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EXPLAINING MUSIC, by Leonard B. Meyer
University of California Press, 1973 (£3.50 or \$10.00)

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Explaining Music is Leonard B. Meyer's latest offering in his self-admittedly personal quest for a productive and rewarding analytical/critical method. The author's purpose in developing such a method is, in the words of the publicity blurb, "to discover the secret of the singular — to explain how the patterns peculiar to a composition are comprehended by, and affect the listener". However, because "idiosyncratic relationships can be explained only in terms of general principles", and "because such principles, as formulated in existing music theory, often are inadequate for Mr. Meyer's purposes, he proposes new explanatory hypotheses from time to time". Consequently, the book is "theoretical as well as critical".

Explaining Music is divided into two parts which do not, however, correspond to the theoretical-critical distinction just mentioned. In the first, which is based on the Ernest Bloch lectures given at the University of California at Berkeley in 1971, Meyer principally considers what are probably the two most important inter-related constituents of tonality: conformant relationships (that is, relationships in which "one . . . identifiable, discrete musical event is related to another such event by similarity") and the hierarchic structures of which these relationships are such essential building blocks. In the second part, originally conceived as an independent book, the author considers an aspect of tonality clearly inherent in its hierarchic structure: namely, the way in which the important 'events' of a piece carry implications which are variously realised throughout its duration. Meyer elucidates this process by reference to different types of melodic structure. Finally, the two halves of the book are drawn together by a brief but perceptive discussion of the first 21 bars of Beethoven's *Les Adieux* Piano Sonata.

To put it in a nutshell, the criticism in this book is first-rate, but the theories — or, more correctly, the theoretical implications — are rather more questionable. On the one hand, Meyer is so steeped in the tonal tradition from which the individual analytical examples are taken, that his personal observations and insights will undoubtedly prove extremely valuable for other people wishing to examine pieces in that tradition. On the other, his inability to go beyond a certain restricted viewpoint has both unduly circumscribed the effectiveness of his explorations, and permitted the continuation of unquestioned and possibly unfounded assumptions about the function of music.

That his quest for a critical method has been partially circumscribed is admitted by Meyer in a somewhat roundabout way. Right at the beginning of the book (p. ix) he states that: "As I intend the term, criticism seeks to explain how the structure and process of a particular composition are related to the competent listener's comprehension of it." The nature of this comprehension is expounded on towards the end of the book (p.242): "A competent listener perceives and responds to music with his total being . . . Through such empathetic identification, music is quite literally *felt*, and it can be felt without the mediation of extramusical concepts or images. Such kinesthetic sensing of the ethos or character of a musical event is what the term *ethetic* refers to." It is precisely this ethetic relationship, which stands at the heart of musical apprehension, that is problematic for Meyer: "Ethetic relationships are unquestionably important . . . [but] are hard to analyse with rigor and precision . . . [There is an] absence of an adequate theory of ethetic change and transformation" (pp. 245-246). (Again: ". . . the analysis must end here . . . [because] the rigorous analysis of ethetic relationships is beyond my knowledge and skill" (p. 267).

The remedy, it would seem, is in Meyer's own hands. In his opening chapter, 'On the Nature and Limits of Critical Analysis', the author draws a basic distinction between critical analysis and style analysis. Whereas critical analysis is concerned with the singular and idiosyncratic, style analysis "is concerned with discovering and describing those attributes of a composition which are common to a group of works" (p. 7). Theory, moreover, "endeavours . . . to discover the principles governing the formation of the typical procedures and schemata described in style analysis" (pp. 7-8). To complete the relationship: "Critical analysis uses the laws formulated by music theory . . . in order to explain how and why the particular events within a specific composition are related to one another" (p. 9).

It could be assumed from this last statement that the principles and laws of music theory would be of crucial importance to the development of a critical method. But apparently this is not so. In being required to explain why the melodies of Palestrina, for example, display a certain structural feature, Meyer suggests (p. 8) one answer "with a general law of some sort". This law might be "the Gestalt law of completeness, which asserts that the human mind, searching for stable shapes, wants patterns to be as complete as possible". Beyond this, however, Meyer does not think it necessary to go. There is thus no need to enquire why the mind searches for stable shapes: ". . . I doubt that the explanation of musical practice needs to be pushed back this far. As a rule we are, I think, satisfied with the least inclusive law which will account for the events described."

But satisfaction is surely the thing Meyer does not attain. In one breath he tells us that "the rigorous analysis of ethetic relationships is beyond my knowledge and skill", and in another he strongly implies that the psychological processes — which he clearly sees as important to those ethetic relationships — do not themselves require that same 'rigorous analysis'.

It is possible to trace this conundrum to the central difficulty in understanding the functioning of music. Unlike words and pictures, the significance of music cannot, as Meyer has already said, be approached through "the mediation of extramusical concepts or images". If, indeed, music can be said to have 'meaning', then it is undoubtedly to be located within the internal structuring of the particular composition in question. And since music both originates and is efficacious within the minds of men, it can be assumed: a) that there must be a conformance between musical structures and the structure of the human mind, and consequently b) that this structure can be ultimately revealed through the analysis of any musical idiom. Both these assumptions are implicit in Meyer's thought: "In music, psychological constants such as the principles of pattern organisation, the syntax of particular styles, and typical schemata . . . constitute the *rules of the game* . . . For any given musical repertory, the 'rules' determine the kinds of pattern that can be employed in a composition" (p. 14). It follows, then, that music can be satisfactorily explained in terms of itself, and it is symptomatic that, in supporting his idea of the 'least inclusive law', Meyer incorporates Mario Bunge's view that "every system and every event can be accounted for . . . primarily in terms of its own levels and adjoining levels".¹

Since, on the surface, there would seem to be nothing inherently fallacious in this line of argument, Meyer looks elsewhere for the cause of his difficulties with ethetic relationships. He apparently concludes that the cause is to be found in the impossibility of distinguishing between psychological constants and the conventions of a particular musical idiom: "In theory, it is possible to distinguish between archetypal patterns and schemata. The former would be those patterns which arise as the result of physiological and psychological constants presumed innate in human behavior. The latter would be those norms which were the result of learning. But the distinction breaks down in practice. For most traditionally established norms have some basis in innate constants, and, on the other hand, patterns derived from innate constants become parts of tradition." "This being the case", concludes Meyer, "the terms will be used more or less interchangeably." (p. 214)

It is not to be disputed that psychological or physiological constants are incorporated in all forms of musical expression. But since, on Meyer's own admission, the constants are assimilated in, and become indistinguishable from the norms of specific musical idioms, would it not be more fruitful to seek for the basis of ethetic relationships in these different and *identifiable* norms? Here, however, the difficulty of musical 'meaning' again comes into play, because if it is assumed that musical significance is to be located in the structuring of particular norms, then it is not a very big step to further assume that this structuring is rooted in the extra-musical 'beliefs' and 'ideas' of the appropriate culture.

Although this difficulty cannot be discussed here, it is far from insoluble.² Moreover, in situating different musical 'meanings' in the particular cultural milieu of their creation, the solution not only solves Meyer's problem — by providing an explicit basis for under-

standing ethetic relationships — but puts the significance of his book in a clear perspective. For the book does not 'explain music'. It simply elucidates — with, it should be reiterated, considerable perception and lucidity — the fact but not the function of tonality. It accounts for the 'what' but not the 'why'. And since it is the norms, rather than the culture-specific significance of tonality that Meyer has so clearly set out, absolutely no conclusions can be inferred about any other kind of music.

NOTES:

¹ Mario Bunge, 'The Metaphysics, Epistemology and Methodology of Levels', in Whyte, Wilson and Wilson, eds., *Hierarchic Structures* (New York: Elsevier, 1969), p. 24.

² cf. Shepherd, Virden, Vulliamy and Wishart, *Whose Music? A Sociology of Musical Languages* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, forthcoming), Chs. I-III.