

Peter Kivy. *Sounding Off: Eleven Essays in the Philosophy of Music.* Oxford University Press 2012. 320 pp. \$62.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199697526).

Peter Kivy is the undisputed doyen of the sub-sub-discipline of Philosophy of Music, a special branch of Aesthetics that has been of interest at least since Plato, and which brilliantly exemplifies fundamental problems, not least in metaphysics (where is Bach's *B-minor Mass*?) and epistemology (can music convey a propositional truth?). Unlike many contemporary practitioners, who think that Philosophy must use recondite terminology and rejoice in apparent contradictions, Kivy writes with exemplary clarity about what look like simple problems, but he often gets to the very heart of fascinating things.

Sounding Off collects eleven papers, eight of them previously unpublished, divided into four sections, each on a different topic. He has had long-standing interests in all four: the notion of genius; the pursuit of authenticity; representation and meaning; and 'absolute music'. Like any good Philosopher of Art, Kivy not only refers to a wide range of examples, but also shows his deep affection for the art he discusses.

Let me begin with a fraught topic and an exemplary essay from Part III, 'Meaning and Representation' (Chapter 6, '*Messiah's* message'). Is Handel's *Messiah* anti-Semitic? Much heartfelt ink has been devoted to documenting putative anti-Semitic aspects of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, for instance, and the question has also been posed of Bach's Christian works. Kivy, himself Jewish, gives these claims a respectful reading. But in Chapter 6, he modestly aims 'by the application of some common sense, some ordinary logic, and some ordinary intuitions about meaning, to shed some light on the issue' (114). He distinguishes four types of anti-Semitism: racial, zealous, prejudiced, and slander anti-Semitism. The latter is 'epistemically blameworthy'; it consists in falsely attributing to Jews some odious attribute when this is known to be false, or *should have been known* to be false. Next, Kivy turns to Paul Grice for one of his 'ordinary intuitions about meaning', namely that to say something and mean it, one must not only intend one's words to have that meaning, but also must assume "that there is some chance..." that his utterance will be recognized as so intended' (119).

It has been charged that in the *Messiah*, the recitative, 'All they that see him laugh him to scorn' (#27, Watkins Shaw, 1966), portrays Jews as malicious, and gloating over the suffering of the innocent Jesus. This looks like 'slander anti-Semitism', but is it? Kivy thinks that Handel sincerely believes that he is portraying the truth, as reported in the Gospels. He takes the Gospel stories to be reliable eye-witness accounts of the crucifixion. So, he is not epistemically blameworthy. But later scholarship has shown that the Gospels were written at least a full life-time after the event, and were intended to exonerate the Romans and put the blame for Jesus' execution on the Jews. Thus we can say that Mel Gibson, who in his 2004 film *The Passion of Christ* 'portrays the Jews in much the same odious way' (121), *should have known better*, and thus is guilty of slander anti-Semitism. But Handel is not guilty.

Charges of anti-Semitism have even been raised against the 'Hallelujah' chorus, one of the glories of the *Messiah*. It is claimed that what the piece rejoices over is the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, as hinted at in the preceding number, 'Thou shalt break them in pieces like a potter's vessel' (#43). Can this have been Handel's message?

Here is what *I* think that the text of *Messiah* says: after Jesus is welcomed into heaven, the gospel of peace (#38) is preached into all lands (#39). It is then asked: if peace has been proclaimed, 'Why do the nations rage so furiously together?' to which the answer is that 'The kings of the earth rise up...against the Lord' (#40). It is those kings of the earth who are smitten in #43, and what the Hallelujah chorus (#44) celebrates is their replacement by the King of Heaven, who shall reign for ever and ever. The destruction of the Temple is not a secret key to the meaning of 'Hallelujah'. Now it may be that the Psalmist from whom the text was taken was thinking only of the lands of the twelve tribes of Israel and 'kings of the earth' as their temporal leaders. But, replies Kivy, this message, too, fails Grice's requirement. Thus it cannot be one of the meanings of 'Hallelujah'.

It should be clear that Kivy tackles a significant issue, and does use 'some common sense, some ordinary logic, and some ordinary intuitions about meaning' to cast light on the problem. This clarity and simplicity are virtues which should not hide the subtlety of what he accomplishes.

In the following Chapter 7, Kivy asks: 'Is the atheist impoverished by...being denied the full artistic rewards of great religious art?' (132). Religious artworks can express truth-functional beliefs, but not in the form of arguments supporting conclusions. Rather, they 'propose them as "candidates"...for belief' (141). Now a 'dogmatic atheist' whose mind is closed on the subject, will not be able to entertain these propositions. A different atheist, however, whom Kivy calls the 'non-aggressive atheist' (introduced at p. 131) may be able to entertain propositions which she does not presently believe. The idea of Jesus' returning to life after death may be for her a 'live hypothesis', although one that she does not believe to be true. For this viewer, a richer appreciation of great religious art is possible. 'Speaking for myself, I do not see a conversion to the religion of Bach or Haydn in my future, or, for that matter, conversion to the religion of my forebears. But I *will* say that while listening to the *B-minor Mass*, greater than which nothing can be conceived, I am as close to conversion as I ever will be' (144).

Let me return to the book's beginning. Part I ingeniously defends the genius of Mozart, against various critics who argue that it is circumstances or social constructions that make this category, rather than the transcendent gifts of special individuals. Genius is disturbing and mysterious. Anti-élitists who deny the category, also deny themselves the possibility of being inspired with awe at what genius can accomplish, and the valuable experience of humility that goes with it.

Authenticity, as in 'to hear Baroque music as its composers intended one must hear it played on period instruments and following period performance practices', is revisited in Part II. Kivy is already well known for his vigorous counter-arguments (*Authenticities*, 1995). Notable among them is his objection that almost no one is inclined to apply similar principles to theatre. He insists on a distinction between authenticity of interpretation: producing the sounds with 'acoustic accuracy', and authenticity of appreciation. Mozart's audience 'heard with eighteenth-century sensibilities and we with twenty-first-century ones. They and we would hear the *same* sounds *differently*' (41). An essay on opera (Chapter 5) greatly develops the point about theatre, and also leads, by contrast, to the notion of music not supplemented by words: pure, or 'absolute' music, the topic of Part IV.

R. G. Collingwood reminded us that the ubiquitous 'song' is a hybrid art form, a mixture of two arts: music and poetry. Together with words, music seems to describe all sorts of things. Kivy challenges those who claim that music alone, 'without text, title, program, dramatic setting, nor any other extra-musical baggage' (191) can convey propositional content. In Chapter 10 he asks, what

can we know about 'authorial intention' when it is applied just to the parameters of pure music? Susan McClary maintains, for instance, that the unusually long and written-out cembalo cadenza in the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto expresses 'The possibility of virtual social overthrow, and the violence implied by such overthrow...' (as cited in Kivy, 194). Kivy argues that if we allow as better interpretations ones that have 'a richer, more interesting, or more significant metaphorical content than [we] succeeded in hearing in it previously (Christopher Peacocke, as cited in Kivy, 195), then we must accept even 'McClary's outlandish interpretation'. We *should* hear it that way, too.

What Kivy proposes, in place of this 'richer metaphorical interpretation' view, is that we give at least the first word to the author. This we can do 'by simply inducing obvious facts that clearly show Bach could have had no such intention in the first place' (195). Indeed it is likely that his intentions were purely musical, and had no such external reference to propositions in politics, and so on. In his discussion of Leonard Meyer's work (Chapter 11) Kivy focuses on the tension between thinking that music is pure *syntax* (which explains why children of little worldly experience can sometimes be brilliant at it), and thinking that it has *semantic* content, can represent or be literally meaningful.

There is also an Appendix in which subtle debates with James O. Young (*The Critique of Pure Music*, 2014) are pursued. Each essay in this volume tackles a topic of great interest, and solves it with style and care. The book is well worth reading slowly.

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