

**James O. Young.** *Critique of Pure Music*. Oxford University Press 2014. 224 pp. \$55.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199682713).

The title *Critique of Pure Music* invites comparison with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Although the author's choice was motivated by another factor, it may mislead some as to the aim and scope of the book. Rather than a magnum opus, this *Critique* is rather, in the author's term, an 'essay', that comes in at just under 200 pages. Its scope encompasses some arguments in English-language music aesthetics, mainly from the last thirty years.

First of all: what is pure music? The opening sentence implies that it is the equivalent of pure form. However, the question of form is not pursued beyond casting it as the opposite of content. Most of what follows is couched as the question of whether music has content. The only content that is nontrivial is quickly determined to be feeling or emotions. Just as there are only true or false statements, there is only musical content or extra-musical content. Young argues that music does contain the extra-musical content of emotion. Following this, he presents the case for the idea that not only is music expressive of emotion, but also that it represents emotion. Therefore, he does not believe that a 'pure', content-less music exists.

This logical, methodical approach to musical meaning is derived from analytical philosophy. Young positions himself mainly as the opponent of the formalist critic Peter Kivy, one of the most prominent authors of aesthetics for the last thirty years. Kivy publishes prolifically, and shows no signs of slowing down (his latest is *De Gustibus: Arguing about Taste, and Why We Do It*, 2015). Young gives us due warning about Kivy in the introduction: 'no one comes in for more criticism in the course of these pages. His philosophy of music is the *bête noire* that is stalked on almost every page' (ix). Even Young's title is explained as a specific reference to Kivy, who had considered it for one of his own books. Young finds the work of the prominent philosopher Stephen Davies more congenial. However, he parts ways with Davies on the question of whether music can be representational. While Davies believes that music does not represent, Young does, and in the end this can be said to be the main point of his essay.

There is another figure who looms large in this book. This is the nineteenth-century Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, who set the terms for future formalist debates in his 1854 book, *On the Beautiful in Music*. Its five chapters take on issues of form versus content, 'pure music', music with text, 'representation', and 'expression'—as does Young's five chapters. In light of Young's analytical approach, it is interesting to note that Hanslick was not educated to be a philosopher, but rather a lawyer. A recent article by the musicologist Anthony Pryer has argued that the prevalence of negative argumentation in Hanslick's book can be traced to the nineteenth-century Austrian legal system, which solved conflicts of principle on a case by case basis, rather than relying on precedents (*Rethinking Hanslick: music, formalism, and expression*, 2013). Lawyers were trained to prove that a defendant was not guilty *as charged*, focusing on the question of the charge rather than the question of the guilt. Hanslick's book similarly spends more time attacking other theories than offering a substantive alternative. The same could be said about Young's book, which at its most extreme poses an eye-crossing series of negations with a rebuttal of 'anti-scientific a priorism' (36). Taken as a whole, the formalist debate about music tends to make its points through critique.

Although this approach puts its stock in the logic of the argument, Young also calls upon recent cognitive research as well as psychological experiments that yield empirical evidence (see

especially chapter two, ‘Music and the Arousal of Emotion’). He also sprinkles in testimony by various historical personages to strengthen the case that the response to music cannot be attributed only to convention (learned behavior), but also to cognition (by which he means extra-musical emotional responses that are innate).

One may question whether these additions strengthen or weaken his case. The musicologist James Hepokoski has recently presented an argument that is pertinent here. He claims that ‘the traditional, philosophically posed question ‘is pure music (or this or that piece) actually *capable* of expressing or representing things outside of itself?’ is unproductive. In part, this is because of the record of historical evidence: much music of the past has been created and listened to under the influence of the belief that it can’ (*Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives*, 2014). In other words, one can *either* formulate a statement about music’s expressiveness that must be true, *or* accept that regardless of whether it is true or not, the understanding of music has historically functioned in the belief that it is expressive. The ideology motivating these respective questions finds answers in such different spheres of knowledge as to make them incompatible. For instance, the music under consideration by Young is assumed to be stable, the same regardless of time and place, due to the innate response by listeners (see especially chapter one, ‘Music and Expressiveness’). In contrast, Hepokoski does not see a musical work *per se* as the object, but rather the ‘total listening situations’ that include the ‘force-fields of expectations, habit, knowledge or external association’. Drawing on work from linguistics and semiotics, Hepokoski finds that ‘pure’ music is actually extremely messy and contingent on ‘a generous aggregate of ready-made, previously blended spaces, historical accretions, standardized connotations—hyperblends of newer metaphors grounded in multiply accumulated layers of more elemental, prior metaphors’.

These opposing positions comprise a stalemate. When focusing on the terminological and semantic challenges of articulating true statements about music, Young’s elegant little book refines the arguments of philosophers interested in proving what music is and does. Those studying this topic from other disciplines and perspectives will continue to remain unconvinced.

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