Backwoods musicology
Roger Scruton’s aesthetics of music

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Roger Scruton is a right-wing pundit regularly rolled out by the British media to voice ‘bravely unfashionable’ points of view. After the march against New Labour organized by the Countryside Alliance, he published a book in defence of fox-hunting. However, unlike most backwoods right-wingers, Scruton has pretensions to intellectual consistency. He has only recently abandoned academic philosophy for journalism. *The Aesthetics of Music* was published by Oxford University Press, alongside Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, as ‘the first comprehensive account of the nature and significance of music from the perspective of modern philosophy’. One theory for high culture, another for low: could these be our end-of-millennium philosophies of music?

Scruton seeks to justify an actuality that postmodernist musicology is often too trendy to acknowledge: classical concert-going as communion with eternal values. In a period when the very concept of cultural value is under attack, classical music still flourishes as a social practice. Given sharpened social antagonisms, Scruton’s anti-modernist aesthetic might indeed contribute to the ideological coherence of an insecure middle class. His book is as politically driven as his hunt apologia.

The perils of Scruton’s simple-minded version of ‘analytical philosophy’ are apparent from his opening words:

> Like colours, sounds are presented to a single privileged sense-modality. You can hear them, but you cannot see them, touch them, taste them, or smell them. They are objects of hearing in something like the way that colours are objects of sight, and they are missing from the world of deaf people just as colours are missing from the world of the blind.

Stating the apparently obvious, Scruton’s concepts define themselves, and lock the door against further reflection. Actually, anyone who has experienced a rave or sound system has ‘touched sound’ – if it’s working right, you can feel the bass vibrate your ribcage. However, such practical observations have no place in Scruton’s idealist schema.

Debates about music very quickly raise philosophical issues. Insistence on the separateness of the realms broached by the senses is a traditional prophylactic against the materialist doctrine of a monist reality. Reading Scruton suggests a third species of logic to set beside the proliferating rhizomes of Gilles Deleuze and the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno: *tautology* – the inability of defenders of the status quo to say anything but ‘what is, is’.

Tautology opens Scruton’s book, and it permeates his reasoning, down to the most technical-sounding assertions: ‘The encapsulation of musical movement in melodic

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events, with boundaries that may be enclosed or permeable, and with structural episodes heard as “stations on the way”, is the most important source of thematic organization in classical music.” A theme is a melody used as a basis for development. So ‘the most important source of thematic organization’ is ‘the encapsulation of musical movement in melodic events’, or in other words… a theme! In Scruton, themes organize themes because, well, they do.

**Fetishizing the score**

For defenders of tradition, it is twentieth-century developments that are invariably the bugbear. In this giddy atmosphere of circular logic – what Theodor Adorno called ‘identity thinking’ – Scruton’s charge against atonality boils down to it being ‘not tonal’. Astonishingly enough, with atonal music, ‘the sense of the tones themselves, as advancing inexorably towards a final resting place, is absent.’ This might be because atonal music is not written in a key, and was in fact invented in order to avoid the banality of tonal resolution.

For Scruton, tautology is not something to be ashamed of; it’s the founding rock. An inability to separate concepts from things conceived results in a kind of paranoia, as if those who have thought beyond Scruton’s concepts wish to deprive him of hard-won baubles. ‘Pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony are not only forms of musical organization, but they provide the core musical experience in our culture, and perhaps in any culture that is recognizably engaged in music-making.’ Actually, ‘pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony’ do not provide the core experience of music in our culture. True, they are the key categories used to analyse music in the academy. However, experience of music and its study are not identical. In ‘our’ culture – presuming that Scruton means modern industrial society – musical experience is supplied by a music industry: the manufacture of CDs, their exposure on the radio and in magazines, supplemented by live manifestations designed to consolidate and extend the market position of those involved. This is as true of the classical composers Scruton celebrates as the rock music he loathes, but pointing out such crucial mediations is dismissed as ‘mere sociology’.

It is not just the sociological data that refutes Scruton. His tidy principles of ‘pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony’ have been thoroughly relativized, interpenetrated and exploded by twentieth-century developments. Karlheinz Stockhausen famously provided the $E=MC^2$ of postwar music by lowering a pitch electronically until it throbbed, and then pointing out that what resulted could be heard as rhythm. Ornette Coleman coined the term ‘harmolodics’ to describe his musical method, in which an improvised ‘melody’ is immediately understood as both rhythm and harmony by sympathetic accompanists. Recording technology has meant that modernists from Edgard Varèse to Manchester’s Dogbiz have taken on board Anton Webern’s use of timbre as a structural principle, and made significant music by cutting sounds together on tape. Hip-hop and rave producers use computers to fuse pitch, melody and harmony into a single repeated sonority, whose resultant timbre – like that of the African drum – is the object of passionate dispute by the music’s adherents. Refutations of the doctrine that ‘pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony’ are natural categories emerge at every level of musical production.

This is not simply to engage in a nihilist celebration of cultural implosion. By naturalizing the European tradition he champions, Scruton does it a disservice. Distinctions between ‘pitch, rhythm, melody, and harmony’ are not a fundamental truth, but a fantastic historical achievement. It allowed composers to martial their musical forces with unprecedented precision. As formulated by the classical score, this rationalization of musical parameters allowed in-concert repetition of musical ideas, and thus granted a historical overview to listeners and composers alike. Self-conscious innovation – rather than blind evolution – became possible. However, to confuse the score with music (the
parameters with the experience) is to fetishize a technology – one that recording has in many ways made redundant.

Jazz and blues used recording to create a tradition: Ellington and Mingus used scores, but recording allowed the ‘masterpiece’ to be the performance rather than the notation. Individualized instrumental nuance (the ‘solo’) stepped onto the plane of history. Scruton resembles a superannuated art teacher insisting on the rules of perspective and denying the validity of the camera. Scruton cannot see beyond the score: the rest of *The Aesthetics of Music* is a primer on classical harmony.

However, because Scruton’s exposition is unsystematic and picturesque, it would be of little value for anyone needing to master the different keys, or such procedures as counterpoint and modulation. The exposition is there as a bluff: an occasion for Scruton’s polemics. The real agenda is to elevate concert-going, score-following and piano-playing to an ideology, one that can assure an economic elite that they are culturally superior too. The project is absurd because Scruton’s musical culture is parochial and moribund, founded on resisting technological and aesthetic innovation alike.

Contempt for the human measure invades every detail of Scruton’s argument. He calls ‘attempts to explain the experience of musical movement by reference to the strain on the larynx as it ascends the scale … absurd’. Interestingly enough, that is precisely how Adorno explains some of the most moving passages in Beethoven: by singing them inwardly and imagining them inseparable from the physical sensation of the vocal cords. Anyone who has been touched by the idiosyncratic singing on country and soul records will understand Adorno’s remark. Recording is a sonic photograph of the larynx’s physical state, and one responds to it as one would to any human cry. Like the owner of the ancestral portrait decrying photographs as ‘inartistic’, Scruton is scandalized by the democratic universalism latent in new technology. To fail to grasp the progressive aspects of mechanical reproduction strips the art of the past of its technical achievements, reducing it to a badge of privilege. Any artist working today in that paradigm will only produce kitsch.

**The real agenda**

In a phrase that reveals his aesthetic to be an extended defence of social *mores* among the upper classes, Scruton argues that music is not a matter of transcribing emotions, but of finding ‘appropriate phrases’, ‘like the matching of clothes to an occasion – to a state ceremony, a private celebration, a wedding or a funeral’. Such an account of the music which fills his book – motifs from Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Wagner – is bathos, the reduction of courageous, non-conformist innovation to Hollywood’s vision of quaint Englishness.

Unable to grasp the political and social content of Romanticism – its commitment to the freedoms promised by the French Revolution and disappointment with the shabby world of commerce and private interest it eventually ushered in – Scruton is reduced to noting its ‘rules of thumb’. He acknowledges that his own ‘parsing’ (a term appropriate for a dead language) will never produce anything worthwhile. He compares a phrase Schubert wrote with an exercise of his own, and remarks ruefully that his own lacks ‘genius’. This term merely highlights Scruton’s inability to understand what Schubert is doing. Transubstantiated to the heaven of Platonic Ideas, Great Art – originally determinate social statement – becomes an image of itself, as tautologous and self-reflecting as Scruton’s logic.

The closer Scruton comes to understanding musical history, the closer he comes to views he cannot accept. In examining Bartok’s harmonic transgressions, for example, he finds himself echoing Adorno: ‘Such examples suggest that the very force which created tonality – the force of polyphony – was also destined to destroy it.’ Naturally, Scruton must avoid sociological explanation, so the force that created tonality is not the
rise of the bourgeois class (a new secular audience and a new, rationalized, factory-like way of organizing musicians), but another musical ‘force’ (polyphony). However, he has all but admitted that tonality is incapable of creating new work, that musical form is historical rather than eternal. This lapse is quickly made good: ‘If we compare tonality to a language, it is surely for this reason, that it wholly permeates the life and organization of any piece that displays it, and offers an inexhaustible fund of artistic possibilities.’ As a loyal nationalist, Scruton cannot admit that a particular language may be exhausted (and may need an influx of immigrants to revitalize it). This sudden switch to celebration of tonality is a politically driven denial of the facts.

During the 1960s, free jazz proved the truth of Adorno’s comments about the limitations of tonality. John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and Derek Bailey are heroes of new music today because they took Schoenberg’s steps in playing that felt like liberation rather than denial.

For proletarian modernists, the end of tonality was not tragedy but joy.

The politics of musical form are vast and complex and forever contested, but it is important to recognize that it is not only blues and jazz that require historical explanation; the state of classical music cannot be understood without factoring in the slave trade and the requirements of capital accumulation. The worst thing about Scruton (and one, despite errors of judgement on jazz, not made by Adorno) is that he fosters the idea that detailed criticism of musical texts necessarily blinds us to the realities of history.

Because he believes in the free market, Scruton refuses to condemn pop music. His cultural programme – rather like Clive Bell’s in Civilisation in 1928 – is for an elite to preserve a natural relationship to music, while a stunted and depraved populace labour to sustain it. This of course entails class inequality, and the solution to that is religion: ‘When people lose their faith, and cease to experience their social membership in sacral terms, the culture begins to wither.’ Culture is ‘the gift of religion, which heals the divisions of rank and class’. The Nazis, it should be remembered, also prescribed a ‘common culture’ to unite a divided nation: classical tonality and the ‘German’ triad would cure the ‘degeneracy’ of Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone. Dreams of a society beyond class division – when phrased by those in receipt of its dividends – have the bad odour of Gleichschaltung.