

Aaron Ridley

The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations.

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In this elegantly written and economical monograph Aaron Ridley argues that much recent philosophy of music shares a common and mistaken orientation, which he calls the ‘autonomaniac’ view. The basic mistake underlying this view is the assumption that music is essentially or ultimately sound structure. In effect, Ridley says, holders of the autonomaniac view treat music as though it were something from Mars rather than an aspect of lived human experience. Ridley’s goal in writing is to chip away at the intuitions that make the autonomaniac view even minimally plausible, and so to re-open the possibility of thinking responsibly about musical value. As Ridley himself puts it, he hopes to put aesthetics back into the philosophy of music. Ridley is perhaps ideally suited to criticize the autonomaniac view as he admits to having been in its grip himself in his earlier *Music, Value, and the Passions* (Cornell University Press 1995).

Ridley claims that no one is an autonomaniac ‘all the way down’ and allows that the view is not as ubiquitous or evenly distributed as he sometimes implies. The philosophers who come in for criticism most often will be familiar names (usual suspects?) to anyone with even a passing interest in recent philosophical aesthetics: Peter Kivy, Stephen Davies, Roger Scruton, and Jerrold Levinson. Equally familiar to readers with an interest in the philosophy of music are the backward glances to Eduard Hanslick and discussions of his influence. Most of the music discussed is classical or art music, and each chapter is structured around a single canonical work, reflecting Ridley’s position that one must set out from particular concrete works if one is to say anything of interest. The work of philosophers who concentrate on popular music and jazz — and who are much less likely to hold the views Ridley decries — is basically unexplored, a forgivable omission in a book of this length and focus.

The book is comprised of five chapters, on understanding, representation, expression, performance, and profundity. Throughout, Ridley’s arguments are based upon a distinction he explicates in the first chapter, between internal and external understanding. This distinction is in turn based upon remarks made by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*. Basically, ‘external’ understanding is understanding of paraphraseable content, and an ‘internal’ understanding is of non-paraphraseable content. In aesthetic contexts we are usually more interested in the latter, although both types of understanding are required. If I could not offer a paraphrase of a poem you would rightly doubt that I had understood it, even if we agree that the paraphraseable content is not what we are interested in when we read a poem as a poem. Ridley believes that there are parallels with music and that both

types of understanding are important here as well. We show external understanding of music when we offer verbal descriptions of works. If we insist that all musical understanding is internal (as is usually assumed on the autonomaniac view), then it is hard to understand things such as background-foreground relations in music and to make sense of the fact that in well-structured compositions some passages are more significant than others.

Ridley's chapter on expression is an especially valuable contribution to philosophical work on music, and one of the best in the book. In opposition to most of the philosophers who have written on the subject, Ridley focuses not on 'pure' music without a text but on song. Rather than seeing song as a hybrid of music and poetry (according to one influential model), Ridley insists that it is more fruitful to see songs as a kind of music that includes words. When a previously existing poem is set to music it is transformed — the melody breaks up the lines and emphasizes certain words — so that the song text is different from the original poem. Hence any talk of an appropriate or inappropriate 'match' between words and music must be rejected, as it presupposes that we are dealing with two separate things. Ridley instead argues that an appropriate song setting evinces an internal understanding of the poem by transforming it into this rather than that song text. While the text particularizes the expression of the music, it is also the case that the music particularizes the expressiveness of the text.

The chapter on performance is largely taken up with a discussion of musical ontology, and is similarly out of step with much current discussion. Ridley does not distinguish clearly between questions relating to the identity conditions for specific works (what makes this performance a performance of Beethoven's Fifth rather than of some other work?) and questions relating to the ontological status of music as such (what sort of a thing is Beethoven's Fifth, anyway?). Indeed (like some other participants in the discussion) he tends to collapse the latter kind of question into the former. Ridley's main reason for rejecting talk of musical ontology is that evaluative questions can be settled without reference to ontological issues. If we are 'doing aesthetics', that is, chiefly interested in 'our aesthetic experience of renditions of pieces of music' (114), then ontology is at best superfluous, and at worst irrelevant philosophizing. Ridley's traces the current interest in musical ontology to the influence of Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1976) and to the 'lure' of metaphysics by insecure aestheticians, admitting that the latter remark is ad hominem. The energy Ridley spends decrying ontological discussions of music strikes me as misplaced. The ontological status of artworks has been a topic of philosophical interest since at least Plato's *Republic* and is not likely to cease anytime soon. And it is puzzling for someone who is staunchly anti-essentialist about music to insist on what musical aesthetics essentially is or is not.

Ridley's writing is energetic, free of jargon, and accessible to non-specialists. I found his discussions of particular musical works to be illuminating, both of the philosophical issues at hand and of the works themselves. This

book (or sections of it) would work well in undergraduate classes on the philosophy of art or music.

Jeanette Bicknell
University of Ottawa