

## The Problem of Reference in Musical Quotation: A Phenomenological Approach

A musical quotation is a deliberate evocation within a composition of a different musical work.<sup>1</sup> It can be distinguished from both coincidental similarities between works and plagiarism on the basis of intention: The composer does not mean for the audience to hear the quoted passage as his or her own unproblematically. In this paper, I discuss the problem of reference in musical quotation as formulated by Nelson Goodman<sup>2</sup> and later discussed by Vernon Howard.<sup>3</sup> Briefly put, this problem has to do with whether a quoted passage can be aurally marked as different from a passage that is merely *contained* by another without being quoted. I propose a solution based on the listener's experience of musical quotation and inspired by Howard's suggestion that loose analogues of language and other symbol systems may enliven music's capacity to add nuance to what exists primarily as an auditory experience.<sup>4</sup> In the final section of the paper, I suggest some ramifications if my account of musical quotation is correct.

### I. THE PROBLEM

According to Goodman, there would seem to be two necessary conditions for direct or indirect quotation: containment and reference. The quotation must contain a syntactic replica of the quoted expression (in the case of direct quotation), or its semantic equivalent (indirect quotation). The quotation must also refer to or denote what is quoted, either by naming it or by predication. In written language, quotation marks set off a group of words as a direct quotation. Sound cues such as pauses and expressions such as

"in exactly those words" can indicate direct quotation in speech. Indirect quotation is indicated (in spoken or written language) by the word "that" and other expressions.

Music (at least, music in standard notation) has no problem meeting the first requirement for quotation—that of containment. Two performances of the same score count as replicas of one another, so there is no difficulty with one musical event containing another. Howard has argued that the requirement of containment is fulfilled whenever the passage bears, if not the same, closely similar auditory properties to the original. It is well known that differences in timbre (whether, for example, a melody is played on a bassoon or sung by a soprano) and transposition into other keys do not significantly affect recognizability.<sup>5</sup> Psychological research has shown that, provided certain pitch intervals and relative durations remain constant, simple melodies can be identified despite (limited) changes in mode, harmony, and tempo.<sup>6</sup> Howard is surely right to argue that quotation in music seems not to enjoin the strict criterion of syntactic replication required for direct quotation in language.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the distinction between direct and indirect quotation in music collapses in view of the absence of a developed semantic structure in music, such that an indeterminate range of replicas can function as direct quote contents. A musical paraphrase is, then, not one that conveys the same meaning as the original (as does a paraphrase in language) but a recurrent, deviant theme.<sup>8</sup>

The second requirement for quotation, that of reference, poses difficulties for music. What is the auditory equivalent of quotation

marks? There is no system of reference in performed music; that is, there seems to be no way to mark the difference between a musical event that merely *contains* another and one that also *refers* to another. Goodman suggests that standardized clues such as context, emphasis, and pause might constitute an auditory device for reference in music.<sup>9</sup> Howard entertains and rejects the possibility that familiarity might be a criterion for reference: “A quoted theme sounds conspicuously familiar *against* its secondary background, served up, as it were, for special display.”<sup>10</sup> While familiarity of the quoted melody is indeed often a symptom of musical denotation, it cannot be a criterion. A quoted passage does not cease to be quotational if some listeners are unfamiliar with it.

Howard likewise rejects the possibility that musical quotation might be assimilated to onomatopoeia. A musical quotation, like an onomatopoeic sound, is familiar, and similar to another sound (in this case, another musical event). It might be argued that similarity and familiarity combine to engender reference in secondary contexts. However, rather than it being the case that similarity and familiarity breed reference, the referential use of sound breeds similarity and familiarity.<sup>11</sup>

Before suggesting my own solution to the problem of reference in musical quotation, it will be helpful to examine the listener’s experience of this phenomenon, paying close attention to some of the factors discussed above: the presence of auditory clues, familiarity of quoted passages, and the larger compositional context in which they are found.

## II. ONE LISTENER’S EXPERIENCE

I have chosen Alfred Schnittke’s String Quartet No. 3 (1983) as an example, because it is particularly rich in musical quotation and allusion. I first heard this work performed in concert by the Tokyo String Quartet<sup>12</sup> and have since listened to a recording by The Tale Quartet.<sup>13</sup> Before I had heard the music, the concert program notes

alerted me to Schnittke’s use of musical quotation:

At the outset we hear a passage from the music of the Flemish composer Orlando di Lassus, who died 400 years ago. Then Schnittke quotes the theme of Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge*, followed, and usually coupled with, the notes D, E flat, C, B. In their German pitch designations, these make up the four-note pattern DSCH with which Schnittke’s friend and former Soviet colleague Dmitri SHostakovich used to “sign” his music.<sup>14</sup>

Information we have about a work of art can affect our perception of it; expectations, legitimate or not, shape our patterns of attention and response. Alerted by the program notes, I tried to listen for the various quotations. The only one that stood out as obvious to me on first hearing was the initial fragment from Lassus. As the performance continued, the Lassus fragment recurred, sometimes as I had first heard it, sometimes variously developed. Each time I heard it, the Lassus fragment seemed a contrast to the music that preceded and followed it.

My appreciation and understanding of the music grew with subsequent listening at home. I listened to Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* until I was able to recognize its theme in Schnittke’s quartet without difficulty. I became increasingly familiar with the D–E–flat–C–B “signature” of Schostakovich in the quartet. I came to be more aware of the way in which Schnittke developed the opening statements; he “played” with them until they sounded twisted and distorted, but recognizable. Each time the Lassus fragment reemerged undeveloped, it seemed familiar and calming, even elegiac.

We saw above that Howard rejects familiarity as a possible criterion of musical quotation, but maintains that it can be a symptom of the phenomenon. It is interesting to note that the Lassus fragment stood out as a likely quotation for me despite my unfamiliarity with the particular passage quoted (from Lassus’s setting of the *Stabat Mater*). In spite of my ignorance, I was able to recognize the Lassus fragment because of contextual clues: the contrast it presented “against” the rest of the composition. I had come to

the concert with a basic understanding of Lassus's place in the history of music, general ideas about his style, and some familiarity with twentieth-century chamber music, including other works by Schnittke. I had certain expectations (as it turned out, correct) of how music by both Lassus and Schnittke was likely to sound. These expectations enabled me to identify the Lassus fragment as secondary material that was quoted and then developed within the composition.

My (correct) general ideas of Beethoven's and Schostakovich's historical context and respective styles did not help me recognize the quotations of their work on first hearing. My initial unfamiliarity with the particular passages quoted prevented me from hearing them as quotations of others' work, rather than as unproblematically Schnittke's own. There did not seem to be a definite stylistic contrast between the quotations and Schnittke's subsequent development of them. My lack of discernment was likely due to the similarity between the quoted fragments and Schnittke's own idiom. The contrast between the secondary material and the composition was not as great as it had been with the quoted Lassus fragment.

Before drawing any conclusions based on my own experience of the Schnittke quartet, I should defend my methodology. Because I am interested in the phenomenon of musical quotation *as heard*, it makes sense to pay close attention to listeners' concrete experience. I do not (and cannot) claim that my experience of this composition conforms to everyone else's experiences of it, or that I am a "typical" listener. Yet I do not believe that my response was wildly idiosyncratic either. Coming to the concert with a basic background in the history of Western tonal music and familiarity with some twentieth-century developments, I likely knew more and was better prepared than some members of the audience, and certainly knew less than a great many others. While caution must be exercised in drawing general inferences about the phenomenon of musical quotation from one listener's experience of a single composition, one listener's experience seems a reasonable place to start.

What conclusions, if any, can we draw about the role of a listener's familiarity with the quoted musical material in the identification of that material as quoted? Certainly familiarity plays a role; my unfamiliarity with the *Grosse Fuge* prevented me from recognizing Schnittke's quotation of it. Yet familiarity with the quoted work need not be crucial; my lack of familiarity with Lassus's setting of the *Stabat Mater* did not prevent me from being able to identify it as secondary material within Schnittke's composition. The more crucial feature for allowing plausible identification of a quotation seems not to be familiarity with quoted works, but an awareness of the practice of musical quotation, as well as musical literacy more generally.

By "musical literacy" I understand, following Jerrold Levinson, the ability to hear a piece of music in an appropriate way. For example, a comprehending listener will hear a Bruckner symphony as tonal, symphonic, and romantic. She or he will experience the music as connected, rather than as discrete sounds in progression, and will apprehend the gestural and emotional content of the music. The relevant background knowledge necessary for musical literacy in a given tradition is similar to verbal literacy, but also differs from it. Musical literacy is largely tacit, acquired intuitively through listening to music, nondiscursive, and not necessarily expressible in propositional form.<sup>15</sup>

A listener with little or no background in Western classical music would not likely have been able to identify the secondary material in the Schnittke quartet as quoted. A more sophisticated and musically educated listener than myself may have been able to recognize the theme from the *Grosse Fuge* and the Schostakovich "signature" without being informed of their presence beforehand.

### III. A POSSIBLE SOLUTION (OR A REJECTION OF THE PROBLEM)

It might be helpful to rehearse Goodman's conception of the problem of reference in musical quotation: briefly put, there is no auditory equivalent to quotation marks. There

is no way of marking, in heard music, the difference between music that *contains* a secondary musical text, and music that both contains and *refers* to another musical text. Howard, while taking issue with some aspects of Goodman's analysis of musical quotation, similarly sees no way out of this dilemma. However, both Goodman and Howard overlook the fact that in spoken language, reference can be secured without formal devices such as quotation marks. It is here that we must seek an analogue for the phenomenon of musical quotation.

In everyday speech, we quote other speakers and various texts without explicitly indicating that we are quoting, or the source of our words. We do so with the expectation that others will realize that our words are not our own, if not recognize their source, relying on memory and a shared cultural context to achieve this. We quote people to them (sometimes "throwing their words back in their face"); we quote Shakespeare and the Bible; we quote bits of poetry and song lyrics; we quote catch phrases from films and television.

Speechwriters for the former United States presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush made effective use of not formally referenced quotations. Remember Reagan's taunt to his opponents: "Go ahead, make my day"? Reagan did not need to remind his listeners that he was quoting a line from Dirty Harry, a fictional character played by Clint Eastwood. He could expect that most of his audience would have sufficient familiarity with popular culture to catch the reference and get the joke. George Bush's line—"Read my lips, no new taxes"—likewise had its origin in a popular film. Again, Bush could expect his audience to know the source of the line and find humor in the incongruity of a president quoting a film script.

I do not mean to suggest that every speaker of a language will recognize any nonreferenced quotation, or even recognize the statistically most common ones. Some non-native English speakers, for example, might have a hard time recognizing quotations from Shakespeare. Those over a certain age might not be able to identify remarks

lifted from *The Simpsons* or quoted lyrics from gangsta rap. While a speaker, trusting in her or his listeners' memory and common cultural background, might often expect listeners to recognize a quoted phrase without prompting, the presence of a quotation might also be signaled explicitly. The quoted phrase might stand in contrast to the speaker's ordinary mode of discourse. It may be preceded by a hesitation or accompanied by changes in tone, accent, or gesture.

Nonreferenced quotations are used for a variety of purposes. They can add humor or irony to a conversation; they might provide a particularly elegant or effective way of conveying one's point. Nonreferenced quotations can also serve to mark the speaker and comprehending listeners as being "with it" or belonging to a particular subculture. Dropping references in this way—whether to the latest popular culture or to the Classics—can be exclusionary, leaving out those who do not have the relevant background knowledge. Yet the use of nonreferenced quotations is not permanently exclusionary; it can also be an invitation to noncomprehending listeners to discover the original context of the quoted phrase and join the group of those who do recognize it without further clues.

Just as the presence of nonreferenced quotations might exclude some from full participation in a conversation, not everyone present at a concert will recognize the quoted material in a given musical work, or even be aware that any material has been quoted. However, for a musical quotation to be aesthetically effective as quotation, it is crucial that the composer's intended audience recognize it. The answer to the question, Who is the composer's intended audience and what constitutes musical literacy? will vary with each composer and perhaps even with each composition. In the String Quartet No. 3, Schnittke's intended listeners include those who (among other things) recognize Schostakovich's musical "signature."

What about listeners who do not hear a reference to Schostakovich in the D-E-flat-C-B pattern and who are even not quite sure who Schostakovich was and why Schnittke would want to honor him in this

way? Are they not part of the intended audience? Does Schnittke not mean for his music to speak to as many people as possible? I think the answer is that no-one is excluded definitively; the understanding and appreciation of music admit of degrees, just as the understanding and appreciation of painting, literature, and other art forms do. Fully to appreciate a musical performance may require education, as to both musical background (attained through listening) and more general awareness of a composer's cultural and historical context. The presence of unfamiliar secondary musical material in a composition, whether discerned by a listener or indicated in program notes, can be an invitation to listeners to educate themselves, both about the composer in question and about music more generally.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

What are the implications if my argument is correct and the phenomenology of musical quotation is similar to that of nonreferenced quotation in language? There would seem to be ramifications in two areas: methodological considerations and relevance to aesthetic understanding more generally. I shall discuss each of these areas in turn.

The first methodological consideration I want to make is that in seeking to understand music through analogues with language, we must cast as wide a net as possible to examine how language users actually communicate. Specifically, different forms of discourse (including dramatic, rhetorical, and narrative), as well as speech acts, should be encompassed. Sometimes, what is assumed to be understood may be as important as what is explicitly stated.<sup>17</sup>

A second, more specific methodological point is that recognizing the presence of a quotation, especially if the exact source of the quoted material is unknown, would seem at least sometimes to involve recognizing stylistic differences between the primary composition and the quoted material. Therefore, investigations of the experience of listening to music, and perhaps of other aesthetic experiences as well, must take style seriously as an aesthetic issue: Which fea-

tures of the work in question can be considered "stylistic," and what role do these features and the identification of them play in the aesthetic experience? Goodman has done much to sort out the logical and ontological "status" of style and argues that "the discernment of style is an integral aspect of the understanding of works of art and the worlds they represent."<sup>18</sup> However, philosophers who have turned their attention to understanding music have yet to absorb completely the implications of Goodman's work in this area.<sup>19</sup>

My suggestion that the phenomenology of musical quotation can be illuminated with reference to nonreferenced quotation in language also has general bearing on the question of what constitutes aesthetic understanding. We saw above that Goodman suggests the possibility that standardized clues such as context, emphasis, and pause might constitute an auditory device for direct quotation in music or language. But all music (like all speech) is an "auditory device"; the idea that the presence of musical quotations might be signaled with standardized clues ignores the fact that it is already signaled in the music itself, and it overlooks the cultural and historical situatedness of musical compositions, composers, and listeners. Music is composed with certain expectations, and performances take place in a context. While expectations and context are not literally part of the performance, some attempt to understand them needs to be made if the music is to be fully appreciated.

In *Musical Meaning and Expression*, Stephen Davies usefully distinguishes between repeated themes that are importantly referential and those that are only incidentally referential or nonreferential. The first group includes explicit quotations, such as those in the Schnittke quartet I have been discussing. Examples of incidental reference include cases in which a theme is quoted as part of a theme and variations (such as Brahms's *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*), and "borrowed" themes (the scare quotes are Davies's). Nonreferential similarities between different works are usually accidental.<sup>20</sup> In cases of explicit reference, "an appreciation of the music is impossible or in-



hibited if the reference is missing.”<sup>21</sup> While I would include “theme and variations” among repeated themes that are importantly referential, Davies’s point that not all similar-sounding passages are quotations would seem to be valid. Yet, how does the listener distinguish an important reference from an incidental reference? I have tried to show that composers who employ musical quotations assume some level of musical literacy on the part of their audience, just as English speakers who pepper their conversation with references to Shakespeare or Auden assume some level of cultural literacy. While it is unlikely that a single answer could be given to encompass every case of musical reference, the problem of distinguishing among various types of reference underlines that full appreciation of a work of music entails that some attempt be made to understand the expectations with which the music was composed.

That such an attempt sometimes needs to be made brings us to the second point I would like to make with regard to aesthetic understanding: full appreciation of a musical work sometimes involves correct judgment of the composer’s intentions. Extreme care needs to be taken when discussing the possibility of discerning artistic intention through performance. Certain intentions would seem to be not discernable in principle from a performance of a score: for example, the wish that the composition first be performed on a certain date by a particular individual. Similarly, the inner life of the composer—the reasons why he or she decided to compose a particular work and why he or she decided to give it the character it has—would seem not to be recoverable from a performance. Those intentions that we can discern with reasonable probability from careful listening seem to be those conveyed by competent performances of the score: the melody, rhythm, and, to some extent, the gestural and emotional content of the music.

Despite these restrictions on the possibility of ascertaining the composer’s intentions, fully to appreciate a musical performance sometimes requires that the attempt be made to ascertain them. For the listener, it is significant that a quotation be heard as a deliberate evocation. A quoted phrase is

phenomenologically and aesthetically different both from one that coincidentally just happens to be the same as a phrase in another composition and from a deliberately plagiarized phrase.<sup>22</sup> For example, part of the pleasure in listening to Schnittke’s String Quartet No. 3 comes from recognizing the disparate sources he has brought together and admiring his ingenuity in making original music out of them. This pleasure might be diminished in some degree if we thought that Schnittke was trying to pass off as his own work something that we recognized to be by another composer. Moreover, if we thought that the presence of D–E-flat–C–B pattern in the work of Schnittke and Schostakovich was merely an odd coincidence, an important aspect of the work would simply be misunderstood.

Just as the listener must do some work to understand those of the composer’s intentions crucial for comprehension and appreciation of the music, the aesthetic effectiveness of a work depends in part on the composer’s ability to judge accurately the knowledge and expectations of the intended audience. A quotation that is not recognized as such is not aesthetically effective *as a quotation*, although it may be aesthetically effective in its own right. While the Lassus fragment Schnittke quotes is itself lovely, if it is not recognized as a quotation in Schnittke’s composition, then its presence there is a possible source of confusion and perhaps even an aesthetic demerit. Similarly, Schnittke’s use of the notes D–E-flat–C–B may be potent in its own right, but our appreciation of the quartet is diminished if Schnittke has misjudged his audience and we are unable to recognize his homage to Schostakovich in them.

A musical quotation, then, is an intentional re-use: one intended to be heard as a reference to other music, and that succeeds, minimally, in being so heard, at least by its intended audience. Quotational links between pieces of music can have many aims: homage, irony, comment, joke, technical challenge, and so on. In all of these cases, it is the composer’s intention that the quotation be “heard” in performance. In the absence of aural quotation marks, the composer has to

rely on recognition, which in turn requires, if not direct familiarity, then some degree of musical literacy. Thus, the practice of musical quotation inextricably intertwines us with two problematic issues: intention and identity claims about other music. This suggests that, however recalcitrant to philosophical analysis, these troublesome concepts are not to be avoided; philosophers of art who take an “austere” view will not be able to get very far with these and other problems.<sup>23</sup>

JEANETTE BICKNELL  
Department of Philosophy  
Lewis and Clark College  
Portland, Oregon 97219

INTERNET: bicknellj@hotmail.com

1. In this paper I shall limit myself to compositions in which the secondary musical material is by a different person from the composer of the primary work in question. Hence, medleys, overtures, etc. are outside the scope of the discussion.

2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Harvester Press, 1978); especially chap. 3, “Some Questions Concerning Quotation” (originally published in *Monist* 48 [1974]: 294–306).

3. V. A. Howard, “On Musical Quotation,” *Monist* 48 (1974): 307–318.

4. Howard, “On Musical Quotation,” p. 318.

5. It has been pointed out to me that changes in timbre and key do not affect the recognizability of all music in the same way. For example, timbre and pitch level are more important to the musical content of certain twentieth-century compositions than they are to most music of the classical and romantic periods.

6. For details of these experiments, see Benjamin W. White, “Recognition of Distorted Melodies,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 73 (1960): 100–107.

7. Howard, “On Musical Quotation,” p. 311.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 314–315.

9. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 52.

10. Howard, “On Musical Quotation,” p. 315, emphasis in original.

11. “... sounds dissimilar in many respects from their referents (e.g., ‘bow-wow’) are considered to be onomatopoeic, while many sound-replicas, like the successive toots of a whistle, are not onomatopoeic. So even if sounds in onomatopoeia were not so variable, neither similarity nor familiarity would explain the onomatopoeic labeling of one sound by another.” Howard, “On Musical Quotation,” pp. 316–317. See also his “On Representational Music,” *Nous* 6 (1972): 41–53.

12. Thursday, March 12, 1998, at the St. Lawrence Center for the Arts, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

13. Alfred Schnittke String Quartets Nos. 1–3 (BIS-CD-467).

14. Keith Horner, 1998.

15. Jerrold Levinson, “Musical Literacy,” in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 27–41.

16. At the presentation of an earlier version of this paper at a conference, similarities between this account of not explicitly referenced quotation and the work of H. P. Grice were brought to my attention.

17. Leo Treitler makes a similar point when he claims that “unexamined habits and assumptions and undefended dogmas” abound in the discourse on the subject of the correspondences between music and language. See his “Language and the Interpretation of Music,” in *Music and Meaning*, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 23–56.

18. See his “The Status of Style,” in *Ways of Worldmaking*.

19. The great exception is Leonard B. Meyer. See his *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). While the philosophers I have in mind may allude to or mention the importance of understanding style, there is little indication of what such an understanding might consist in or how it might be achieved. See, for example, Goran Hermeren, “Art and Life: Models for Understanding Music,” *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995): 280–292; Peter Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Cornell University Press, 1990); Jerrold Levinson, “Musical Literacy” (cited above) and “Truth in Music,” in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 279–305; Aaron Ridley, “Bleeding Chunks: Some Remarks About Musical Understanding,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 589–596; and Roger Scruton, “Musical Understanding and Musical Culture,” in *What is Music?: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*, ed. Philip Alperson (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 349–358. In *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Scruton makes the interesting suggestion that atonality is a style, in contrast to tonality, which is more like a language (p. 306). He criticizes those composers (including Schnittke) who treat tonality as only one style among many, claiming that “to treat tonality as a style is precisely to belie its reality as the ‘force of nature’ in music . . .” (p. 490).

20. Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 41–42.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 41 n.

22. Goodman is well known for making a similar point about forgeries of visual art, and my arguments parallel his.

23. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the American Society for Aesthetics Pacific Division Annual Meeting, Pacific Grove, California, March 31–April 2, 1999, and at the Canadian Philosophical Association Annual Meeting, Sherbrooke, Canada, June 3–7, 1999. I am grateful to audiences at both for comments and encouragement. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Evan Cameron, Ian Jarvie, and Jerrold Levinson for comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.