



Music Loving, Or the Relationship with the Piece

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ABSTRACT: Some recent musicology and theory has opened scholarly discourse to examination of issues long considered private, subjective, even embarrassing. This paper examines a complex of such issues related to the transformation of childhood music-lovers into adult music scholars. Various individuals have described the replacement of musical experience either by “separating it off from the scholarly endeavor” (Tomlinson), musicology’s solution, or by creating a “*substitute* for sensitive, evocative description” (Maus), theory’s solution. I claim that this replacement occurs in reaction to powers music has to engage and change those who become intensely involved with it, powers that may attract the child performer but that may eventually disturb the increasingly autonomous adult. However, Suzanne Cusick’s account of music as a sexuality proposes a more positive view of music’s powers as powers to create pleasure through intimacy. These ideas suggest ways of describing my sense of intimacy with the opening solo and tutti of the Adagio of Mozart’s A-Major Piano Concerto, K. 488, a sense of intimacy shared by virtually everyone I mention the piece to.

[1] [What follows is the text of the paper I presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory in New York, 5 November 1995. Except for minor corrections, the text stands as it was read. There are, however, brief clarifications which I have placed in footnotes. At the outset, let me say that, in addition to the obvious subject of music loving, power is an underlying issue throughout: the power of music, of musical works, of music scholarship, and of music scholars. I would like to thank *Music Theory Online* for undertaking the publication of the paper.]

[2] Lately I’ve been struck by the realization that we music scholars frequently have an inclination to legislate *against* work different from our own. From my perspective as theorist, I see that some theorists would like the writing of personal accounts of musical experience to go away. On another side, musicologists interested in hermeneutics will often take time at some point in their papers to complain that theory and analysis detach musical works from their contexts, or to call theory and analysis formalist or positivist. (I feel a kinship with hermeneuticists so I find this painful.) And some musicologists write about what other musicologists should and shouldn’t do.

[3] What’s thought-provoking to me is the fact that people are not content to regulate only their own work; they also wish to regulate the work of others. It’s a bit like the Republican inclination to legislate sexual morality, and it makes me wonder what sense of danger is being responded to. There seems to be an underlying belief that the work the individual does and the work she or he wants to legislate against cannot coexist; only one or the other can survive. And there seems to be a fear that

merely presenting one's work to the scholarly community to read and judge cannot be depended on to ensure its survival.

[4] Let me give you an example. Gary Tomlinson and Lawrence Kramer engaged in a particularly acerbic exchange in *Current Musicology* a couple of years ago.⁽¹⁾ Focal to the exchange was a reading by Kramer of the Mozart Divertimento for String Trio, K. 563, that takes the piece as dramatizing the role of the performers' bodies.⁽²⁾ Kramer says, "The body thus represented is not a natural fact but a social figure: the performer's (and by proxy the composer's) body shuttling, with ambiguity and constraint, between labor and pleasure" (13). The reading is a demonstration of the change that could arise in discourse with the emergence of a postmodernist "critical musicology."

[5] Tomlinson questions Kramer's fidelity to postmodern tenets and Kramer responds in kind. More interesting to me is Tomlinson's questioning of the enterprise of close reading. Here is an outline of his ideas:

First, we might seek alternatives to the internalism and formalism that have dominated musicology. This is ostensibly Kramer's primary goal. But his insistence on close reading of the notes and his locating of context in them undoes his good intentions. I would go farther than Kramer here and suggest that we need to move away from the whole constraining notion that close reading of works of music, of whatever sort, is the *sine qua non* of musicological practice. This notion has repeatedly pulled us back toward the aestheticism and transcendentalism of earlier ideologies. (21–22)

[6] The Tomlinson-Kramer exchange could be viewed as nothing more than an academic power struggle, and I think it's largely been read and dismissed as just that. But Tomlinson's fervor is inexplicable in terms only of academic politics—Kramer seems to be getting to him somehow.⁽³⁾ There's something more at stake, and I'd like to know what it is, especially since I can sympathize with the Kramer who wrote about the Divertimento. Kramer's account describes his personal experiences, and personal experiences always seem to have a love of some music as their source. Complaints about them sometimes seem to have a moralistic tone—Tomlinson's does. Kramer recognizes this possibility in his original paper when he says that "the last thing a postmodernist musicology wants to be is a neo-Puritanism that offers to show its love for music by ceasing to enjoy it" (9).

[7] Though presumably we all came to our present positions through a strong attraction to music and to specific pieces, most theorists and musicologists, whether old or new, are not comfortable with "music loving." Or perhaps I should say I think that no one is comfortable with "loving." We do not call ourselves music lovers; we call amateurs music-lovers. My title was difficult to settle on because I kept finding it embarrassing.

[8] I'm going to explore the obscuring and revealing of personal relationships with music with the assistance of several writers who follow what might be termed "new" paths in musicology.

[9] I'll begin with Fred Maus, who addresses the obscuring of involvement in his paper on gender.⁽⁴⁾ He points out that

Neither [mainstream musicology nor mainstream theory] has been primarily concerned with sensitive accounts of musical experience, but they have avoided the issue in different ways. Mainstream musicology has put out a fact-oriented discourse that obviously has no bearing on the details of musical experience, and therefore doesn't tend to deny or distort such experience. It's as though musicology has relied upon a strict distinction between public discourse and a realm that is more private and intimate. In contrast, the discourse of mainstream theory, when it is unevocative, does not seem to be protecting the privacy of listeners. It seems more like a *substitute* for sensitive, evocative description, an *Ersatz* even; something that responds, publicly but speciously, to the desire for a shared articulation of musical experience. (276)

[10] Tomlinson notices substantially the same two means of evasion; he observes that "[t]hose who sought to put the study of music on a scholarly footing were left with two options [I don't know why he thinks only two options, but they are]: positivistic description of historical data around the music and analytic description of the workings of the notes themselves. In the first option the experience itself of music was separated off entirely from the scholarly endeavor, while in the second it was transformed, its quasi-religious transcendence sublimated in technical accounts of musical process" (18–19).

[11] In both Maus and Tomlinson, turning away from “experience” is the crux of the issue, accomplished by creating a “distinction” or a “separation” in the case of musicology or by creating a “substitute” or a “transformation” in the case of theory.⁽⁵⁾ Particularly interesting is Tomlinson’s choice of the psychoanalytic term “sublimation” to specify the “transformation.” It suggests the rerouting of primitive and powerful energies into rational, culturally sanctioned enterprises; the individual and subjective disappears into the collective and putatively objective.

[12] Maus’s account suggests that it is the power of the piece and involvement with a powerful piece that is troubling. He speculates that, in an effort to understand or, more important, control the entities experienced as powerful, scholars may attempt to contain works within theories or historical data. So the avid child becomes the coolly detached scholar.

[13] I’d like to look a little further into the power pieces have, by way of the means we use to detach ourselves from them, or to present ourselves as detached. It is common in music scholarship to speak of pieces as if they were artifacts, entities having material form, which we can study and discuss separate from ourselves. Scholarly rhetoric creates a fiction whereby one speaks purely about a piece, out there, lying on a desk perhaps, unperceived by anyone. As if one really could stand at a distance from it.

[14] This is an illusion: sounds do not become music until they have entered a person, until they have been heard or imagined and attended to. Music exists only in the interaction between sound and the body-and-mind of an individual. There is paper and ink and there is sound separate from individuals; there is not music.

[15] The interaction between a piece and an individual is crucial and unavoidable. It is also ineluctably subjective, though subjectivity is always mediated by culture (or rather cultures: western culture, academic culture at least). It is also shaped by the piece: if I care about some music, I must speak about *it*, I can’t say just anything. In fact, Kramer proposes that music first “addresses a determinate type of subject and in so doing beckons that subject, summons it up to listen. . . . Listeners agree to personify a musical subject by responding empathetically to the music’s summons. Their pleasure in listening thereby becomes a vehicle of acculturation.”⁽⁶⁾ For Kramer, particular musics create their appreciators; his ideas evoke those of Edward T. Cone, and both suggest human listeners who modify themselves, even if only temporarily, to suit the musical work.⁽⁷⁾

[16] The fiction of the freestanding piece effaces disturbing realizations like these. We sometimes acknowledge that pieces change for us over time. Because musical works come into being as music only after they have entered us, to say that a work has changed is to say that I have changed. This no doubt could be disturbing to my sense of autonomy.

[17] Belief in the freestanding piece also hides the even more basic and visceral realization that, if one is open to it, music has the power strongly to control or fill up one’s consciousness and, in the process, to affect one’s physical state; it has the power to engage the whole individual, mind and body. Kramer introduces a lengthy examination of this power by saying “music acts like what psychoanalysis calls a transitional object, an object that, charged with charisma, temporarily crosses, blurs, and may even dissolve the listener’s ego boundaries.”⁽⁸⁾

[18] If ethnomusicologist Judith Becker is correct, the effect that I am speaking of is a variety of trance, probably resulting from synchronization (what is known as “entrainment”) of physical/mental rhythms with some rhythm or rhythms external to the individual.⁽⁹⁾ Entrainment is a comprehensive brain state: “One can reasonably assume that human brains become entrained to the rhythms of music and that these entrained rhythms involve not only acoustic and sensory motor areas of the brain, but areas in many other cortical and sub-cortical areas. Memory, past history and emotions become a part of the rhythmically pulsating brain” (49). Becker associates the pleasure created by music listening with endorphin production.

[19] In other words, if a listener is open to it, musical sound may produce comprehensive, physiological changes in his or her brain. This may be pleasurable, but it’s also powerful and one may feel out of control, that is, in the control of the music.

[20] Experience of music’s power is definitive of music-loving. The powers I’ve described seem to me genuinely part of close involvement with music. I can understand intellectually how they might be so disturbing that one would want to deny them. However, I cannot say that these experiences feel dangerous to me, nor can I endorse denying them.

[21] I think it's possible to put the issue of power in positive terms.⁽¹⁰⁾ Suzanne Cusick describes falling in love with a song on the radio when she was very young.⁽¹¹⁾ She proposes that “[f]or some of us, it might be that the most intense and important way we express or enact identity through the circulation of physical pleasure is in musical activity, and that our ‘sexual identity’ might be ‘musician’ more than it is ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ or ‘straight.’ Be that the case or not, one might expect a significant amount of bleed-through between a person’s musicality and a person’s sexuality as conventionally defined. . . . If music isn’t sexuality, for most of us it is psychically right next door” (70–71). She defines sexuality as “a way of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure shared, accepted, or given” (70) and more starkly, “[s]exuality . . . is a practice which allows movement within a field defined by power, intimacy and pleasure” (71). Pleasure includes acts and sites “beyond the usual ones” (73).⁽¹²⁾

[22] Let me for the moment look into the question of what one piece does to me in light of the ideas I’ve discussed, particularly those of Cusick.⁽¹³⁾ The piece is the Adagio of Mozart’s A-Major Piano Concerto, K. 488, though I’ll talk only about the first solo and following tutti, measures 1–20.⁽¹⁴⁾ I’ve tried to articulate pleasures, simple pleasures, I take in the work. My view of the solo results largely from playing the passage: I know it through touch as well as sound—I know how it moves from moving it.⁽¹⁵⁾

[23] I chose the Mozart because I find it particularly moving and poignant. I know that I’m not alone, that there are others who are strongly drawn to this piece.⁽¹⁶⁾ What I want to understand is why we are so entranced; what makes each moment seem so special? What gives it this power to attract?

[24] I have come to realize that each moment is individually shaped, each has its special features, its graces. Over a fairly easily discerned voice-leading frame is laid a passage in which we hear very little repetition of figuration or rhythm—in which almost everything is lovingly detailed, lovingly reworked. And these particularities keep one listening closely, moment by moment.

[25] Characteristic of the passage is delay in various forms. The passage makes listeners wait for what they desire. Many of the delays can be understood as holding, suspended, on a note become dissonant or leaning on a dissonance, so that the rhythmic effect is, for example, one of delicately delaying measure 2’s second B a moment, of anticipating measure 3’s right-hand F \sharp very slightly, and of reaching measure 8’s B only on the downbeat of measure 9, where it lingers.

[26] For the pianist there is a feel of small stretches, often across sixths, that contrast with closer work. At the opening, after the small movement of the neighbor, attention moves back and forth between the thumb and the little finger. In measure 2 we hear not A–G \sharp but A dipping to B rising again to G \sharp . As F \sharp in the left hand stretches way down to E \sharp , B waits, and E \sharp rises again. This hand counterpoint feels like dancing the piece into sound.⁽¹⁷⁾ Throughout the passage the movement from one voice-leading location to another remains unpredictable, the rhythms remain irregular, and this entices the listener or performer to follow, paying close attention to each movement of the line.

[27] Though the right hand’s line narrows with the loss of the upper voice-leading line in measures 5–6, it stretches again in measure 7, overreaching the G \sharp that is its goal to lean from an appoggiatura A, and continues to lean in the descending steps. Despite the quickening of the sixteenth, the right hand doesn’t rush forward, because the two-note groupings hold attention in each careful movement.

[28] The piano, in its grace and unpredictability, seems made up just for each listener and we respond to its attention. We sense an intimacy with its plaintive speech. The pianist cares for it by bringing it into being, lavishes attention on each minute figure. This is its delicate, entrancing power.

[29] As the piano comes to rest, the orchestra enters. Much as we loved the piano, traced every line, longed for each resolution, took pleasure in every moment, not wishing it over, the orchestral entry feels warm, welcomed. We want it and we want it to go on. Why?

[30] The immediate reason, I think, is the music’s new breadth, a surrounding space in which listeners move more freely. The sustained sound of the strings and winds create a fullness of sonority. The gentle tune dips and rises regularly. The

woodwinds float above the violins. One can spread one's attention across two-measure spans, expanses by contrast with the piano.

[31] As the phrase begins to repeat in measure 16, the orchestra's music becomes less purely broad-stroked and warm. When the piano returns, we are pleased.

[32] My colleague Roland Jordan has spoken more eloquently about the piece:

The most important realization was that the music needed me, needs us. Its reluctance to move forward, the blockages, delays, displacements, and evasions felt even in the first measures asks for our attention even to minute details because the music exists on the most intimate level of implication and nuance. . . . The difficulty of its unfolding, the evasive, rejected move toward A major, the diversionary turn to the Neapolitan, the shifting pitches in measure eight are not deceptions, they create a sense of reticence, of an essential reservedness that draws us to the music, asking us to become part of its coming-into-being. But this is only half the story. When the orchestra enters . . . the music takes control. We have attended, taken care of the music so far but as the cadence is achieved the music begins to take care of us, it allows us to breathe. I realize why my language was sexual. . . . In the interchange with this music I freely offer what I might give and feel free to receive what the music offers—and I know why I love the music. ⁽¹⁸⁾

[33] What is the point of these observations?

[34] My purpose may seem solipsistic. I wrote to recount how the music seems to me, first to make myself more sensitive to it, then to put it in circulation for others. It might stimulate thought about such things as the effect of the solo/orchestra contrast: the welcomeness of the orchestra and again the welcomeness of the solo. I wanted to understand the extreme sense of intimacy one can feel for a musical work—an intimacy akin to that one feels for a lover—as well as some of the powers of music, powers of attraction, engagement, the power to care for the listener. I wanted to understand my role as the pianist bringing the sounds into being, the pleasure I take in being completely focused to play each note and figure. Analysis is for me the articulation of a process of growing awareness, increasing closeness, of “immersion in pleasure” (29), to quote Cusick—or so I prefer it to be.

[35] Perhaps the most important place in which I put such ideas into circulation is in teaching. Cusick's description of teaching as “the lover” is to the point: “I ask my students to open themselves to the music they hear, to let music ‘do it’ to them, to become more intensely aware (physically, emotionally, intellectually) of what's being done to them. I teach them to ask of the music, later, how it achieved that effect. . . . These interrogations are designed, in effect, to increase the actual intimacy of my students' subsequent encounters with that music, or with any music, by increasing their knowledge of who it is, so to speak, who's been ‘on top,’ and by increasing their skill, through practice, in the art of being music's beloved” (74).

[36] Why might someone want to forestall “close reading”? I can think of two possible reasons, given what I've said.

[37] First, to return to Tomlinson: he thinks that we need to examine our musical commitments and how they might foreclose other commitments, and he is right. But theory and musicology have only just begun to talk openly about the experiences and subjectivity of our personal involvement with music. There seems to be a big rush to bypass this step in order to problematize and perhaps discard it. I'm suspicious. I am reminded of the observation of some feminists that, just when women and minority peoples have become visible as subjects, individual subjectivity is being questioned. Similarly, just when musical subjectivity is beginning to be discussed openly, that is, when culturally disempowered modes of relation with musical works are beginning to be discussed, the central role of culture in constructing musical subjectivity has been noticed and we are exhorted not to look at the individual and her relation to particular music, but instead to look at the cultural and historical context. That's fine, it's important work, but why does the cultural pre-empt the personal? Why does this admonition come just now?

[38] Second, perhaps when, as Tomlinson says, “we dredge up our usual impassioned musical involvements from the hidden realm of untouchable premise,” in order to make them “a . . . force to be reckoned with, challenged, rejected, indulged in,

whatever,” we find ourselves facing our most private selves. Maybe it feels like public exposure of embarrassing secrets. After an earlier paper on some of these issues, someone told me that he thought the personal issues were important, too, but that he just doesn’t talk about them in public. Maybe it makes us queasy. Maybe the queasiness results in part from a sense of embarrassment or shame at music’s power “over” us. I’ve tried to suggest, as Suzanne Cusick does, that power can be positive as well as negative.

[39] If I’m interested in musical power, I’m also interested in relations of power in academic discourse. I’m disturbed when individuals speaking from positions of power begin to say not only do this but also do not do that. As I said when I began, such efforts to forbid occur across the entire spectrum of music scholarship. I’m not naive—I know that we compete for journal space, conference time, students, jobs. But, when we’re inclined to silence speech, I think it’s time to examine our professional politics.

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Footnotes

1. Gary Tomlinson, “Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer,” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993), 18–24; Lawrence Kramer, “Music Criticism and the Postmodern Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson,” 25–35; response by Tomlinson, 36–40.

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2. “The Musicology of the Future,” *repercussions* 1 (1992), 1–18; the analysis is found on pp. 11–17.

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3. The fervor I mean is not evident in the quote, but is evident in the paper and response.

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4. “Masculine Discourse in Music Theory,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31 (1993), 264–293.

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5. Another description of professional discourse about music can be found in Benjamin Boretz, “The Logic of What?” *Journal of Music Theory* 33 (1989), 107–116; his concern is music-theoretical discourse and he distinguishes “institutionalizers” from “contextualizers.” While I am mentioning Boretz, his “Some things I’ve been noticing, some things I’ve been doing, some things I’m going to need to think some more about,” is an extremely provocative consideration of issues of power related to music and music scholarship. It appears in *Perspectives of New Music* 30 (1992), 262–270.

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6. *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), pp. 21–22.

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7. See Cone, *The Composer’s Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974).

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8. *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, p. 55. At this point Kramer cites his *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 91–99; and, on transitional objects, D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York, 1971), pp. 1–26.

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9. *Leonardo Music Journal* 4 (1994), 41–51. In *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* Kramer cites Oliver Sacks’s work with Parkinsonian patients (*Awakenings* [1973; reprinted, New York, 1990]) in a manner that suggests connections with Becker, specifically the use of music to bring patients back to themselves both physically and psychically. The music that could accomplish this had to have “rhythmic impetus” and this impetus had to be present “in a formal pattern the listener can grasp unreflectively”. Later Kramer says that “[o]nly the music that listeners identify closely with their own lives . . . can do this” (20).

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10. The following material is extracted from a presentation I made at “Anything Goes: Music and Sexuality”, Music Department, University of California at Berkeley (October, 1993).

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11. “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight,” in *Queering the Pitch*, ed. Philip Brett, Gary C. Thomas and Elizabeth Wood (New York & London, 1993), pp. 67–83.

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12. Also influential to my thinking on these issues is Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA, 1984), pp. 53–59.

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13. I am making a leap here from the question of music loving and its relation to professional discourse generally to analysis of a piece that starkly exposes the fact that we have love relationships with specific music.

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14. I have also written about the opening solo of the Adagio in “Taking Notice: A Response to Kendall Walton,” *Journal of Musicology* 11 (1993), 45–51. Walton analyzes the solo in “Listening with Imagination: Is Music Representational?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994), 47–61.

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15. My account of the solo derives in part from remarks of Sona Haydon made while coaching me in October 1993. Daniel A. Putnam proposes touch as an alternative to the visual model of knowledge for music in “Music and the Metaphor of Touch,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985), 59–66. He points out as well that “[t]wo lovers who are sensitive to each other can learn something about each other’s disposition [’]his or her inner state relative to the person or object being encountered[’] simply by touching” (60). I am grateful to Fred Everett Maus for bringing this article to my attention.

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16. For example, at the mention of the piece during a conversation, Laura Sherman spontaneously began talking about her sense of intimacy with the piece. (Sherman is a harpist and a graduate student in music theory at The University of Michigan.)

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17. This idea was suggested to me by Bell Yung’s study of what he called the choreography of Chinese ch’in music in “Choreographic and Kinesthetic Elements in Performance on the Chinese Seven-String Zither,” *Ethnomusicology* (1984), 505–517.

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18. “How does the tune go?” Society for Music Theory, Cincinnati, 1991, p. 8–9.

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