

Book Reviews

THE DIALECTICS OF MUSIC: ADORNO, BENJAMIN, AND DELEUZE. By Joseph Weiss. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021. 184 pp.

In *The Dialectics of Music*, Joseph Weiss, a lecturer in the department of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State University, USA, offers three excursions on music and meaning in the postmodern present. In a series of loosely connected musings from a “constellation” of philosophical and musical sources—the main subjects being Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Gilles Deleuze, and genres ranging from blues to experimental—Weiss presents a purposely fractured discourse centered on the heavy topic of “music after Auschwitz” (the title of the third excursion). That the book is more an assemblage of ruminations than a systematic treatise, and that it at times offers more questions than answers, seems appropriate given the “gravitational center, around which the concepts, that is, the moving ‘stars,’ cluster” (viii). This does not always make for easy absorption. It is a meditative book meant to be meditated on; its short length and brief subsections invite both slow reading and rereading.

While the author’s abstract approach is not for everyone, the insights provided are, as a whole, thought-provoking and well worth the effort. Weiss’s book joins a multidisciplinary field of “after Auschwitz” studies, ranging from memory (LaCapra 1998), to theology (Rubinstein 1992), to morality (Haas 2014), to architecture (Rosenfeld 2011), to poetry (Gubar 2006), to interreligious dialogue (Ellis 1994), to life in Israel (Burg 2008), and more. Such studies do not deny that life persists largely unabated: human beings continue to engage in the full range of experience and expression, not always (and perhaps rarely) cognizant of the weight of history. Instead, these works ponder which feelings, beliefs, and activities are *appropriate* in the post-Holocaust world.

Weiss focuses on “advanced music” that genuinely reflects, struggles with, and reconciles the realities of our time: “The objective compulsion of a music that would live up to both the victim’s torment and her corresponding dream—that no one, under any circumstances, shall be subjected to torture again—might, therefore, be described as the task of becoming a dialectical composer” (124). He locates this lofty criterion in just a few composers, most notably Michael Gordon, whose work music critic Alex Ross (1993) describes as “the fury of punk rock, the nervous brilliance of free jazz and the intransigence of classical modernism.”

Mention is also made of composers John Adams and Steve Reich, who show that musicians can “play the pulse, ride the wave of the looping, piano echo, instead of the individuated notes or differentiated ‘points’ of sound” (88)—an act that rescues noise, challenges idyllic soundscapes, and points the way to “real transformation” (15). Somewhat counterintuitively, Weiss argues that by exploring, creating, and embracing electronic and electroacoustic sounds, we can reconnect to “the smallest and the largest, the fractal refrain between the microcosm and macrocosm” (36) and, in so doing, reincorporate the natural world, which the “pure tones” of Western classical music often shield us from. He reminds us: “Every development is a preservation of memory, each interval a resistance to the destruction of experience” (107). Music after Auschwitz—the music of *today*—must therefore wrestle with the duality of suffering and hope, raw and refined, turmoil and resolve, ugliness and beauty.

We cannot, according to Weiss, return in good conscience to some long lost, never experienced, artificial innocence, as we might find in the “lulling” sounds of Brahms’s lullabies, where “Each pluck is a little kiss on the forehead” (5). Rather, the “territorializing” of the lullaby—described by Weiss (after Adorno) as “marking out a terrain via sound, so that the fright of impending departure, of the dark, fairytale night, can be borne in solace” (1)—must be replaced with the sounds of reality, just as

the safety of the cradle invariably gives way to the disfunctions, disorders, and disappointments of *real life*. Weiss opines:

One need only think of the drone hum of highways in the distance or the white flashing of radio tower lights that, uniform like the time signature of late capitalism, tick their silent tock before mountainous horizons...[T]oday, after Auschwitz, this hum, which accompanies every child as they fall asleep on automobile and high-speed rail travel to faraway lands, echoes the horror and unrest of airplane bombardment, not the tender caress and rhythm of horse-drawn carriage, which was, to be sure, the basis of the music from Brahms's era. Will this drone, and this static, electrical surge, be rescued one day as their acoustic similarity to the calm, undulating ocean is finally, in peace, recognized? (9-10).

As denizens of a "universal diaspora" (xiii), where paradise and innocence are forever lost, if they ever existed at all, "advanced music" should, in Weiss's view, take its lead from the sorrow songs of bluesmen and blueswomen, whose unpolished, note-bending aesthetic voices the "hopeless clinging to hope" (55). Our messy age of technology, displacement, and hyper-capitalism—an age that is simultaneously post-genocide, witness to genocide, and always anticipating genocide—finds its musical analog in a dignified dissonance that accepts dialectical tensions between noise and sound, the wanted and the unwanted. As Weiss paraphrases Adorno, "Dissonance is the truth of harmony" (27).

Works Cited

- Burg, Avraham. *The Holocaust is Over; We Must Rise from Its Ashes*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Ellis, Marc H. *Ending Auschwitz: The Future of Jewish and Christian Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994.
- Gubar, Susan. *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Haas, Peter J. *Morality After Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Rosenfeld, Gavriel David. *Building After Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Ross, Alex. "Review/Music; When All Is Synthesis, There Are No Categories." *The New York Times*, Jan 23, 1993.
- Rubenstein, Richard. *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

JONATHAN L. FRIEDMANN
Academy for Jewish Religion California, USA

MUSIC AND MENTAL IMAGERY. By Mats B. Küssner, Liila Taruffi, & Georgia A. Floridou (Eds.). UK: Routledge, 2023. 293 pp.

Mental imagery, or the representation of sensory information without a direct external stimulus, is among the universal phenomena associated with music. Not only can we "hear" music without corresponding external sounds, but we can mentally create simple or even complex music in our heads, sometimes in varied timbres and orchestrations. Music can also conjure abstract or concrete images, distinct memories or unfolding narratives, a sense of movement or gestures, and signal other senses, such as smells or tactile textures. *Music and Mental Imagery*, edited by Mats B. Küssner, Liila Taruffi, and Georgia A. Floridou, offers a comprehensive anthology of current research into this ubiquitous occurrence. A project of the Society for Education, Music, and Psychology Research