Emotion and Meaning in Music

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Often the *Zeitgeist* operates anonymously behind the scenes in shaping our lives. Sometimes it works openly and in very specific ways. When I think of these specific impacts on my life I am reminded of Leonard Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. My old paperback copy is falling apart. It tells me it was printed in 1962, and I'm pretty sure I found it that year in the university bookstore. I was at Northwestern

and in the course of shifting from music to psychology. I had been brought up in the tradition of American pragmatism—my father was a high school teacher steeped in the progressive approach of John Dewey. A large part of the attraction of psychology was the promise it held of attacking empirically the issues I saw in music and, in the broadest sense, in life. It was clear to me that the problems of how we understand music, and of how music is structured so that people can understand it, needed to be addressed through empirical research, and basically involved problems of psychology. This was also true of the fundamental questions of who we are as humans, how we understand one another, and how we understand ourselves. So I was strongly drawn to study psychology, and in particular what my new psychology advisor Donald T. Campbell called "the comparative psychology of knowledge processes."

Into this heady and enthusiastic mixture came Meyer's book. I became immersed in it. Leafing through it now, I see the examples that fairly leaped off the page to grab me in my transitional, receptive state: the c minor fugue from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Isolde's *Liebestod*, Beethoven's symphonies, Mozart's quartets, a dance from *Carmen* . . . all of these presented in a way that illuminated them with new sense, and more importantly, connected them to my new found enthusiasm for empirical investigation of the mysteries of musical structure. Meyer's chapters bristled with suggestions of problems to be investigated, along with a well thought out framework for seeing musical structure from a psychological perspective.

My advisor had recommended the technique of creating my own index on the back flyleaf as I progressed through the book, and that and my marginal notations indicate that an aspect of Meyer's thought that captivated me in particular back then came under his heading of "The Weakening of Shape." I had not thought much at that time about ambiguity in music, and Meyer's account opened a whole new vista for me on what (to judge from the indexical entries I invented) had previously struck me as meaningless filler material. The following sentences from page 174 had been marked for future reference:

> The absence of a well-shaped melodic pattern is important. For were rhythm and melody distinctly shaped, the attention of the listener would be directed to these and the feeling of security and control found in such clearly articulated shapes would considerably diminish the suspense and uncertainty engendered by the uniformity of the other aspects of the musical process.

This and innumerable other wise and perceptive observations by Meyer broadened my understanding of music immensely. The book's dilapidated binding and dog-eared pages indicate the times I've returned to it again and again in my thoughts about music cognition and musical structure. I am forever indebted to this great scholar and wise thinker.