

COLLECTIVE AUTONOMY: A PATH TOWARDS ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE

by Phil Treloar

*[Author's Note: in this article, written in 2002, I seek to outline the scope of just one region in Collective Autonomy. As a name, this refers to a general field of potential exchange while "collective autonomy", as a process, explores this potential through the interaction of components. These various components are diverse; eg, free improvisation on the one hand while on the other, philosophy. In this process, composition is significant. Its primary function is to mediate. Whilst beyond the reach of the present article, it should be noted that I consider composition itself as distinct in two ways – **thorough** composition and **intuitive** or **spontaneous** composition. Both these compositional modes have a share in mediation. Each instance of **thorough** composition delimits a field to be explored thereby characterising an area for development. The **intuitive** mode determines how the form of this particular field might be rendered on any given occasion. And, it is the play between these two modes of composition that ensures an active place for the philosophical component; the element of Collective Autonomy that calls to question the very practices 'normally' considered necessary to generate that enigmatic entity so often referred to as "good music".*

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Normally, music stands in relation to the community in some meaningful way; it carries a message, it signifies beauty, it enables people to march together in step, it provides relief from the humdrum of daily life, it gives rise to the solemnity of ritual, it provides means for artistic expression, and so on. Within these contexts, conglomerates of signs and symbols enable the music's meaning, purpose, or function, even when not overt. Take for example, the case of piped music. In observing people's response to this phenomenon one would conclude that there is no response. However, on the occasion that one enters a public place, a shopping-mall for instance, and there is no piped music, one of the first things one notices is its absence. We *do* notice when it's not there, and we *don't* notice when it is. Of course, this is a broad generalisation, but we are talking here of 'normal' circumstances.

The turnaround alluded to in this generalisation is much more than an insignificant oddity. In fact, it's a clear indication of the extent to which our perception, and our consciousness, are able to be manipulated. Furthermore, whether or not this manipulation is realised as manipulation *per se* is a choice the shopper does not have. And of course, the shopping-mall is a relatively innocent example compared to the case of drumming up nationalism for the purpose of world domination. Given due consideration, I would hold that the reduction of music to non-meaning is an actual impossibility.



Phil Treloar, as he was in the 1980s, at the drums...

So, it would seem that before we can proceed further, the question of *meaning* itself looms before us; a question that calls for clarification. What is meaning? And how might meaning be constituted'?

In broad terms I suggest that: if the inherence of relationships constituting a conglomerate are able to be observed in a particular way then meaning has been broached. Does this imply that chaos, for example, is meaningless? No. It implies that there is a certain state, as distinct from other states, in which relationships do obtain and has been assigned the name 'chaos'; ie, a particular state of relationships that determine utter disorder.

This suggests that a state of affairs is perceptible as existing, and that an observer, in the light of making an observation, gives that particular state of affairs a name; first the state of affairs, then the name. Certainly, this order of events will be maintained whilst ever the analytical perspective is taken. Thus we find 'meaning' designated as: literal meaning, figurative meaning, non-figurative meaning, synonymy, or, speaker's meaning, expressive or emotive meaning, prescriptive, descriptive, cognitive, and so on. The *Macquarie Dictionary* tells us quite simply that meaning is intending, expressive or significant. The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* tells us that contemporary analytic philosophy speaks more of propositional attitudes - thoughts, beliefs, intentions - than of ideas and images... virtually all philosophers agree that propositional attitudes have some crucial connection with meaning. It goes on to say: 'linguistic meaning' may stand for two properties, one involving communication intentions and practices, the other more intimately related to thinking and conceiving. It seems to me then, there is no easy explanation for the word. It also

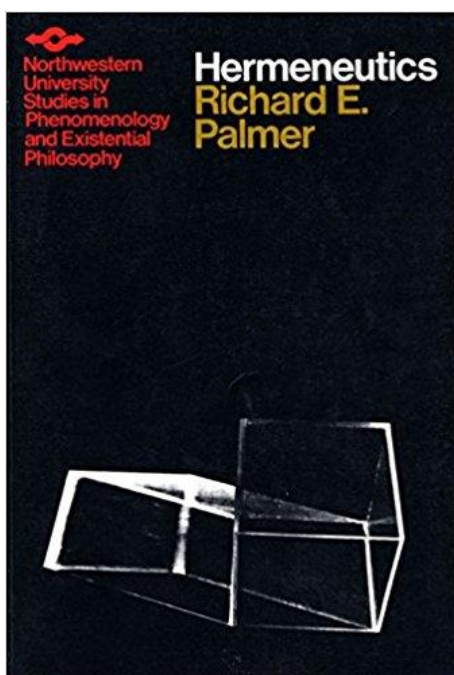
seems that the word is generally talked about in terms that refer to meaning as *found manifest*. But, perhaps there are other possible formulations only alluded to in the phrase above, “more intimately related to thinking and conceiving”; perhaps this, in the realm of “ideas and images”, calls for some consideration.



Martin Heidegger...

How might all this stand in relation to, say, the Heideggerian view?

“...‘meaningfulness’ is something deeper than the logical system of language; it is founded on something prior to language and embedded in world - *the relational whole*. However much words may shape or formulate meaning, they point beyond their own system to a meaningfulness already resident in the relational whole of the world. Meaningfulness, then, is not something man gives to an object; it is what an object gives to man through supplying the ontological possibility of words and language... Understanding must be seen as embedded in this context, and interpretation is simply the rendering explicit of understanding.” (cf. Richard E. Palmer (1969), *Hermeneutics*, p.1 34) (emphasis added).



What seems to me to stand out in this passage is the *a priori* nature embraced by Heidegger's view of 'meaning'; that the naming is but a pointing beyond its own terms; that understanding is to be found in this place beyond. And, it's this *pointing beyond* that interests me vis-a-vis the question of music.

Music, when viewed from the 'normal' standpoint, - ie, the standpoint that maps musical structures and all they encompass onto the community - does so teleologically; the final cause being one of manipulation - ie, to signify beauty, to drum up nationalism, to provide respite from our daily humdrum etc. To achieve this, conglomerates of signs and symbols are set into place in a particular way such that they are read/heard in accord with the protagonist's intentions – in Western tonal terms, minor for sad or serious, major for happy or fast etc. Or, to cite another case, the highly evolved emotional structuring of Indian classical music. These examples are, of course, barely touching the tip of the iceberg and, certainly, are superficial, but the point is made. Whatever the particular case, the protagonist assumes, pretty much, a sovereign position. Here, the inherent relationships that endow the conglomerate with meaning, do so, for the most part, through the employ of components with pre-established meaning - the obvious example from tonal music being the tritone's intensive directionality; its goal orientation.

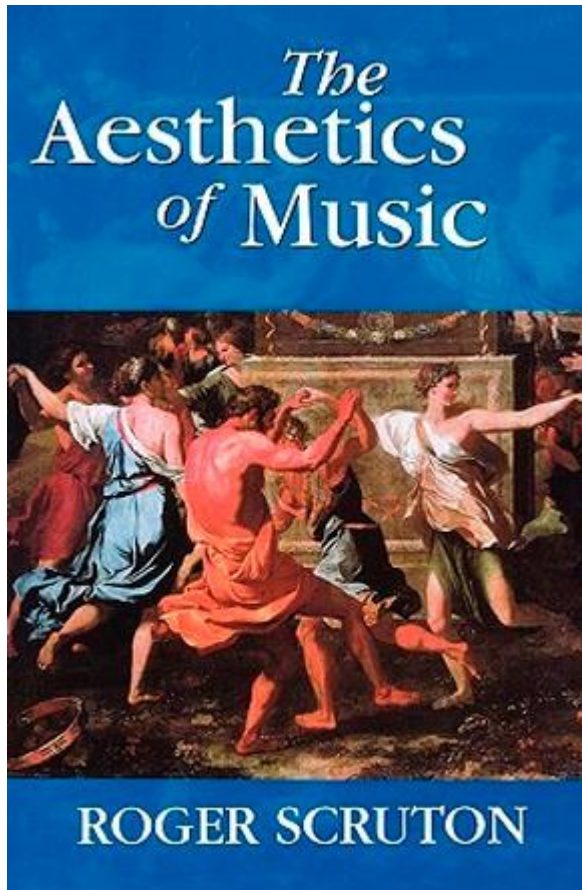
It is not only possible, but, I believe absolutely necessary, for us to communicate with each other and to do so in terms *not* solely reliant upon a sovereign, overarching communicative system - one where hierarchical principles apply so as to ensure the ensuing communication to be constituted only as a manifestation of that sovereignty.



Music theorist Heinrich Schenker...

Absolute sovereignty is certainly the case with, for example, the music theorist Heinrich Schenker. Schenker, in the words of Roger Scruton, "asserted quite

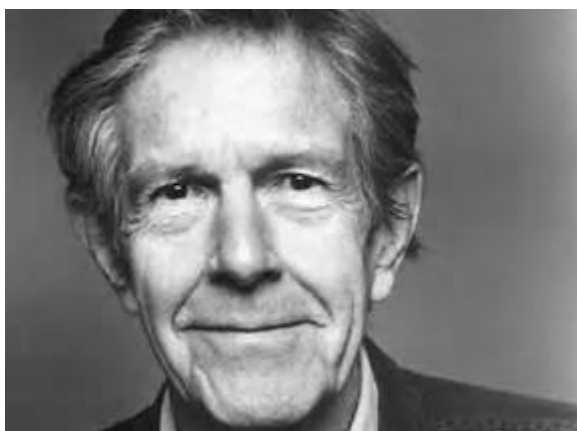
dogmatically that all master-works must conform to his system.” (Scruton, 1999, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p 425). And that “Schenker made the hold suggestion that the distinction between structural tones and prolongations contains the secret of all musical order in our classical tradition.” (ibid, p 59). Scruton himself suggests that



Roger Scruton, in 1998...

the first question to ask about music is whether “a semantics which showed how the meaning of musical complexes could be derived from the meaning of their parts?” (ibid. p 199). The music theorist Felix Salzer claims that the distinction between structural and prolonging harmonies represents “the instinctive perception of the truly musical ear.” (quoted ibid, p419). Schenker believed that the parts could be seen/heard as an organic whole; a hierarchy of compositional values reduced to an “Ursatz” - a ‘primordial composition’ or ‘primary structure’ (cf. Heinrich Schenker, *Harmony*, University of Chicago Press, 1954-1980, p. xx). And in the words of Schenker himself, “Repetition is the basis of music as an art” (ibid. p 5). And that this principle “once successfully applied to the understanding of the microcosm of musical composition, now could be applied on a larger scale as well.” (ibid, p9). Dogmatic? Indeed this is.

One might inquire though regarding the possible well-spring of such thinking. Certainly it goes back a long way. “And there are as many parts of philosophy as there are substances; so that it is necessary that there be among them a first and a next. For that which is divides directly into genera; hence the disciplines too will follow these.” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics 1004a 2-6*: Christopher Kirwin, trans. Oxford 1971-1998). “But if there is some changeless substance, this is prior and is **primary philosophy**, and **universal** in this way, because primary; and it would fall to it to study that which is *qua* thing-that-is, both what it is and the things that hold good of it *qua* thing-that-is.” (ibid, 1026a 30ff.) (bold emphasis added). “When Aristotle explains in general terms what he tries to do in his philosophical works, he says he is looking for ‘first principles’ (or ‘origins’; *archai*)...” (T H Irwin, 1988, *Aristotle’s First Principles* p3). And to jump forward to the beginning of the modern period: In his search for the foundations of a reliable system of knowledge, Rene Descartes, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, treats in general of all the first things to be discovered by philosophizing. (cf, John Cottingham. 1988, *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings* p.vii ff).



John Cage... he suggested that the idea of ‘hierarchical principles’ could have an alternative...

In mentioning all of this it is not my purpose to argue the merit of these various views. I'm far from being up to that task. Suffice to make the point that the idea of first principles has a very long history in Western thought and that this follows through to our present time. And as the above makes patently obvious, the concept of first principles is applied well beyond the domain of philosophy. Rather though, I do want to suggest that this idea of hierarchical principles and the assuming of first position perspectives is not the only one possible, nor perhaps, even desirable.

John Cage, for example, suggested that this idea of 'hierarchical principles' could have an alternative. "I introduced into, or beside, this Schoenbergian idea of a repetition-variation double, another notion, that of something other, which cannot be cancelled out...An element that has nothing to do with either repetition or variation; something which does not enter into the battle of those two terms, and which rebels against being placed or replaced in terms of... That term is *chance*." (Cage 1981 - *For the Birds*, p45). "I told you how impressed I was by those questions of variation and repetition which occupied Schoenberg's keenest thoughts... I decided



Arnold Schoenberg: in order to write music, you must have a feeling for harmony...

to apply that principle of variation and repetition, and then innovation and invention of new forms, to the entire work, that is, to the ways of composing." (*ibid.* p159). Cage suggested that sound could be received, heard, listened to, and, even more significantly, *made or composed as sound per se*. Here, the auditor has a bigger say apropos the overall unity or disunity of the aural experience. How one hears the immediate environment becomes a matter of personal choice rather than it being left in the composer's sovereign domain. Obviously there is more than one way to hear a sound. And perhaps the appropriation of this view is more in line with "the instinctive perception of the truly musical ear." (Compare the context of this quote above.) There's the famous story about Cage, while, as a student of Schoenberg's the following conversation took place: "After I'd been studying with him for two years,

Schoenberg said, 'in order to write music, you must have a feeling for harmony.' I explained to him that I had no feeling for harmony. He then said that I would always encounter an obstacle, that it would be as though I came to a wall through which I could not pass. I said, "In that I will devote my life to beating my head against that wall." (Richard Kostelanetz (ed), 1970, *John Cage*, p 53).

The question I ask and seek answers to through the process of "collective autonomy" is this: How, through music-making that explores relationships in composition of both 'thorough' and 'spontaneous' modes, is it possible to enable a natural flow between the world of our residing & its perception, and the expression of this, such that, if the inherence of relationships constituting a conglomerate is able to be observed in a particular way thus broaching the realm of meaning, *this act of meaning's-being-broached* is one of *process* rather than of predetermination.

Perhaps implicit in Heidegger's way is the possibility of there being more to meaning than meets the eye: perhaps that truth might be more than something established by lining up facts syllogistically; perhaps that truth and meaning don't even necessarily connect; perhaps that meaning is a discovery process rather than being something nailed into place - a universal that predicates all that enters its realm. Perhaps, rather than read the world of our being as gospel, we need to take a leaf from Nietzsche's book of half-written pages: "Here I sit and wait, surrounded by broken old tablets and new tablets half covered with writing." (*Zarathustra* 111.12/1, Walter Kaufmann, trans, 1954-1982, *The Portable Nietzsche*). And just before this Zarathustra entreats: "This is my way; where is yours? - thus I answered those who asked me 'the way.' For the way - that does not exist." (Z. 111.11/2.) Then later he says: "I am a prelude of better players, O my brothers!" (Z. 111.12/20.)

There is the writing we can only write ourselves. Writing that has no precedent nor template; no outline nor trace of previous travels. Only the path, our path, to the present. Who can really know this other than ourselves? Should not our expression embrace this as a gift?

Perhaps after all, musical rendering comprising interpretation making explicit understanding embedded in a community-giving context remains open to the possibility of discovery; ie, discovery for those prepared to embark on the adventure.

One thing is for sure. That which lies on the 'normal' side has been fairly well explored, exploited, and wrung dry of pretty much anything that resembles creative charge; the appropriate question here: Where's the spark? Whereas, to seek a path towards another alternative...

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