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Krenek, Cage, and Stockhausen in Cavell's "Music Discomposed"

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Lydia Goehr's piece offers a strikingly original explanation of the significance of Cavell's title, "Music Discomposed," to the theme of his essay. Goehr's piece does so mainly, though not exclusively, by viewing Cavell's essay through an Adornian lens, situating it in a post-war cultural context and reconstructing the etymological history of the term "discomposed." In revisiting Cavell's essay, however, I found myself drawn to a different explanation of the titular phrase: I think "music discomposed" is Cavell's pejorative label for a certain misunderstanding of the significance of modern music—a misunderstanding mainly found in Cage's interpreter Krenek. I will summarise that alternative explanation here. Then, I'll briefly note what I think are some suggestive discrepancies between it and Goehr's own.

1. WHAT IS MUSIC "DISCOMPOSED"?

Understanding the meaning of Cavell's title ("Music Discomposed") requires taking account of his discussion from Section VI of what it means for music to be "composed" in the first place ([1967] 1976b, 189–93). For Cavell, musical works are "composed" in the specific sense that they are (and are encountered by the listener as) products of human *intention* ("they are, in a word, not works of nature but of art," as he says [ibid., 198]). Moreover, Cavell argues, the great achievement of many *modern* musical works is to vividly encapsulate phenomena connected with human agency. In particular, Cavell stresses the way they alert us to certain disconcerting facets of our encounters with the deeds of others. As Cavell explains, modern musical works confront us with the ever-present possibility of a certain kind of fraudulence in such encounters. Moreover, these works suggest we can never fully eliminate the suspicion that the trust we necessarily place in others may have been betrayed in a given instance. Ultimately, then, Cavell maintains that our encounters with modern musical works model almost perfectly our encounters with other people. They are no less fraught with opportunities for misunderstanding, alienation, and miscommunication, but also no less rich in possibilities for mutuality and connection.

As Cavell stresses, this account implies a novel view of the relation of these *modern* works to past ones. In particular, it implies that the possibility of fraudulence has always been present. If that possibility is inherent to human action, artistic or not, then it follows that it will have been present in all past musical works, since all were products of agency. At least in this one respect, modernism's break with the past is less radical than either its detractors or its defenders might have us believe.

The truths about our condition encapsulated in modern musical works are disconcerting; we therefore have a tendency to repress their true significance, a tendency Cavell finds in certain (then) contemporary critics and composers. One of the great themes of Cavell's work of this period is that many of the more extreme ideas in both traditional philosophy and contemporary criticism (those in the periodical *Die Reihe*, for instance) represent misbegotten attempts to evade these truths about our condition. This is a facet of one of Cavell's central preoccupations in *Must We Mean What We Say?*: philosophy's flight from the human.

It is against this backdrop, I suggest, that we should understand the meaning of the phrase "music discomposed." If music "composed" is music that is a product of intention, then music "discomposed" is modern music and criticism that mistakenly strives to eliminate intention from theory and practice. Although Cage is clearly implicated in attempts to create music of this kind, his interpreter Krenek is the main culprit here. For Krenek, "chance" displaces human responsibility completely and therefore divests music of its status as a product of the human will (Cavell explicitly labels Krenek a "nihilist" and includes Stockhausen in this camp, too). Put crudely, Krenek, Stockhausen, and, to a lesser extent Cage, are fleeing the human.

If this answer to Goehr's question ("What anyway is a music discomposed?") seems plausible, then I think that Goehr's argument should be qualified in a certain respect. Goehr's essay often equates "music discomposed" with modern music and, more specifically, its radical break with convention; moreover, the essay seems to include Cavell in the chorus of authors who lament the breakdown of convention, bemoan the disorientation modernism creates, and so on. In my view, however, Cavell's reaction to modern music is not conventionally conservative but more nuanced and complex. What Cavell bemoans is not the break with convention itself but rather the wrongheaded attempts of certain critics, composers and philosophers (e.g., Krenek and Cage) to understand this break as having rendered human intention obsolete.

There is textual evidence that this is what Cavell meant by his title. Admittedly, he does not explicitly say so, but he comes very close. For Cavell, critics and composers like Cage and Krenek, with their appeals to "chance," threaten music with "discomposition" in the following way: "When a contemporary theorist [Stockhausen, Cage, Krenek, et al.] appeals to *chance*, he obviously is not appealing to its associations with taking and seizing chances, with risks and opportunities. The point of the appeal is not to call attention to the act of composition, but to deny that act; to deny that what he offers is composed" ([1967] 1976b, 202).

2. ATONAL MUSIC: DISORIENTING MODERN SUBJECTS? OR REORIENTING THEM?

Goehr's piece emphasises Cavell's preoccupation with the challenge "atonality" poses to modern listeners who may find it inaccessible. In my view, however, it is just as important to emphasise a countervailing theme in Cavell's treatment of atonal music. For Cavell, atonal music represents one of two paths that can be taken by modern composers. The atonal music of composers like Schoenberg, inaccessible as it may be, actually represents the last hope for a certain kind of accessibility. Such accessibility, says Cavell, is unachievable in the other main form of modern music—the "total organisation" of composers like Stockhausen. Atonal music represents a heroic attempt to re-establish convention in an era of "mass-deception" in which tradition has become an object of profound (perhaps justified) mistrust. Responding to the challenge posed by late Romantic extensions of chromaticism that eventually overwhelmed tonality entirely, atonal music finds a new, non-tonal basis and substitute for the structure and organisation that characterised traditional musical works. In this respect it both breaks with and preserves tradition, and indeed does so in the interest of preserving the possibility of communication between artist and audience. By contrast, the "total organisation" of Krenek and Stockhausen renounces convention of even the most minimal kind. It therefore completely forecloses the possibility of shared understanding between artists and their audience—it rules out the possibility of saying (or better, playing) something that means anything at all to another person (it is, as Cavell says, "nihilism").

3. CAVELL'S "HISTORICISATION" OF THE CATEGORY OF IMPROVISATION

In the closing section, Goehr discusses Cavell's elevation of the musical phenomenon of improvisation to the status of an ethical ideal (a virtue reflecting resourcefulness, courage, and other praiseworthy human qualities). I wonder, however, if this section should have included an engagement with Cavell's "historicisation" of improvisation. I ask because it seemed, at points, as if the essay implied that Cavell celebrates improvisation and even looks to it as a "saving power" to redeem us from the disorientations of modernism; although that's partly right, Cavell also appears to maintain that improvisation is no longer a possibility in modern music and may never be again.

Among Cavell's most provocative claims in the essay is the seemingly paradoxical one that improvisation, which seems spontaneous, unstructured, and free from various strictures, can actually only take place where an agreed upon and stable set of shared conventions exists. As I understood it, the rationale for this claim is that the novel gestures of the improviser achieve their aesthetic effect only by virtue of tacit reliance on such conventions—even if, or maybe especially if, they are relied upon only in order to be subverted. Accordingly, improvisation, which we often associate with certain trends in modern music (jazz, for instance), actually has its home in a much earlier "convention-bound" period, and is scarcely possible in modern music—at least in those quarters

where convention has (more or less) completely broken down. With Bach, Cavell says, improvisation is still possible: his music, although not ordinarily improvised, can at least be imagined to have been improvised or to be the product of the composer's improvisational experimentation. With Beethoven, however, improvisation is no longer possible: not because there is, in fact, less improvisation in his works but because we can no longer hear his pieces as if they were improvised. Here, Cavell draws a distinction between what is a product of "improvisation" (for him, an honorific) and what is merely a product of "chance" in Cage and Krenek's sense (for him, a symptom of decline, as we saw earlier). Cavell does so in an effort to express his conviction that what appears improvised in modern music—Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI*, for instance—is, in fact, not improvised at all but rather a mimicry of true spontaneity.