



The Deconstruction of Musicology: Poison or Cure?

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ABSTRACT: This essay is a critical examination of the claims of deconstruction and “textuality.” The three sections of the argument concern: I. Derrida, in one of his most frequently cited deconstructions; II. the problems of Saussurean semantics and post-structuralist textuality; III. broadly deconstructive strategies to be found in musicological writings.

I

[1] At the close of an essay which sees off one of Derrida’s opponents, Christopher Norris sets the following conditions for any future challenge to Derrida. He says,

“[A]ny convincing challenge will have to do more than just rehearse what amounts to a litany of anti-deconstructionist *idées reçues*. It will need to show precisely where Derrida’s arguments go wrong; where he misreads or misconstrues his philosophical source-texts; or where the claims of deconstruction themselves fall prey to a better, more adequate, historically informed, or cogent theoretical critique.”⁽¹⁾

I accept that these conditions are fair, and I am happy to abide by them in this paper. What I shall attempt here is a critique first of Derrida himself, secondly of textuality and interdisciplinarity, which simplify and distort Derrida’s writings, and thirdly the use that certain musicologists have made of these arguments during the last decade, in writings that may today be generally dubbed the New Musicology (a label bound to disappear before long). If I were to limit my criticisms to the post-structuralist assumptions which pervade much recent work in musicology and the other humanities, I might be accused by some of attacking too easy a target. It is for this reason that much of the present paper confronts the most important source for such ideas, however simplified and debased they may have become in their dissemination. I will remind the reader at this point that the necessary restrictions on space preclude any exhaustive treatment of the issues here; according to the Socratic principles examined in the first part of the paper, I would encourage further dialogue within the arena of mto-talk.

[2] Let me begin with a cautionary tale. In Derrida’s essay, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” from the collection *Dissemination*, we find one of the most frequently cited examples of a metaphysical text which contains the seeds of its own deconstruction⁽²⁾. Norris, in his biography of Derrida says that it is “a good place to start . . . since Derrida is here engaged with something like a mythical inaugural moment in the ‘logocentric’ epoch whose effects (as he argues) reach down from Plato to the present

day”⁽³⁾. Let us then begin here too. The deconstruction characteristically involves an aspect of the text under discussion which would be regarded as marginal: in this case, Derrida examines a metaphor, which, he claims, introduces an element of semantic undecidability that threatens to subvert the canonical reading of the text. The text is a passage from Plato’s *Phaedrus*⁽⁴⁾, and in Derrida’s hands it begins to speak against its author; Derrida’s “close reading” of the text seeks to demonstrate exactly how the text’s rhetorical figures may contradict its argument.

[3] The *Phaedrus* is an examination of rhetoric, which argues that the art is pernicious insofar as it ignores reason and knowledge. Contrary to Derrida’s reading, Plato does not present rhetoric and philosophy as a binary opposition, since he is condemning only some rhetoric, while generously conceding that, for example, the rhetorical school of Isocrates, one of Plato’s own rivals, has much of worth to offer. So Plato is not interested in making a rigid and unyielding distinction between the logic of an argument, and the way in which it is presented. The passage Derrida discusses is centered upon an Egyptian myth which Socrates relates to Phaedrus, the superficial young orator, by way of an illustration of his arguments on writing. The god Theuth came to Thamus, the king of Egypt, offering a long list of his inventions as gifts. Thamus first listened to the account Theuth gave of each of his gifts, accepting some, while rejecting others, according to his judgement of the merits of each. When Theuth arrived at the gift of writing, he said, “Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a remedy for memory and wisdom.” Thamus rejects the gift, with a weighty reproof, which is worth quoting in full.

“Theuth, my paragon of inventors, the discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practise it. So it is in this case; you, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your offspring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a remedy for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society.”⁽⁵⁾

(Thamus seems to have great insight into the note-taking habits of some students, who write furiously and memorise great quantities in the hope that these activities will serve as a substitute for understanding.) The word I rendered as “remedy” is in the original “phármakon,” which the lexicons define as alternatively a curative medicine, or a poison. Indeed, the two meanings are preserved in two modern Greek cognate words: phármakon now means medicine alone, while the verb pharmakóno is to poison. This is the crux of our present argument.

[4] Now according to Derrida, this apparent ambiguity renders the meaning of the word “undecidable.” Let us examine this on two grounds. First, within the present context, “phármakon” clearly carries its positive meaning, since Theuth is hardly going to persuade the king by offering him a poison. Derrida realises this, but he wants to argue that the other, opposed meaning insinuates itself upon the intended meaning. Secondly then, might the word’s use in the language settle the question of meaning? I would argue that it does, and this is exactly what Derrida is constrained to ignore due to his whole approach to language. For the apparent double-meaning is not a binary opposition operating solely within a closed linguistic system, but is linked rather to features of the extra-linguistic material world. As Paracelsus had already said prior to Plato, “it depends only upon the amount whether a poison is poisonous or not”⁽⁶⁾. So what we have is not a Saussurean semantic opposition within a single signifier, but the disappointingly mundane observation that a small dose can cure, while a large dose will poison. As usual, the implicit linguistic idealism of deconstruction excludes the possibility of any interpretation which refers to our experience and perceptions of an external world, because “il n’y a pas de hors-texte.” Thus a word whose meaning is readily comprehensible in the context of common medical knowledge, available equally to Plato and to ourselves, becomes fissured by paradox through the assumptions which deconstruction brings to bear on the text. The paradox is not therefore discovered but rather created by deconstructive reading of the text.

[5] So far we have one pivotal example of Derrida’s supposed “close reading” proving quite otherwise. Pivotal because this passage supposedly lays bare the “inaugural moment in the ‘logocentric’ epoch whose effects reach down from Plato to the

present day.” It would be unlike Derrida, of course, to engage in a simple search for origins; what he is claiming is not so much that Plato is the creator of the “logocentric epoch” and the source of all its problems, but rather that the *Phaedrus* passage is symptomatic of a kind of necessity imposed upon us by language, whenever we engage in the search for philosophical truths. But what kind of necessity is this? What are the forces which according to Derrida, always already subvert the meaning of texts? By way of explanation, let us look at Derrida’s next step in his discussion of the *Phaedrus* passage, which introduces the mechanism of intertextuality.

[6] Derrida claims that the forces of language bring a cognate word to bear upon the poison/cure discussion. He claims that this other word, which means either magician or scapegoat is the key to this discussion, and since words, according to Derrida’s post-Saussurean semantics, gain their identity and meaning through all the other, absent terms of the language, it is of no matter that this word fails to appear in Plato’s text. A magician, according to the lexicon, can be a user of potions, possibly to poison others, while Derrida notes, from a reading of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, that in the earlier history of Athens, certain persons living within the polis would be ejected as a means of averting an impending disaster. He elaborates upon this notion of the scapegoat, claiming that the word is both within Plato’s text, due to the presence of the supposedly related “phármakon,” but also absent, excluded, just as the scapegoat was excluded by the laws of the polis. The word is then drawn up into a discussion of the inside/outside opposition which Derrida again thinks is pervasive and inevitable within logocentrism.

[7] I would contend though, that Derrida is again mistaken in a way which is symptomatic of his approach to language. You will notice that I have so far avoided mentioning the Greek word for magician and scapegoat. This is for a good reason. Since Attic Greek in its written form had no accents, only the spoken language revealed which syllables were stressed. Because of Derrida’s charge that speech has been privileged throughout the “logocentric epoch” this issue is of central importance. What has escaped Derrida here, is the fact that magician and scapegoat were not rendered by the same Greek word, but rather by two, and the distinction is only apparent from speech ⁽⁷⁾.

pharmakós (stress on the last syllable) means scapegoat, while
phármakos (stress on the first syllable) is our magician and user of poisonous potions.

Thus the latter is a genuine relative of our original word phármakon, while the former disappears from the picture. This provides a neat example of exactly the reverse of Derrida’s neologism “différance”: where Derrida created a word whose double meaning—différance and deferral—is apparent only in writing, and not in speech, here we have a difference in meaning apparent in speech but not in writing. This is a nice irony to arise from a Derridean text. The importation of the scapegoat, seems designed to raise the stakes by introducing a political dimension to Plato’s supposed binary oppositions; however, Derrida not only makes a very telling error in the process, but the importation can only take place by a very nebulous notion of necessity and forces traversing language; this is related to his semantics of différance, derived tendentially from Saussure—but I shall deal with this matter a little later. I might, facetiously, offer another example of Derridean semantic deferral: writing, in the myth was offered as a gift, but of course in German, “Giffl” means poison, reinforcing Derrida’s original point. By this means—admittedly more Yale deconstructionist than Derridean—we can prove anything.

[8] The *Phaedrus* is in part Plato’s defence of the Socratic dialectic method. In opposition to this, he places the rhetorician’s speech, written out beforehand, which can be delivered by another on a different occasion, to an audience quite different from that originally intended. There is of course a certain irony in the fact that Plato is himself leaving a piece of writing as a hostage to fortune, in praise of Socrates who resisted the temptation to depart from spoken dialectics, and so preserved nothing in writing; and indeed this irony can hardly have escaped Plato. Socrates, in the dialogue, is making a complaint of a very practical nature: that speeches already written out cannot answer back, and cannot possibly adjust themselves to the prejudices or ignorance of all future audiences. There is no binary opposition here, though, because, as I have said, Socrates allows for a rhetoric, an art of speech writing which is carefully attuned to its audiences’ needs, not to flatter, but to persuade. But of course the dialectical method remains the ideal for Socrates, since minds interact directly, and every fallacy, over-hasty conclusion or misunderstanding can in principle be addressed immediately by the other speakers. Socrates is also concerned that knowledge gained purely from written sources will not necessarily be accompanied by understanding; the reader may

accept the conclusions of a detailed argument dogmatically, without following the argument. (This matches my own teaching experience, since, for example, a few students in my aesthetics courses have been horrified by the notion that the quality of the argument is to be valued above the conclusions reached, since they have been accustomed to the neat packaging of supposed facts, which can be memorised for examination purposes—in which case, understanding is a mere luxury.) This is the kind of practical problem Socrates is addressing, and to treat it according to a hermeneutics of suspicion that searches at all costs for a privileging of speech over writing seems to miss the point, without any substantial gain to compensate—this is in addition to the fact that the alleged close reading turns out to be gravely flawed in ways which directly undermine Derrida's deconstructive interpretation. To put a contemporary gloss on Socrates' argument, we might offer e-mail as a form of writing which would completely satisfy all his strictures, since the writer can answer back; the academic e-mail discussion list, at its best, would have pleased Socrates greatly, and might even offer an advantage which he would acknowledge: answers can be more carefully framed, since we can ponder over them at far greater length than would be tolerable in spoken dialogue.

[9] So here we have an example of writing which co-incides with Socrates' discursive ideal. We should also remember that the examples of writing Socrates was considering were themselves to be communicated in speech, since rhetoric was the topic under consideration. We ought further to recall that silent, inward reading is a relatively modern phenomenon, which was rare enough to invite comment only five centuries ago; even with an audience of one—the reader alone—written texts were still associated with the speaking voice. The concert platform, by the way, displays its own ethic on written music: the consensus since Liszt has demanded that a recitalist memorise the score on the understanding that only then has the music been internalized.

[10] Derrida is also misleading in his account of the supposedly canonical reading of the *Phaedrus* which his deconstructive reading is supposed to overthrow. The scholarly consensus, according to Derrida, is that the *Phaedrus* is one of Plato's poorest products, either immature, or written in his dotage, and in either case not worthy of the same attention as most of his other works. This, however, is a travesty of contemporary Platonic scholarship, which has established conclusively that the *Phaedrus* is a late work, and it is admired for its literary qualities, not condemned. Glancing at the translation most widely available in the U.K., by Walter Hamilton⁽⁸⁾, the Introduction explains how the seemingly disparate segments of the text are in fact carefully unified, whereas Derrida would have us believe that modern commentators unite in proclaiming the *Phaedrus* too haphazard. Nor is the writing myth shunned, or regarded as an embarrassment by Hamilton. (I might also mention here that the *Phaedrus* character in the dialogue seems to think that Socrates has just invented the myth as a colourful illustration of his argument.) It is this largely fictitious canonical reading against which Derrida offers his new transgressive interpretation—a dramatic backdrop to be sure, but unfortunately for Derrida it is also untrue.

[11] By way of summary then, Derrida, in his treatment of the *Phaedrus*, first misrepresents the modern scholarly consensus on the text; secondly, he declares that his own close reading will overthrow this alleged canonical interpretation, by respecting the details of Plato's text, but on closer inspection this reading is found to be less than close, and subject to external purposes, leading to a reading which the details of the text cannot sustain, such as various imposed binary oppositions; thirdly, he bases his deconstruction of the text on the semantic undecidability of a word which is perfectly decidable on non-linguistic grounds; fourthly, he imports another word into the text, justifying this strategy on the basis of a dubious necessity arising from his semantics of difference; fifthly, this absent word, supposedly a key to the passage, turns out to be two words, spoiling the putative relationship, and ironically proving symptomatic of a certain blindness in Derrida's approach.

II

[12] All too briefly, I would now like to present a sketch of Derrida's views on language, derived from his peculiar reading of Saussure. At the end of his life, Saussure, an historical linguist, presented a vision of a new non-historical linguistics which would treat language synchronically⁽⁹⁾. Derrida tries to cast Saussure as an upholder of phonocentrism, the privileging of speech over writing, but this charge is even harder to press on Saussure than it was on Plato⁽¹⁰⁾. For Saussure had worked with written texts throughout his working life as an historical linguist—prior to the development of audio recording technology, written records were all the historical linguist could refer to. Saussure, in his last lectures was, among other

things, explaining how the spoken word could now find a place in a new, synchronic examination of a language, at any given moment in its history, as a system; this appearance of speech was a proposed reversal in the practices of linguists, and nothing to do with the upholding of an alleged phonocentric tradition running from Plato onwards.

[13] Saussure explored the phonemic level of language in these last lectures, and concluded that phonemes belonged to a system of oppositions, allowing us to distinguish cat from mat. His daring speculative leap was to suggest that the semantic level of language was also governed by a system of oppositions, and it was this idea which made the structuralist enterprise in the social sciences and humanities possible, giving us Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology and Nattiez's structuralist musicology. Saussure was suggesting that words gained their meaning purely from an intra-linguistic system of differences, each concept gaining its identity from all that it was not, that is from all the other concepts. In the hands of Saussure's successors, such as Jakobson, this speculation began to appear unsustainable. Jakobson split the phonemic atom in the 1930s, showing that each phoneme consisted of a number of simultaneous material distinctive features; the science of phonetics can describe these features in terms of their acoustics, or in terms of the physiological changes in the speaker's buccal cavity. This analysis of the phoneme removed the motivation for the oppositional model in linguistics and the structuralist enterprise in general, but its implications were not immediately felt⁽¹¹⁾. The model of syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes to account for the interaction of grammatical and semantic features of sentences was found too weak in its explanatory powers to cope with many common linguistic formations, and by the late 1950s the Saussurean hypotheses had all been tested and found wanting⁽¹²⁾; the new model for linguistics was provided by Chomsky's transformational and generative grammar. (Still more important, perhaps, was the development, since Frege, of truth-functional semantics, of which Saussure was ignorant.) This revolution in the parent science of linguistics seemed to leave structuralism in the other disciplines untouched, even though the foundation had now collapsed. Hence the structuralist writings of Nattiez as late as the 1970s⁽¹³⁾. Indeed, it was just as structuralism in linguistics was collapsing that the francophone world chose, perversely to adopt it, so that its final overthrow outside linguistics was not due to Chomsky, but rather to the very different critique offered by Derrida. Thus we find Barthes in the early 60s producing *The Fashion System*⁽¹⁴⁾, a largely unread work of mind-numbing high structuralism, while by the end of the decade, he was subverting his own structuralist past in the seminars which led to the publication of *S/Z*⁽¹⁵⁾. Likewise, in francophone Canada, allowing for a trans-Atlantic delay, we find Nattiez furiously back-peddalling during the 80s in order not to appear naïve in the new post-structuralist environment⁽¹⁶⁾.

[14] Derrida, in *Grammatology*, ignored the Chomskian revolution and took Saussure's lectures of 1917 to be the last word on language and meaning. Aside from the shortcomings mentioned above, this also meant the acceptance of the potentially most misleading of Saussure's methodological choices: the bracketing of the language- and mind-independent world, in order to present language as a self-sufficient system. But once the external world is removed from the account, for methodological reasons, it is hard to see at what point it can logically be re-introduced. And so we arrive at a kind of linguistic idealism which treats the world as a creation of language. While Derrida himself would not seem to endorse this doctrine, it is implicit in much post-modernist writing in the humanities today. Saussure, in his talk of the arbitrary connection between the signifier and the signified in no way introduced a revolutionary idea: he is saying simply that the sound of a word has no necessary connection with its associated concept—this much should be evident to any child when she first notices that there exist languages other than her own. But once this association has been made, the connection between the word and the objects in the extra-linguistic world to which it may refer is not at all arbitrary. Most literary theorists' accounts of Saussure are hopelessly confused on this point⁽¹⁷⁾.

[15] Derrida takes as his starting point Saussure's semantics of pure difference, which, as I said, leaves out the referential function of language. At this point, since Derrida thinks it should be taken seriously, I would like to ask just what a semantics of pure difference would mean. Take, for example the word "sheep" in English: its French equivalent is "mouton"; but whereas we have a second word for the animal when slaughtered for consumption, namely "mutton," the French must manage with the one word for both concepts. Now, in a linguistic economy of pure difference, we are to understand that whereas we anglophones, thanks to our language, can carve up the world conceptually in such a way as to distinguish live from dead sheep, the francophone, on the other hand can make no such distinction. I would suggest though, that it is far from immaterial to most Frenchmen whether the dining table supports a live or a dead sheep, just as French farmers seem aware of the distinction when they set alight British lorries carrying live sheep. Such are the absurdities of a theory which treats language as a completely autonomous system. But this unworkable semantics is what Derrida insists on employing as

his starting point. From there, he generates his favourite paradox by showing that meaning is perpetually deferred by the economy of difference—there is no self-present meaning when a sign owes its identity to the rest of the system.

[16] I would like to consider now the textualist strategies of interdisciplinarity which emerge from this position, and which pervade much recent work in the humanities. The Saussurean exclusion of any language-independent reality removes the referential function from language, and without reference, truth claims must also be abandoned. This blurs all distinctions between literary writing, which makes no direct assertions about the world beyond the text, and any writing which purports to extend our knowledge of extra-textual matters, whether particle physics or music theory. Distinctions between verbal and non-verbal artifacts can also be removed, now that language has been dispossessed of its referential functions. Thus the inability of music to form propositions is irrelevant: it is no more, and no less discursive, on this view, than language. All human artifacts can therefore be treated within a generalised theory of “text” without respect to the different media involved. Interdisciplinarity is the attempt to realise this project: since all is text, the boundaries between the disciplines is illusory. The different arts are thus to be treated in the same manner, and the differences between the arts and factual discourses are considered illusory.

[17] This has clear consequences for music theory, since the dissolving of disciplinary boundaries in favour of generalised text removes all justifications for specialist technical knowledge in this field or any other. There is no ground for complaint therefore when the interdisciplinary outsider encroaches upon the territory we thought was ours, without any training in music theory, perhaps without even the ability to read music notation, for no technical prerequisites can be stipulated if there are no disciplinary boundaries left. Instead of music theory’s approach to music as an art with its own vast repertoire of techniques, based on its peculiar material, sound, the interdisciplinary approach reduces musical works to cultural documents. As the psychologist Maslov once said, if your only tool is a hammer, you tend to see everything as a nail. Music theorists should therefore think again before they join in the celebration of interdisciplinarity, since the price of the ticket is ultimately the renunciation of technique. While these techniques are individually open to interrogation—witness the growing literature tracing the genealogy of Schenker’s thought in the work of William Pastille⁽¹⁸⁾ and others, its organicist links to the aesthetic ideology in Alan Street’s critique⁽¹⁹⁾, and the project of replacing its methodological foundations, by Matthew Brown and Douglas Dempster⁽²⁰⁾ and many others. All of this is welcome, but while music theory can challenge, modify or replace parts of its technical repertoire, it cannot survive the removal of all specialist technical knowledge.

[18] This, however, is to look towards the future. Inconsistency can sometimes have its advantages, and the consequences of misguided theories are not always realised. It is also to pass well beyond Derrida into the murkier realms of contemporary academia. What I propose to look at now are some attempts by musicologists to deconstruct musical texts using similar strategies to those found in Derrida. These strategies include the close reading of musical texts in order to find marginal elements which subvert the hierarchies supposedly present in the score. This accordingly involves the isolation of weighted binary oppositions, with a privileged and a suppressed term, which can be mapped onto binary oppositions of political import, tracing encoded patterns of complicity and subversion in the music. Related to this is the strategy of discovering a transgressive element in the score which cannot be contained within the frame set by canonical readings of the work, but disrupts and places in question the opposition between the inner and the outer which sustains the ideology of the autonomous musical work. As with Derrida, I shall be examining these transgressive close readings to see whether they have textual warrant.

III

[19] Susan McClary, in “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year”⁽²¹⁾, provides an analysis of the first movement of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No.5, which seeks to isolate such a transgressive element, one that is only subdued just in time for the final ritornello to begin. She prefaces this analysis with a denunciation of formalism and then attempts to define tonality, linking it to “the social values it articulates” which are thoroughly bourgeois, consisting of “beliefs in progress, in expansion, in the ability to attain ultimate goals through rational striving in the ingenuity of the individual strategist operating both within and in defiance of the norm.” The route from the musical to the particulars of McClary’s political reading is obscure. For instance, McClary, like most musicologists today, recognises the elaborate hierarchical organisation of tonal music; but does this not suggest that tonality upheld the values of the aristocracy, or the

Church, who, after all, employed most Eighteenth-Century composers? Why should we simply assume that tonality articulates bourgeois values? The role of the tonic within this picture is not clear. Is it an “ultimate goal” to be attained through “rational striving”? Or is it a “norm” which the “individual strategist” may often defy?

[20] At any rate, McClary chooses the Brandenburg Concerto movement to demonstrate how her politics of tonality is played out in a piece of music from this era. Her reading is of course transgressive of canonical readings, which fall within the norms of formalism—hence the “blasphemy of talking politics,” as she puts it. She characterises the concerto as a form which “addresses the tensions between the dynamic individual and the stable society,” the ritornelli representing stability and the concertino representing dynamism. In the case of this movement, the ritornello ill fits this description, due to its elusive phrase-structure and its strange melodic contours (in measures 3,4), but to point this out would burden the account McClary wants to give with complications. The transgressive element she picks out is the role of the harpsichord, which almost succeeds in enacting a revolution, emerging from its traditional humble task to overthrow not only the ripieno, but the two conventional solo instruments as well. She focusses upon the famous cadenza, in which the harpsichord “unleashes elements of chaos, irrationality, and noise until finally it blurs almost entirely the sense of key, meter, and form upon which eighteenth-century style depends.” The harpsichord only allows itself to be reabsorbed into the final ritornello “when the alternative seems to be madness.” This analysis faces some grave problems. Firstly, the harpsichordist was traditionally in a position of leadership; the humble role McClary would assign it must leave this out of consideration. Secondly, the harpsichord behaves as a normal member of the concertino group from the first entry, so that McClary must resort to suppressing the harpsichord’s contribution to stability for most of the movement, just as she suppressed the instability of the ritornello. Thirdly, and this is most important, the account McClary gives of the cadenza badly misrepresents the score: the harpsichord emerges to the fore gradually, not violently, and of the sixty-five measures, the first forty-one are more placid and undisturbed than any earlier passage. This section ends with six bars of dominant pedal, from which emerges a resumption of the demisemiquaver arpeggios and scales from earlier in the movement. The demisemiquavers proceed for six-and-a-half measures before the dominant pedal returns. Of these measures, only two and a half contain any chromaticism, and they take the form of a chromatic descent in diminished-seventh chords, such as we find elsewhere in Bach (the B \flat Partita, for example). Even during this short passage, the rhythm is very clear: the left hand takes the first note of every quaver beat, while the right hand follows with three demisemiquavers. Twelve measures of unambiguous dominant pedal return after this, and the harpsichord cadenza ends with as much decorum as it had begun.

[21] Another essay of McClary’s analyses the first movement of Brahms’s Third Symphony, a paradigm of Hanslickian absolute music according to the canonical interpretations which McClary wishes to challenge⁽²²⁾. She argues that sonata form encodes gender oppositions into its thematic contrasts, while the tonality of sonata form involves conflict between Self, represented by the tonic, and Other, represented by the key to which the music modulates; the patriarchal nature of traditional sonata strategies is evident from the purging of the Other which must take place before the movement can close in an affirmation of Self. In her analysis, McClary seeks to rescue Brahms from the shadow of Beethoven, by showing how Brahms subverts his predecessor’s patriarchal strategies. You will recall that McClary has little affection for Beethoven the rapist, as she once styled him in a discussion of the Ninth Symphony, which motivates her redemptive work on both Brahms and Schubert. This redemption takes place, according to McClary through the treatment of the material representing the Other in the recapitulation. Where the exposition had moved from F to A, the recapitulation casts the Other, not in the tonic, but in D. This strategy, McClary says, wrests the second theme, the feminine, “from the control of the ‘patriarchal tonic.’” Unfortunately for McClary’s close reading, this is one of Beethoven’s standard strategies in sonata movements which modulate initially to the mediant, so Brahms is in fact using Beethoven as a model, and not overthrowing him.

[22] Finally, let us look at an analysis by James Hepokoski of a scene from *Il trovatore*: the gypsies’ “Anvil Chorus” which alternates with Azucena’s narrative, “Stride la vampa”⁽²³⁾. Hepokoski assumes that Verdi, in his early and middle operas, employed fixed forms which were so firmly established as conventions that they were recognized and understood by contemporary audiences. In the middle-period operas, Verdi was additionally able to manipulate those forms, creating expectations in his audience which could be redirected or frustrated in meaningful ways. These strategies served to evoke semiotic complexes which traversed contemporary cultural and political attitudes. Hepokoski portrayed opera in Italy at this time as an institution of the waning feudal ruling class, which was being appropriated by the bourgeoisie to legitimate its own world view. While enjoying the prestige derived from aristocratic opera, the bourgeoisie also wished to dissolve the former

grand conventions into the immediacy, spontaneity and naturalness promoted by their Romantic creed. Hepokoski takes the French strophic form of Azucena's aria, and the Italian lyric form of the "Anvil Chorus," and maps the resulting French/Italian opposition onto political oppositions, such as bourgeois/aristocratic, and cultural oppositions, such as natural/conventional. The intermingling of world-views thus resulting from the nesting of the different forms in this scena enacts the clash between the two social classes vying for power, and reveals their common purposes.

[23] The pivotal use made of Azucena's strophic aria in this system of oppositions appears over-ambitious, since a strophic form was used conventionally for narratives, regardless of any French, bourgeois or other associations this form supposedly carried. Hepokoski's interpretation finally comes unstuck on general issue of the fixed forms thesis that he depends upon in order to extract his initial binary opposition: this thesis altogether lacks support in the contemporary literature. The one commentator who mentioned forms—Basevi—used the word to refer to the constituent parts of the larger forms, spanning a scena, which Hepokoski means by the word. Basevi, as Roger Parker has established,⁽²⁴⁾ discussed formal issues on an ad hoc basis, and his account compels us to concede that form was too malleable and varying to provide grounds for any clear-cut binary oppositions. But without these oppositions, no deconstruction arises.

[24] These three examples are not offered as paradigms of Derridean deconstruction, but as representative examples of the use of deconstructive strategies in recent musicology. But even if McClary and Hepokoski were meticulous in following Derrida's practices, they would still face shipwreck upon the issue of Saussurean semantics, which Derrida shares with the cruder linguistic idealism of so many in the humanities today. As I have argued, the search for binary oppositions within texts is without motivation once Saussure's semantics is understood to be unworkable. And since Saussure was attempting to found a scientific project, he submitted himself, by implication, to scientific method, which is fallibilist rather than dogmatic; to respect Saussure's historical role is very different, therefore, from nurturing misplaced dogmatic loyalty in a theory which was disproven long ago. I have many other examples of putative musicological deconstructions which fail to live up to their claims, but since the danger of causing offence by attacking someone in the audience increases with the number of examples used, I thought it would be more diplomatic to reserve these for any private discussion which might arise later. In conclusion though, if the god Theuth, of Plato's myth, should approach you bearing the gift of deconstruction, ponder his claims carefully, lest you receive poison rather than cure. Musicology today needs a cure for its overweening theoretical ills, but that cure is unlikely to be found in the incantations and potions of deconstruction's magicians (phármakos). If, on the contrary, you think I have made a scapegoat (pharmakós) of deconstruction, you are welcome to place your protest on mto-talk.

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Footnotes

1. Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong With Postmodernism* (London, 1995), 160.

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2. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination* (1972), trans. Barbara Johnson (London, 1981).

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3. Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London, 1987), 28.

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4. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274ff.

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5. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. W. Hamilton (London, 1987), 96.

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6. This etymological confusion must surely have struck many readers. The first reference to the matter in print is, I believe, Alexander Nehemas, review of Norris, *ibid.*, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 100/2 (1991), 303–6.

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7. *cf.* Nehemas, *ibid.*, 304,5.

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8. Plato, trans. Hamilton, *op. cit.*, 7–11.

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9. Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1916).

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10. Derrida, *Grammatology* (1967), trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore, 1974), 27–73.

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11. For an excellent summary of this issue, see Leonard Jackson, *The Poverty of Structuralism* (New York, 1991), 70–75.

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12. Jackson also takes De Man to task for his use of the metonymy/metaphor opposition, which is dependent upon the same syntagm/paradigm opposition long since rejected by linguistics, *ibid.*, 77–7.

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13. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Fondements d'une semiologie de la musique* (Paris, 1975).

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14. Roland Barthes, *Système de la mode* (Paris, 1967).

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15. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970).

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16. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, trans. C. Abbate (Princeton, 1990).

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17. For example in Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London, 1979), 4–5; and in Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford, 1983), 96,7 – at least Eagleton is correct in his account of the signifier/signified distinction. Similar confusions emerge in accounts of Saussure to be found in Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980); Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*; Julia Kristeva does not escape these confusions, as the pages of *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, 1986), ed. Toril Moi, readily witness. Kristeva is at least consistent, in making explicit her unconcern for, and even rejection of linguistics *qua* science, in “The Ethics of Linguistics,” *Desire in Language* (Oxford, 1980).

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18. Most recently in “Schenker’s Value Judgments,” *MTO* Vol. 1.6 (1995).

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19. Alan Street, “Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories,” *Music Analysis* Vol. 8 (1989).

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20. Matthew Brown and Douglas Dempster, “The Scientific Image of Music Theory,” *Journal of Music Theory* Vol. 33 (1989), 65–106.

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21. Susan McClary, "The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year," *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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22. Susan McClary, "Narrative Agendas in 'Absolute' Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms's Third Symphony," *Musicology and Difference*, ed. R. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 326–344.

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23. James Hepokoski, "*Il trovatore* as Sociocultural Drama: Generic Mixtures and Clashing World-Views," unpublished conference paper, *Belfast International Congress of Verdi Studies* (1993).

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24. Roger Parker, "*Insolite forme*," unpublished conference paper, *Belfast International Congress of Verdi Studies* (1993).

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