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Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, 375 p.

James Garratt



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- 1 Like the concept of aesthetic autonomy, to which it is closely connected, the idea of absolute music has experienced a precipitous fall from grace over recent decades. While once it was regarded as the dominant paradigm within Western art music (or even as the 'natural' condition of music), contemporary critiques have knocked it off its pedestal, excoriating it for fostering an asocial, apolitical, acontextual viewpoint. Absolute music has not been entirely expunged from the aesthetic lexicon, of course, yet in general survives today merely as a convenient shorthand for instrumental music without text or programme; scholars tend to neutralize its ideological baggage by stressing the historical contingency of the concept or, as Sanna Pederson notes, by quarantining it within scare quotes.¹ The prospects of the concept being revived and recuperated are surely remote, even though other problematic aesthetic terms and categories, such as aesthetic autonomy, have been the object of recent reappraisal.² Yet the task of understanding the historical meanings, functions and limits of absolute music remains crucial, not least because recent revisionism has arguably gone too far in underplaying its influence.
- 2 The difficulty lies in deciding what exactly absolute music comprises, since the term, the idea and the musical practice do not map neatly onto one another. One approach, epitomized by Sanna Pederson's important reappraisal, is to focus exclusively on the historical usage of the term as a means to cut the broader concept down to size. This method is productive, puncturing some of the misleading assumptions that have

accumulated around absolute music (including Roger Scruton's misconception that the expression was employed by early Romantic commentators such as Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder).³ But it is also problematic, since, even though Hanslick and Wagner used the phrase or its cognates relatively seldom, it would be unthinkable to write them out of the history of the concept.

- 3 Another approach, familiar from Carl Dahlhaus's work, is to construct absolute music as an ideal type: that is, to accentuate particular elements or viewpoints in order to discern coherence within a multiplicity of phenomena. This model usefully encourages musicologists to see beyond apparent oppositions (e.g. the Hanslick-Wagner antithesis) and understand how factors absent from some or even most of the sources may nonetheless have played an important role. But Dahlhaus's textual sample (Friedrich Schlegel, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Nietzsche!) is too small to sustain his notion that the metaphysical dimension of absolute music 'is the true musical aesthetic of the nineteenth century', providing 'latent unity' beneath surface-level conflict.⁴
- 4 Enter Mark Evan Bonds, whose aims and methods differ substantially from those of either Pederson or Dahlhaus. In an earlier, well-received article, Bonds took a restrictive approach similar to Pederson's, stressing that the concept of absolute music should be rigorously distinguished from the early Romantic idealist aesthetic of instrumental music.⁵ In the present book, in contrast, his approach is anything but restrictive, tracing the shifting fortunes and functions of the idea of absolute music through virtually the entire history of Western music aesthetics. There are pros and cons to this breadth, but it does give Bonds the advantage of not having to favour a particular dimension of absolute music (Dahlhaus's preference for the metaphysical aspect predisposes him to focus on the early Romantics, while a formalist take would gravitate towards Hanslick). Indeed, Bonds rejects an approach which treats 'absolute music as a constitutive concept, a quality or set of qualities that are (or are not) inherent within music' (p. 6), treating it instead as a regulative concept within music-aesthetic discourse.
- 5 The view that regulative concepts can help us understanding the practical efficacy of aesthetic ideas will be familiar from Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. For Goehr, the 'work-concept', like other regulative concepts, functions not through explicit rules but rather indirectly 'by reference to the ideals of a practice, to subsidiary constitutive concepts, and even more concretely to a set of beliefs and values about the status and nature of the objects and activities of a practice'.⁶ In this way, such concepts become embedded as discursive imperatives and constraints, functioning like givens within a particular culture. The relevance of these ideas to absolute music is immediately apparent, but so are potential problems. Goehr ties the work-concept to a particular period and repertory (Western art music post 1800), benefitting from the proximity of related regulative concepts such as aesthetic autonomy and, for that matter, absolute music as traditionally conceived. But Bonds stretches his regulative concept over a much broader time frame, with the consequence that it loses its identity and sheds its regulative function. While Bonds is right to stress the continuity of particular issues and concerns through the history of Western music aesthetics, the tale he has to tell involves radical innovations and discontinuities too; whether by accident or design, the years around 1850 still emerge as a fundamental break in the history of the concept.
- 6 If Bonds' book does not entirely succeed as a rebooting of the concept of absolute music, it nonetheless provides a provocative and impressively cohesive account of the history of music aesthetics. The cohesiveness stems from the rigour with which he traces the

shifting relationship between the subsidiary ideas which he groups under the frame of absolute music; most importantly, the relationship between perceptions of music's essence and its effect, explored through continuities and shifts in how expression, form, beauty, autonomy and disclosiveness were conceived. As a result, the book's coverage of the history of aesthetics is more tightly focused than is the norm with survey volumes (which tend to align each period covered with particular predetermined dominant themes). It is also sets a new benchmark in terms of the breadth and sheer volume of figures discussed; while other authors on music aesthetics have applied this level of scrutiny to the discourse of particular periods, it is an impressive achievement to engage in this way with five centuries' worth of texts.

- 7 Part of the function of the opening eight chapters, which cover music aesthetics prior to 1850, is to correct the historically 'myopic' character of the concept of absolute music formulated by Wagner and Hanslick (p. 7). These figures nonetheless take centre stage, and Bonds argues that the origination and popularization of the term absolute music stem from their need for a 'retronym': a 'neologism created to distinguish between older and newer varieties of a particular phenomenon' (p. 134). While readers may be unconvinced by Bonds' 'long haul' conception of absolute music, they will nonetheless appreciate the subtlety of such moves. The twentieth century – arguably the only period in which the concept really acquired a regulative function within art music – receives short shrift in Bonds' account; in addition, the relationships between the idea of absolute music and developments in the other artistic discourses get little attention. There is still plenty of room for multiple, alternative histories of absolute music, and in particular for accounts which attempt to map out the complicated relationship between aesthetic discourse and musical practices. This book, however, provides the definitive foundation for any future work in the field, supplanting earlier accounts such as Dahlhaus's *Idea of Absolute Music*.
- 8 Bonds argues that his aim is not 'to argue for or against the legitimacy of the idea of absolute music' (p. 5). Yet tracing the continuity of an idea through five centuries has the effect of making it seem permanent or indispensable; Bonds claims, revealingly, that the concept will 'continue to shape our attempts to identify and comprehend the essence of music' (p. 299). This conclusion – perhaps a nod towards analytical aesthetics – seems out of place given the book's historical thrust; no less jarring than the metaphysical effusions at the end of the original edition of Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*. It would surely be entirely fitting if Bonds, like Hanslick, were to remove this final paragraph in subsequent editions of the book.

NOTES

1. PEDERSON, Sanna, "Defining the Term 'Absolute Music' Historically", *Music and Letters*, Vol. 90, N° 2, 2009, p. 240-262.
2. See, for example, JOUGHIN, John J. and MALPAS, Simon (eds), *The New Aestheticism*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2003; RANCIÈRE, Jacques, "The Aesthetic Revolution

and Its Outcomes”, repr. in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran, London, Continuum, 2010, p. 115-133; and CURRIE, James, “Music After All”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 62, N° 1, 2009, p. 145-204.

3. SCRUTON, Roger, “Absolute Music”, *New Grove II*, Vol. 1, p. 36-37; PEDERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

4. DAHLHAUS, Carl, *Zwischen Romantik und Moderne: Vier Studien zur Musikgeschichte des späteren 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, Emil Katzwichler, 1974, translated as *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1980, p. 38-39.

5. BONDS, Mark Evan, “Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 50, N° 2-3, 1997, p. 387-420.

6. GOEHR, Lydia, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 103-104.

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