

Is There a Way to Invoke the Music Itself Without Embarrassing Ourselves?
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Certain novels not only cry out for critical interpretations but actually try to direct them. This is probably analogous to a piece of music that both demands and defines the listener's movements, say like a waltz.
—David Foster Wallace¹

When it is not immediately obvious whether something is an upbeat or a downbeat, choosing between the two can seem pretty arbitrary—you feel that the analysis is forcing you to make judgments that are not demanded by the music itself.
—Nicholas Cook²

Most musical analysts will now readily admit (or at least admit when pressed) that statements about form or structure do not represent music positivistically, “as it really is.”
—Lawrence Kramer³

The interpretation of analytical claims about music presents a dilemma between positivism and fictionalism: are the structures thereby imputed part of the *reality* of the music itself, or are they merely a form of shorthand and thus better conceived of as fictions? Judging from the confidence underlying the epigraph from Lawrence Kramer, even analysts themselves have conceded that the matter resolves quite easily in favor of fictionalism, albeit some form of fiction-construction that does the work of truth-telling.⁴ Analytical statements about music cannot be seen to represent the music itself, “as it really is,” without suffering pretension, contradiction, or naïveté.

Since there are hardly many sins more supreme in the humanities than naïveté, how could it be that the analysts Kramer imagines so readily agreeing to his premise might still require some “pressing” on the matter? It appears problematic for an analyst to subscribe to a certain epistemology for the sake of argument while admitting that the epistemology crumbles under interrogation—that is, unless the epistemology is “quasi-realist.” Leaving aside the significant matter of determining the ultimate ontological status of the “music itself,” this paper proposes that there is a coherent interpretation of

music analysis that recognizes it to be thoroughly fictional (rather than “positivist” or full-on “realist”), but still allows it to be ontologically-implicative—hence, “quasi-realist.” The proposal does not come by way of reversing the central insight of fictionalism—something like “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Positivism”—but instead works to earn the right to *invoke* the reality of the music itself from within a discourse that recognizes its fundamental status as normative and constructed.

The term comes from Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realist program in metaethics, a program which takes as its first departure point the “expressivism” of Hume’s theory of the moral sense.⁵ Bryan Parkhurst has already begun to develop a model for glossing analytical discourse that draws on metaethical expressivism,⁶ but what distinguishes quasi-realism from expressivism more generally (and thus from Parkhurst’s model), is its reticence to jettison representation and description as a result of acknowledging normativity. A proponent of quasi-realism subscribes to an anti-realist interpretation of ethics while sanctioning first-order ethical talk. I develop an analogy between Blackburn’s quasi-realist interpretation of ethics and how we might best interpret analytic discourse about music—but before spelling out the model in detail, I aim to rally support for the analogy in advance by surveying a few of the common metatheoretical maneuvers in our field that have led me to hold that we have been motivating for something like quasi-realism for some time. I conclude with a few thoughts about how the ongoing interest in the ethics of music analysis and the ontologically-implicative dimension of the discourse I describe come to reinforce each other. The performativity of the discourse thus entailed, and the convergence of several authors’ attention on dance encourages a final section entitled “Are We Dancing?”

ORDERS OF ONTOLOGICAL AVOWAL

It is worth recalling the state of affairs when the epistemic question did not resolve itself so simply. Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary challenged the element of necessity that they saw as inevitably permeating formal analysis. Kramer, in 1995: “Modernist forms of musical understanding ascribe a unique self-referentiality to music that renders it largely opaque from ‘extra-musical’ standpoints. Music must somehow be understood from the inside out.”⁷ McClary, in 1987: “If one feels comfortable and identifies with what is being articulated in a particular kind of music, one is likely to be happy ascribing to it universality and extra-human truth. ... (That is, ‘we didn’t make this up: this is simply the order of things.’)”⁸ Now that the number of scholars who would mouth such certainties is surely smaller, it is tempting to assume that the reply comes easily: it is not that music *must* be understood from the inside out; it is only that an analyst might choose to understand it that way, for reasons that are subject to debate. So long as we no longer voluntarily offer implausible subscriptions to “extra-human truths,” we can admit that we are making things up but perhaps still hold that this is also supposed to be the order of things.

It is at that leap of ontological faith, rather than at the epistemic concern that seems so noncontroversial today, where I would like to restage the dilemma between positivism and fictionalism. On positivism, some first-order ontological avowal (“here is how the music goes”) is reaffirmed at a second level (“and that’s how it is, *really*”); on fictionalism, the first-order claim is automatically deflated (“it’s just a fiction”). There is something attractive about each alternative: whereas the fictionalist view remedies what Jim Samson called the “ambition and pretension” of the analyst,⁹ it comes at the

cost of any positive proposal that some music goes any certain way—and who are we to say that music goes no particular way?

In this light, we might reformulate the critique of an analyst as follows: indeed, you agree that we lack direct access to the music itself, and yes, you grant that expressive statements are no less valid than formal statements—however, by choosing to theorize form and structure, you theorize something uniquely autonomous such that it spoils your epistemological caution. One cannot theorize about tonic prolongations without believing in “real” tonics and prolongations, the idea goes, and this becomes hard to square with a skepticism about whether the concepts we use to invoke the music itself are *actual* components of the music, given that we are constructing fictions.

Such a view is analogous to “error theory” about ethics. There are a variety of views about ethical discourse that refrain from ascribing an ethical structure to the world itself, and yet just error theory insists on delegitimizing all moral discourse as a result. Quasi-realism is motivated in large part by the challenge of error theory. Blackburn notes that John Mackie, an error theorist, continues worrying about moral matters despite his conviction that moral discourse rests on a fundamental error, which, of course, is enough to cast doubt on the original diagnosis of error. Likewise, if critics of analysis themselves conduct ontological avowal in their preferred vocabulary (for instance, Kramer’s “expressive statements” or what it was that McClary saw as “being articulated” in the music after all), then one might wonder why it would be that analytical vocabulary in particular is inherently infected.

The strongest form of the objection would not lie against any particular vocabulary, or the pure act of first-order ontological construction *per se*, but against doubling-down on the second-order ontological avowal (what “really happens”), accomplished by imputing greater ontological priority for the objects of the explanation.

FLATNESS AND TALLNESS, OR,
WHAT REALLY HAPPENS WITH “WHAT REALLY HAPPENS”

Consider this example from the contemporary literature of an avowal of second-order ontological priority from a theorist intending to demonstrate what *really* happens:

In my view, nineteenth-century composers were not explicitly concerned with inversional relationships as such; instead these relationships appear as *necessary by-products* of a deeper and more fundamental concern with efficient voice leading. Rather than being the syntactic engine that drives the music, inversion is merely epiphenomenal—the smoke that escapes from the locomotive’s chimney, rather than the furnace that makes it go.¹⁰

Here Dmitri Tymoczko is offering a methodological critique: he asks us to avoid ascribing ontological priority to the vocabulary of inversion for the purposes of explanation. Why? Because there is an alternative vocabulary that *does* hold higher priority. Ultimately he intends to have the historical argument—that second-practice nineteenth-century composers, as a matter of fact, did not compose with inversions in mind, but rather with parsimonious voice leading—resolve the question of how to ascribe greater or lesser ontological priority to the various objects of the explanation. This way one might still avoid making any reference to what *really* happens. It is as if Tymoczko sees it as harmless to simply help himself to the additional avowal.

Joseph Dubiel, in the course of making a diametrically opposite point that explanation, as opposed to *mere* description, does not necessarily carry the mark of “special rational command,” curiously helps himself to similar language: his essay is entitled, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens,” even though the *really happens* locution occurs nowhere in the main text.¹¹ Dubiel’s is also a methodological critique: he asks us to stop holding that analysis, at minimum, requires explanation *over and above* mere description. His view of what analysis might look like under this purged

vocabulary is similar to the sense of first-order ontological construction: “if you’re articulating a distinct and interesting conception of how a piece goes, you’re doing all that you need to do,” as opposed to occupying oneself with a further “anxiety about whether one is rising to the exalted level of analysis.” Thus we should be concerned only with saying how a piece goes. But whither what *really* happens?

Both theorists are helping themselves to the additional avowal of what *really* happens in a piece—Tymoczko because he presumably wants to double-down on that second-order ontological avowal, Dubiel because he wants to *do away* with any sort of second-order realm that would confirm or refute the first-order avowals. I read Dubiel to be asking: in the absence of any fundamentally different “analytical” procedure over and above “mere description,” what is the harm in saying some description of how a piece goes is also how a piece *really* goes, in whatever deeper sense one might imagine?

Even though the two authors escalate quite automatically from deciding what happens to deciding what *really* happens, we should maintain a way to tell the two apart, as they are making radically different claims. Tymoczko thinks there is a real elevation between the two levels, whereas Dubiel thinks it’s flat, and if it’s flat, it matters not whether one shuttles between locutions that were once regarded as more or less exalted. Dubiel encourages us to view description as merely one way to interpret the more fundamental act of ontological construction, among others more theoretically involved such as explanation or justification, in which case we would maintain a way to distinguish different senses of analytical discourse. Even if we follow Dubiel in holding that all the more theoretically exalted vocabulary (e.g. explanation, or what *really* happens) adds nothing fundamentally different, we can maintain a scale of theoretical involvement from description, to explanation, to justification, in order to discern where an analyst’s intentions lie.

Even though Dubiel spends the majority of his essay arguing for the primacy of description, he even slips into the vocabulary of explanation and justification—providing further proof of his “flat” conception of the grades of theoretical involvement. He says that the new conceptions of pieces (i.e. descriptions) offered to him by other analysts led him to believe that certain events were “supposed to happen” and that they “sounded just fine,” contrary to his first impressions. Even though this is the language of teleology (explanation) and permissibility (justification), his point is that the vocabulary comes for free once the conceptual work of the description is done.

If there is no elevation between the two orders of ontological avowal—if the difference is really only something superficial, like stamping one’s foot—then we might wonder whether the restaged critique of second-order ontological avowal developed above could return to infect the first-order level. Should we legitimize the entire spectrum from what happens, to what *really* happens, to even what’s true, as in Kramer 2012’s *true* expressive statements; should we delegitimize the entire vocabulary, as with error theory in ethics or following McClary 1987 and Kramer 1995; or should we maintain that we can sanction some claims, e.g. “innocent” description, and not others?

TWO ASSESSMENTS OF GROUNDING DESCRIPTIONS IN HEARINGS

One familiar effort to erect a distinction between description and explanation is that of grounding descriptions upon *hearings*, as opposed to an epistemologically implausible “music itself.” The positive assessment of this possibility supposes that theoretical differences can be heard—not just imaginatively heard, but *actually* heard, in some sense that can legitimize descriptions over explanations. For instance, Joseph Kerman supposes that the “deterministic overkill” generated by Schenkerian theory is

useless unless it can be shown to be *actually* heard.¹² The negative assessment supposes that the more seriously we interrogate the realism underlying talk of *actual* hearings, the more we will recognize an unwanted ontological determinacy of hearings as something *given*, rather than constructed. Nicholas Cook mocks the debate over the Tristan chord—whether “the chord was ‘really’ a diminished seventh or whatever”—as a result of misguided premises about chord derivation processes representing what the listener does subconsciously.¹³ When David Lewin argues for the insufficiency of his own model of phenomenology, he, too, employs the negative possibility. As a result of “the sociology of the matter” leading us to self-certify our analytical statements, an improper ontological priority of *Dasein* over *Anwesenheit* will arise at the level of the second-order “political/legal dispute” and infect the first-order phenomenological report.¹⁴

Even the gestures toward psychologism in the positive assessment share with the negative assessment a concern for the music itself. It is as if the descriptive-explanatory axis must terminate—whether it stands tall or lies flat—in premises about the *music itself* rather than ourselves, indeed out of some form of *obligation* to it.

AN OUTLINE OF A QUASI-REALIST META-THEORY

One of the central insights of expressivism, drawing on Hume, is that causal and moral beliefs are fundamentally attitudes rather than propositions subject to proof or disproof. Parkhurst’s expressivist meta-theory is thus well positioned to model the normativity of analytic discourse, but the explicit point of the model is to excise propositional knowledge, or any sort of world-disclosing or ontologically-implicative representation. He reminds us that his imperatival analysis does not preclude the

involvement of facts; indeed, “offering an analytical utterance means accepting a host of background norms and background facts.” It is only that the categories of facts Parkhurst imagines serving in this role—facts about the composer’s intent, the music’s historical reception, the way to appreciate a work, or a fact set entailed by an analytical method (i.e. Schenkerian theory)—are facts about *us*, not strictly about the music.

Instead, these are the possibilities that we wish to retain without suffering incoherence by adopting a quasi-realist meta-theory: that thought about music, construed along a descriptive-explanatory axis that is “flat” and thoroughly normative, bears the task of determining music, and that its terminus is the music itself rather than our commitments, a “music itself” with sufficient agency to overturn our ideas about it.

[*Normativity and imperatival analysis*]: Descriptions do not supervene on hearings; they are both normative and fundamentally basic. Descriptions combine into theoretical claims that lodge imperatives regarding how music is to be understood or heard.

[*Metaphysical anti-realism*]: There are not musical structures inherent in reality, considered in isolation from their creation or invocation by listeners.

[*Representation*]: At the same time, our imperatives do the work of truth-telling (or world-disclosing); they are not merely imaginative fancies.

[*Ontological implication*]: Thus we may form first-order claims about how music *goes*.

[*Truth*]: If we avoid proposing “extra-human truths” that would contradict anti-realism, there is no reason to reject movement along a “flat” axis from description, explanation, to even truth—so long as truth is glossed as a signal of our commitments.

[*Agency*]: The meta-theory is not an idle question; there is more at stake than merely academic politics. Our obligation to speak correctly is owed to the music itself.

ARE WE DANCING?

I will conclude with two matters that suddenly intruded: truth and idle questions. Blackburn is often accused of incoherence. If his ethics lack any

Jacob Walls — “Is There a Way to Invoke the Music Itself Without Embarrassing Ourselves?”

metanormative architecture—if all moves within the discourse amount to the further deployment of first-order values—then how can truth follow so cheaply? How do we earn the realism in quasi-realism?¹⁵ One of Blackburn’s clearest replies comes in casual response to a seminar question.¹⁶ Hume, on the other hand, doesn’t always exude the same confidence. Terry Eagleton observes that at the end of the first book of the *Treatise*, Hume “breaks down before our eyes, turning helplessly to the reader in an access of anxiety.” Hume becomes “the hairy prophet in the wilderness ... who discloses the dreadful secret that backgammon is more or less what it comes down to.”¹⁷

Academic music studies have struggled to define their stakes. Jonathan Dunsby even apologizes for inquiring into the matter: “...if we are not plagued here by ethical questions, what sort of purchase do practitioners have on the practice of music theory?

... It is hard to imagine a more contingent question in a more contingent context.”¹⁸

James Currie’s discussion of similar thrust lapses into a dream-like scene in which the music itself smokes a cigarette and busies herself with whatever she was doing when no one was watching.¹⁹ He leaves us with the image of dance: we risk ignoring the music itself at our peril. If we do not dance the steps that the music demands, we risk falling:

After all, a waltz might confuse its steps by trying to be a march, and ... bad dancing can disturb us by making us witness how easily we can convince ourselves that we have enacted a transformation when we are, in fact, about to fall over.²⁰

In my opening epigraph, David Foster Wallace tosses off a casual reference to music in the course of characterizing a special type of cerebral literature that appears to reach out and direct its own critical interpretation. There may be a reason why both Wallace and Currie reached for the waltz. We are not left to delirium, wondering if we have committed an absurd inversion of the is/ought fallacy by deriving what “is” from what “ought” to be—no, the waltz unambiguously tells us what to do with our bodies.

1. David Foster Wallace, “The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10, no. 2 (1990), 217.
2. Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (London: J.M. Dent, 1987), 81.
3. Lawrence Kramer, *Expression and Truth: On the Music of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 22.
4. According to Kofi Agawu, “the fictional texts that are put in place to facilitate understanding of a complex passage are exactly that: fictions” —but even so they are “the ultimate facilitators of truth-telling.” “How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back In Again,” *Music Analysis* 23, nos. 2–3 (2004), 267. In *Expression and Truth*, Kramer, too, allows formal-analytic statements to have a claim on truth, only a claim equal to that of so-called “expressive” statements.
5. For an introduction to projectivism and quasi-realism, see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry by Richard Joyce: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/moral-anti-realism/projectivism-quasi-realism.html>
6. Bryan J. Parkhurst, ““Fraught with Ought: An Outline of an Expressivist Meta-Theory.”” *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 3 (2013), 19.3.6.
7. Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 13.
8. Susan McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 17.
9. Jim Samson, “Analysis in Context,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46.
10. Dmitri Tymoczko, “Dualism and the Beholder’s Eye: Inversional Symmetry in Chromatic Tonal Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Riemannian Music Theories*, ed. Edward Gollin and Alexander Rehding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 253.
11. Joseph Dubiel, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens,” *Music Theory Online* 6, no. 3 (2000).
12. Joseph Kerman, “How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1980), 325.

13. Cook, 222.
14. David Lewin, “Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception,” *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 4 (1986), 382.
15. David Lewis replies to Blackburn in an article with the pithy title “Quasi-Realism is Fictionalism.”
16. Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 319.
17. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 46–49.
18. Jonathan Dunsby, “Criteria of Correctness in Music Theory and Analysis,” in *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music*, ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81.
19. James Currie, “Music After All,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no. 1 (2009), 177.
20. *Ibid.*, 194.