tying itself so doggedly to the notions of structure, of system, of work, that in time inadvertently opened up a disciplinary space for the new, postmodern musicology, thus providing the latter with a foil against which *it* could constitute *itself* as a new knowledge, a new power. Of course, the other foil for the new musicology was the "old" musicology, a musicology that still focused on the work and on the canon, and that was less inclined to question the ideology and politics on which both the canon and musicology itself were based. Watching the new musicology produce and appropriate its own brand of power, we look on and wonder if it is doing to us what we did to composers and musicologists of a generation ago.

[9] And so, here in the mid-1990's, where do we, as a discipline, and as individual theorists, stand, when we view what we historically have produced, and what the new musicology now produces, whether in disdain or ignorance of us, or in gleeful contradistinction to us. We as theorists locate ourselves along a wide spectrum of points of view. Some of us are formalists or "modernists" and proud of it—I heard Milton Babbitt, prescient as always, proclaim in a 1982 lecture that he was an unredeemed logical positivist, long before it occurred to many of us that there was anything to be redeemed from. At the other end of the spectrum are those who question the fundamental premises of contemporary music theory to the extent that they no longer wish to be called "music theorists," a label that brands them as direct descendants of that creature that was born with such fanfare in 1957. As we examine where we fall along this spectrum, we should keep in mind the wise words of the cultural historian David Couzens Hoy:

> Historical breaks do not occur everywhere for everyone at the same time. The same person, discipline, or institution can be traditional in some respects, modern in others, and postmodern in yet others. Furthermore, since [in the eyes of the postmodern] there is no necessary progress, no forward movement in history, and perhaps no such thing as history (in the absence of a convincing metanarrative), the postmodern cannot imply that there is any normative advantage that comes from either being later in time or a sign of the future. Postmodernism cannot and should not claim to be better, more advanced, or more clever than whatever preceded it. That modernism does assume this superiority is what distinguishes it from postmodernism, and what postmodern pastiche disruptively reveals. So a postmodern cannot argue that those who are traditional or modern must eventually follow the path to postmodernism.(6)

[10] And so I urge readers of the essays that follow, whether theorists or musicologists, analysts or critics, moderns or postmoderns, or those who are sufficiently evolved to label themselves as nothing whatsoever, to return to the little connective that links contemporary music theory *and* the new musicology, and to explore the intriguing disciplinary spaces

that separate us and that bring us together.

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Footnotes

* This essay was delivered by Professor McCreless 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. Parts of this essay are derived from my much longer article, "Rethinking Contemporary Music Theory," in *State of the Art: Refiguring Music Studies in the 1990's*, ed. Anahid Kassabian and David Schwarz (Charlottesville, VA, forthcoming 1996).
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2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1977), 27.
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3. Milton Babbitt, *Words About Music* (Madison, 1986), 121.
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4. David Kraehenbuehl, "Foreward," *Journal of Music Theory* 1/1 (1957): 1.
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5. William Benjamin, "Schenker's Theory and the Future of Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 25/1 (1981), 159–61.
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6. David Couzens Hoy, "Foucault: Modern or Postmodern?" in *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges*," ed. Jonathan Arac (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 28.
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who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

Prepared by Robert Judd, Manager and Tahirih Motazedian, Editorial Assistant