

Exploring Music through Lewis Rowell's

Thinking About Music

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It is not often that a book takes one beyond the simple subject matter of music, beyond theory, notation, and harmonization. Lewis Rowell has done just that with his book, Thinking About Music. It certainly *is* about music, and in an as broadly-defined a scope as is conceivably possible. In some sense, it is a history book. In other ways it is a philosophy book. It is certainly much more than a book of musical theory and harmonization; these items are only briefly touched upon. The book goes deeper in many other areas, and is an exposition presenting information from numerous fields of study, including those of culture, mythology, history, and philosophy. Reading it certainly makes one *think* about music in new ways.

Music should either be left alone to exist on its own for our enjoyment, or else it should be studied thoroughly. Rowell chose the latter. The very title itself only hints at what the book contains. The word *thinking* indicates that a process is in effect with the intellect being focused. *Thinking* is an active verb, and represents exactly what we are *doing* when reading the book. Although the subtitle identifies it as an introduction to the philosophy of music, it is certainly much more. Art and drama are included where appropriate to show how other aspects of culture are intertwined with musical traditions.

The ordering of the book's chapters takes us from ancient times to the present, ending with a chapter that encourages us to speculate on what music might become if we allow the expression of music in the broadest possible sense, and without restrictions of any kind.

Rowell points out that defining music is inherently difficult since the subject matter is so diverse. Early definitions of music focused on its origins and effects. Mythology figured prominently in ancient discussions of music. People saw patterns in music that were similar to

those observed in nature, such as the repetitiveness of the four seasons, the linearity of a flowing river, and the cyclical process of birth, life, and death of living things. These inanimate and animate processes were often personified through myths.

Although mentioned only a couple of times in their respective eponymous chapter, Dionysus and Apollo represent the dichotomous views of ancient Greek mythology. What was important about this chapter was that it showed us the two major ways of viewing the ancient world. Simply put, Dionysus represented all that was ordered, comprehensible and proportionate. In contrast, Apollo symbolized all that was disorganized, irrational and emotional.

Rowell insightfully discussed five major categories of myth—those of person, power, transience, harmony, and instrument. Each of these myth categories represents cultural issues in a slightly distinct philosophical way. For example, a myth with a transient theme would present a trial, a crisis, or difficulties for people who try to hold onto, capture, or save music. In myths of transience, music always seems to be on the verge of being lost after it is played, and measures need to be taken to secure it. The other four categories of ancient musical myths present equal difficulties for those involved in their respective thematic plots.

The importance of including mythology in the book was that it helped set the tone for what was to develop in the generations following ancient traditions. Individuals in ancient society wanted to understand the mysterious world. Creating myths helped them feel more in control of their lives in that it gave them a way in which to comprehend the mysterious. Understanding that people not only enjoyed music as an auditory experience, but also placed value in understanding music, helped set the foundation for the chapters of the book that follow.

In chapter six, “European Tradition to 1800,” Rowell presented summaries of the major cultural phases of Europe from ancient civilization through 1800. His discussion went much

broader than musical history since it is vital to see how all aspects of life were affected during these periods. It is difficult to pinpoint when one phase ended and another one began, because certain regions or areas of Europe may have been slower than others to evolve culturally and musically. Nevertheless, the generally recognized musical periods in European cultural tradition from ancient times to 1800 are the Middle Ages (from ancient civilization to 1400), the Renaissance (1400-1600), the Baroque (1600-1750) and Classical periods (1750-1800).

The year 1600 is generally recognized as the beginning of the “modern world” in the view of philosophers and historians. No longer was mythology deemed as important a way to explain the unknown. Rather, logic and critical thinking were becoming increasingly valued as advances were made in science. Rowell pointed out that from 1600 onward, there were two major schools of philosophical belief in Europe, that of Cartesian rationalism and that of empiricism. Both helped shape the way we think about the world. After these belief systems had taken root, a new system of belief arose in Germany, that of German idealism. Introduced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the importance of German idealism was that philosophical inquiry was expanded to value artistic speculation. Music thus became a relevant topic for philosophical argumentation.

Not only was music increasingly included in philosophical discussions, but it was becoming structurally refined. Jean-Phillipe Rameau (1683-1764) organized a comprehensive theory of tonal harmony and chordal structure. From Rameau’s contributions, we understand how classical music evolved out of prior musical traditions with its inclusion of more varied chordal textures.

The Romantic period is recognized to have started in 1800. During this period societies experienced an expansion of ideals and considered possibilities in almost all facets of culture.

The way people were thinking was also expanded. Rowell's seventh chapter, "The Romantic Synthesis," presents how values, style, and thought were in such harmony with each other as to effectively represent a cultural ideological synthesis. Romanticism represented the response of emotion against reason. And if emotion is set up against reason, then almost anything is possible. Values of Romanticism thus included *the disordered, the intense, the dynamic, the exotic, the ambiguous*, and many others that were recognizably different from the values of earlier periods. As Rowell astutely pointed out, Classicism was Apollonian, and Romanticism was Dionysian. Despite centuries of advancements, it was evidently still relevant to use Greek mythological archetypes to distinguish Romanticism from its cultural predecessor.

After the discussion of Romanticism, Rowell presents us with a useful chapter on perception that shows us *how* we think and perceive. It is an instructive psychological exposition on the subject. Modes of perception are discussed, such as a visual component being included when watching a performance rather than having only the auditory component when listening to a performance. Also in this chapter is a section on meaning, including discussion on an object itself (e.g., a song) and meaning the listener attaches to that object.

Following the chapter on perception is an equally meaningful chapter on values. Subchapter headings include a discussion of various categories of values, including tonal (e.g., timbre, harmonic color, chord, silence), textural (e.g., simple/complex, thin/dense), dynamic (e.g., athleticism, ambiguity), temporal (e.g., rate, motor rhythm), and structural (e.g., theme, melody). Rowell also discusses value clusters, such as the concerto, which are compositional forms made up of certain acknowledged combinations of values. In this chapter on values, he also includes a discussion of preferences, judgments, and standards, helping us realize that just as each individual can perceive differently, each can also value differently.

On pages 188 and 189 at the end of the chapter on values, and still considering the points made in the preceding chapter on perception, Rowell presented “Guidelines for excellence in music: a proposal.” His list of 11 values is helpful for both novice and expert. What an insightful way to provide a system of valuing excellence that almost anyone from any Western culture can use to recognize and better appreciate excellence in its sundry forms.

Rowell’s list of guidelines for valuing music wouldn’t necessarily be pertinent to the music of all cultures around the world. In chapter 10, titled, “Comparative aesthetics: India and Japan,” Rowell chose two old-world societies to illustrate that musical values are cultural in nature and not absolute. It is uncommon for a book that is supposed to be an introduction to the philosophy of music to contain such in-depth descriptions of music that some would deem so unusual and exotic. Just because we in the Western musical tradition have learned to expect certain conventions (e.g., compositions based on a root tone) doesn’t mean that all cultures across the globe believe likewise. The Japanese, for example, value the simplicity of music that has elements of disorder and asymmetry. Noise elements, like the loud pluck of a samisen string, are valued in that they make the sound distinctive.

Indian music is similarly different from what many are used to in the Western musical tradition. Its music is often improvised, but not in the pure sense of spontaneous compositions. Rather, Indians songs follow a general structure of impulse and habit, a combination representing tradition and innovation. Indian music is heavily influenced by the theory of *nāda*, which maintains that everything is a part of a continuum, and performer, performance, audience and location are all a part of that organic process.

In the Western tradition, we are used to the 12 tones within an octave. Indian and Japanese music often incorporate semitones, and it is understandable that Japanese and Indian

music is not reliant upon notation. Certain traditions of structure and technique are passed down from teachers to students that keep recognizable forms consistent over time.

Rowell listed seven impediments to the aesthetic experience, as presented by Abhinavagupta, an eleventh-century scholar from Kashmir, India. These seven impediments are tedious to ponder, and one must struggle to appreciate their value. But they do have relevance when helping the reader understand the consistency of the long tradition of the music of India.

The first ten chapters of the book dealt primarily within the purview of Lachesis, a Greek mythological character representing the past. Rowell revisits Greek mythology only in the introductory remarks of Chapter 11. He goes on to write that what follows for the rest of the book is in the domain of Clotho (the present) and Atropos (the future). Rowell's mentioning of symbolism from Greek mythology reminds us of the roots of musical inquiry. It keeps us remembering the past as we turn (starting in Chapter 11) to inquiries of the present and future.

One inquiry in Chapter 11 has us break down music into a concept of its root essence. Rowell forces us to ask questions that beg an understanding of the components of music. For example, he asks us to wonder how 'raw' the raw material of music truly is. Sound itself is music's raw material, and an acoustical engineer would be a good professional to consult on this issue. One thing is for sure—if sound is the raw material of music, then the intrinsic value of music is found in its own language of tone. Something either sounds good or it doesn't, yet it is relevant to say that what is good or not good is not in the eyes, but in the ears of the beholder.

Time is also an important element in music. Time itself may be part innate, but also part learned behavior. On a sheet of musical staff paper, notation requires a certain sequence, time signature and speed. However, solely in the memory bank of the brain, a song can be "rushed" during remembrance in such a way that parts overlap or are synchronous. Music is thus both

synchronous and asynchronous. Commercialism may be a factor in the preference of the masses for traditional sounds and structures, and it is perfectly okay for commercialism to have its place among the realm of creative endeavors as it pertains to production and promotion. Music is nevertheless a product of our creative intelligence, regardless of whether or not it is liked or what we do with it after it is created. The very fact that composers push beyond conventions proves that we have a creative spirit. Our ability and drive to modify our environment for our own ends is at the heart of the matter on creativity. Music is a product of our industrious nature.

Rowell hesitated at the beginning of the book to “define” music. Instead, he wisely preferred to discuss diverse types of music, from ancient, to medieval, to Baroque, to Classical, to Romantic, to Asian, and finally to modern. The variety seems endless, and possibilities for the future seem infinite. Rowell’s inclusion of such broad topics in Thinking About Music helps us to understand music’s place within our society. The book is a successful integrative effort in that regard. From the book, we learn not only *about* music, but we gain a rich understanding of humanity as well.

As author of Thinking About Music, Rowell wore many caps. He adeptly plays the role of historian, philosopher, cultural anthropologist, psychologist, musician, analyst, researcher, theorist, and scholar. Through a very detailed and organized discussion of music, we are forced to expand our own awareness of music. In essence, the book leaves us thinking about music in enriched ways. Neither musician nor non-musician can complete the reading of the book without being positively affected in such a way as to appreciate music for all that it is in its many forms, for how it has evolved, and for all that it can become in the future.



Works Cited

Rowell, Lewis. Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts, 1983.