

The Work of Jerrold Levinson

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When thinking about Anglophone musical aesthetics or philosophy of music (which we will not try to distinguish between here), the work of three philosophers – Malcolm Budd, Jerrold Levinson, and the late Roger Scruton – stands out if you look at the period from the 1960s onwards. This is not so much because of the musical knowledge of this triumvirate; though such knowledge is of course necessary even if not sufficient to philosophise about music. Instead, this trio is distinguished by the *philosophical rigour* or acumen in their writings about music. What follows is an attempt to give the reader a very rough (though not comprehensive) sense of the work on music of Jerrold Levinson, whose 75th birth anniversary is being celebrated by this special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*.

It will be best to look at some issues that Levinson has written about. Musical ontology is one topic that comes to mind readily. Levinson has argued that musical works (be they songs or symphonies or something else) are abstract entities, types, that are common to their (more or less correct and complete) performances. They are not Platonist pure sound structures that exist eternally and are discovered; instead, they are created by composers and musicians in musico-historical and broadly cultural contexts, thus respecting the widely shared intuition that artists create artworks. These contexts of creation individuate or distinguish musical works from each other so that two works may sound exactly alike and yet be different works because one is bold and original, say, while the other created much later does not have these properties. Additionally, the instrumentation or performance means of musical works is also integral to their identity.

Let us turn next to the topic of musical expressiveness. Here, Levinson has argued that when we hear passages and pieces of music as expressive of affective states (as sad, happy, tranquil, anguished, hopeful, etc.), this involves imagining an indefinite agent in the music, a musical persona, expressing itself through the music, its gestures, its development, and so on. The persona need not be imagined in very highly foregrounded ways.

Musical understanding is another subject that Levinson has written about. The traditional view, architectonicism, about understanding works of Western classical music (symphonies, sonatas, and such) is that one needs to bear in mind the overall large-scale form or structure of these works. As opposed to this, and inspired by the work of the 19th-century English psychologist Edmund Gurney, Levinson has argued that the ordinary listener's apprehension of such works is not so intellectualised and is instead more moment-to-moment, or concatenationist, consisting in following the work as it unfolds over time. Such musical understanding does not have to be very highly verbalisable, nor need it involve formal, musicological terms so long as one has the right skill of being able to follow the music.

It is surprising that no philosopher before Levinson tried to define music, for trying to elucidate the nature or concept of music as an answer to the question "What is music" is arguably the first philosophical issue about music one should seek to address; just as the question "What is art?" is perhaps the most basic question in philosophical aesthetics. Levinson attempted to fill the gap by being the first to try to define music, across boundaries and barriers of time, place, culture, style,

genre, tradition, and so on. Of course, one should engage critically with all of Levinson's output and question it, including this definition (in particular, what it has to say about Muzak or elevator music); and Levinson's definition of music has been questioned by those who came later and have sometimes offered their own definition instead. As Levinson would agree, philosophy, after all, questions everything, including the very nature, conceptions, aims, methods, etcetera of philosophy itself!

Space does not allow discussion of other topics within musical aesthetics that Levinson has written about, in addition to the issues mentioned briefly above. Among many others, these include jazz; song; musical evaluation; musical performance; critical interpretation; performative interpretation; truth in music; music and negative emotion; hope in music; musical profundity; authenticity in music; film music; musical chills; musical literacy; and so on. On these issues, and others besides, Levinson's work has been widely influential and has been discussed by philosophers in many different countries across the world.

Some of the features that set Levinson's work on music apart from many other philosophers of music, including some contemporary writers, are these. Levinson always has a broader sense of musical culture, music's history, music's instrumentation, and its practices. He is also keenly aware of related issues in philosophical aesthetics, which some authors neglect; for philosophy of music is a branch of philosophical aesthetics and so overlaps a lot with philosophical issues pertaining to the other arts. Levinson's work has philosophical rigour, as mentioned earlier, and he has a deep knowledge of music.

Let us celebrate Jerrold Levinson, then, and wish him a happy 75th birthday, with many more to come!

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