

Peter Kivy

*The Fine Art of Repetition: Essay in the
Philosophy of Music.*

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Peter Kivy ends the preface to his collection of 19 essays—written over a span of thirty years—with a parenthetical expression of hope: ‘I am glad that now, with the publication of these essays in a single volume, my work on the philosophy of music to date can be viewed and (I hope) discussed in its entirety’ (ix-x). What makes the fulfillment of this hope unlikely is the breadth of Kivy’s interests in the philosophy of music exercised in this collection. And yet it is precisely the breadth of this display that recommends *The Fine Art of Repetition* as among the handful of most important books in recent years on the philosophy of music. Indeed, *The Fine Art of Repetition* compares favorably with, and is a worthy complement to Carl Dahlhaus’s very fine introduction to the philosophy of music, the *Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). Kivy might well have taken Dahlhaus’s insight regarding the unity of the aesthetics of music as the organizing principle for his own interests in music and for the collection at hand: ‘The system of aesthetics is its history: a history in which ideas and experiences of heterogeneous origin interpenetrate’ (Dahlhaus, 3). The strength most prominent in Kivy’s book lies in the extent to which he allows the aesthetics of music to show itself as the product of just such an interpenetration of heterogeneous origins.

The Fine Art of Repetition displays its heterogeneous origins in a manner more prodigious than any one of Kivy’s four previously published books in the aesthetics of music. The collection includes the following: three essays on opera, four essays on various aspects of Mozart, three essays on Platonism and music, a couple of essays on Hanslick, an essay on Kant’s *Affektenlehre*, etc. The pleasure of reading this variety of Kivy lies not just in the refined wit and eloquence of the formulations he offers but in attending to his pleasure and astonishment at how even the most minute or seemingly mundane questions regarding the nature of music and musical experience—it seems inevitably—to some of the most central and constitutive features of human life. An essay, for example, that investigates the phenomenon of, and claims made regarding so-called ‘historically authentic’ performances argues that both music-making and listening are historical; historical authenticity (if such a concept is in fact possible) must then, precisely in order to be authentic, take account not only of the changes in the history of the listening to those sounds. In short, the sound of music relies only in part on the objects ostensibly producing it; at least as important is the history of the subjects who listen and who have been shaped by their listening. As Kivy convincingly argues, an historically authentic sound might possibly be produced, but an historically authentic listener is a construct always still in production, and can thus only be contemporary. (The historically authentic listener is the evil stepsister of the often dismissed concept in visual art theory of the innocent eye.)

In his *Introduction* Kivy has the following to say regarding the genesis of one of the two longer essays in the collection, this one entitled ‘A New Music Criticism?’: ‘In completing my last book on the aesthetics of music, *Music Alone*, I became aware that I had been moving over a ten-year period, without really being aware of it, toward a version of musical *formalism*, unusual in that it countenanced in absolute music just those expressive qualities—what I had begun to call the “garden variety emotions”—that from the time of Hanslick formalists are well known for dismissing. I am certainly not the only writer presently dissatisfied with traditional formalism in its rejection of emotive properties’ (6). The attraction Kivy’s position—which might be called ‘informed emotivism’—lies in its success at ameliorating the centuries old dichotomy in the philosophy of music between formalism and emotivism. (Kivy deserves much better than Edward Lippman’s dismissive quip that his work merely ‘rediscovers the tired topic of “expression”’ [*A History of Western Musical Aesthetics*, 1992].) Kivy not only shows the untenability of the more extreme formulations of each position (a too strict formalism empties music so completely that any articulate response to it seems unwarranted, conversely, an exaggerated emotivism reduces music to symbol, representation or vehicle of something nonmusical), but more importantly he argues for the compatibility of the two positions. Kivy’s pithy formulation of this compatibility is expressed, perhaps curiously, via an analogy to linguistics: ‘music alone is, by hypothesis, a syntax without a semantics’ (317).

Some might well object here that to revert to the linguistic in order to formulate the nature of absolute music is to have already irredeemably compromised the nature of formalism and absolute music both. That would be too harsh an objection; more important is what Kivy achieves with such formulations: he produces an affinity with one of the central tenets of Kant’s aesthetics. That is, Kivy’s informed emotivism is best understood as an application to the aesthetics of music of what Kant describes as purposeless purposiveness. (In a rough and not at all ready way, formalism may in general be equated with purposelessness and emotivism with purposiveness.) It is thus no mere coincidence that in the second of the two longer pieces in the collection, this one the title essay, Kivy discusses Kant’s designation of wallpaper designs and pure instrumental music as the supreme examples of free beauty since they neither represent nor refer to anything in particular. Kivy concludes that, ‘If absolute music is wallpaper for the ears, it is a many-dimensional wallpaper that offers intrigues and complications far beyond its visual counterparts’ (355).

For all the Kantianism inherent in his reflections, Kivy nonetheless withdraws from the implications of Kant’s aesthetics in regard to two crucial matters. The first follows from that nagging, analytically-tainted expression, ‘garden variety emotions’ as a description of the expressive qualities of absolute music. Regardless however else one might characterize Kant’s description of aesthetic response, if it is taken to be truly mundane it is difficult to understand how a sufficient degree of disinterest from this experience of the everyday and ready-to-hand might be achieved as Kant thought requisite for an aesthetic judgment. Secondly, the contention that absolute music is best understood as a kind of sonic wallpaper obscures an important feature of Kant’s notion of free beauty in particular and aesthetic experience in general. Absolute music is an extreme example of free beauty since it does not, as is the case with designs on wallpaper,

simply present the absence of a missing concept—and absence which thereby allows a free play within the subject. Music in general, and absolute music in particular, present the curious case not only of a missing concept but of an always evanescent object, whereas wallpaper is stuck with (to?) its objectivity. Absolute music is thus importantly not a ‘counterpart’ to wallpaper. This difference has tremendous consequences: since the *object* of aesthetic experience never congeals into a whole entity, the harmony and unity of the *subject* of aesthetic experience becomes a wholly different beast than that generated in response to wallpaper designs.

The Fine Art of Repetition will be read with profit and pleasure by students and experts alike in music theory and aesthetics. The book’s only faults are a dozen and a half typographical errors and the lack of an index.

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