



Review of Michael L. Klein and Nicholas Reyland, eds., *Music and Narrative since 1900* (Indiana University Press, 2013) and Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts: On the Ancient Quarrel between Literature and Music* (Clarendon Press, 2009)

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[1] Does narrative musical analysis still need to be defended? For Michael Klein and Nicholas Reyland, the answer is emphatically “no.” Their new collection of essays, *Music and Narrative Since 1900*, promotes the value of narrative analysis—and the impulse to do it—as simple common sense:

Since we know it is productive to speak about musical narrative, the primary question asked in this collection concerns what has happened to musical narrative since 1900. (x)

Such confidence in the narrative approach—unthinkable in the 1990s—comes across as perfectly reasonable today, especially in the wake of Byron Almén’s *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (2008), which rigorously counters the most common objections to narrative analysis. Thus Klein—in a characteristically whimsical opening essay—fancifully invokes a world in which the pent-up anxiety from three decades of critical onslaught simply vanishes: “those tiresome arguments about music’s failures of diegesis, representation, temporality, agency, and causality are rendered moot with the wave of a wand” (3).

[2] Klein might find this magic wand especially handy for Peter Kivy’s *Antithetical Arts*. Kivy has been arguing against the concept of narrative in absolute music for quite some time, and he isn’t ready to watch a narrative victory parade without spreading a bit of rain:

For more years than I care to remember, I have defended against all comers...enhanced formalism: the view that absolute music, music without text, title, or program, pure instrumental music, in other words, is to be understood and appreciated as a structure of sound, sometimes an expressive structure of sound, without either representational, narrative, or semantic content. (201)

He describes *Antitibetical Arts* as possibly his “last effort in the cause,” which he has defended “with a confidence sometimes approaching a kind of evangelical zeal” (201).

[3] Before we see how narrative fares amidst the chaotic diversity of the twentieth century, then, we might first take notice of Kivy’s objections. As most readers will know, Kivy has approached music mainly as a philosopher; he is not typically concerned with the day-to-day mechanics of music theory and analysis. But *Antitibetical Arts* is unique in that it includes a middle section—the heart of the book, really—that launches extensive, lacerating critiques of specific narrative analyses by some of the most prominent analysts in the field: Fred Everett Maus, Anthony Newcomb, Jenefer Robinson, and Gregory Karl.⁽¹⁾

[4] The entire book is written in Kivy’s trademark prose: witty, intelligent, and exceptionally clear. But for anyone sympathetic with the narrative approach, it is a deeply frustrating read. To begin, many “narrativists” will find that Kivy has fundamentally misunderstood what they do and why they do it. Here, for instance, Kivy explains why analysts identify agents and personae in music:

The musical persona performs, really, two functions for the narrativist: to give to absolute music a fictional content that is supposed to account for its artistic substance and interest, at least in part; and to explain how absolute music is capable, which such theorists claim it is, of arousing what I have been calling the “garden-variety” emotions—love, happiness, fear, melancholy, anger, and a few other such. (101)

While I don’t doubt that *some* theorists have thought about musical personae in just these ways, it hardly represents the way most theorists think about their work. The principal concern of narrative analysts, typically, is not to explain the value or emotional impact of a particular piece—which is usually taken as a given—but to offer new ways of thinking about and experiencing music’s temporal organization.

[5] Kivy, however, seems entirely unconcerned with such suggestive possibilities.⁽²⁾ Consider his response to Newcomb’s interpretation of the scherzo in Mahler’s Ninth Symphony. Newcomb never settles on a fixed, final reading of the piece—he continually acknowledges the indeterminacy of his personae and the possibility of multiple readings. He does argue, however, that the movement features a struggle that raises “issues of weakness of will, of lapses of attention, of addiction to external glitter, entertainment, and the racy life, of banalization and brutalization of the initial clumsy, rustic image, and of the realization only intermittently and too late of the need to resist” (quoted in Kivy, 142). Kivy rightly challenges whether any of this can be reasonably identified as an objective, immanent feature in the music, but what is most telling is how he casually dismisses the value of Newcomb’s imagination:

That it caused Newcomb to “imagine”...weakness of will and the rest I have no doubt. We have his essay to prove it. That, however, is of no particular concern to the vast number of other listeners who have heard the work with no such result. (152)

[6] This is typical of Kivy’s response to narrative in general. It seems not to have occurred to him that many of us enjoy music analyses *precisely because* they offer something new. We may reject interpretations such as Newcomb’s, but a novel reading rejected is often more valuable than the one we’ve already imagined ourselves. Kivy never addresses these suggestive possibilities other than to brush them aside with pompous contempt:

Whatever paltry interest or pleasure these minimal scenarios, with their “indeterminate” personae, and agent-less actions can provide for those who manage to hear them in the music, such vanishingly small rewards cannot answer for what it is about absolute music that so deeply interests and pleasures us. (197)

[7] The reason Kivy is so reluctant to entertain such narrative imagination becomes perfectly clear when he discusses his preferred form of listening, what he describes as “canonical” listening: listening in “a formalist manner *without* hearing anything but *the music*; no personae, no stories, no psychodramas, no nothing” (his italics, 148).⁽³⁾ To give us a better sense of what this entails, he approvingly quotes descriptions of such listening by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Clive Bell,

which are significant enough for Kivy's book that they deserve to be quoted here in full. Wackenroder says:

Whenever I go to a concert, I always enjoy the music two ways. Only one of them is the true one. This involves attentively following the progression of sounds, yielding completely to this stream of overwhelming sensations, and banishing and withdrawing from every disturbing thought and every alien sense-impression. A certain effort is involved when one drinks in the sounds so avidly, and it cannot be sustained for any length of time. (22)

Bell expresses a similar sentiment:

When I am feeling bright and clear and intent, at the beginning of a concert, for instance, ...I get from music that pure aesthetic emotion I get from visual art...[A]t moments I do appreciate music as pure aesthetic form,...as pure art...with no relation at all to the significance of life...Tired or perplexed, I let slip my sense of form...and I begin weaving into the harmonies...the ideas of life...(22–23)

[8] These quotes engage familiar scenarios: the inevitable moments at concerts when our attention lapses and we drift off into thoughts and memories that have nothing to do with the concert program. Certainly this can be construed as a poor form of listening in that it causes us to withdraw from the music—not really listening much at all. But Kivy doesn't consider the possibility that "weaving into the harmonies...the ideas of life" might actually *focus* our attention. It might be a way to become more involved with the music. It might even teach us something new about those "pure" sounds that Kivy so wants to protect. And perhaps the reason that people like Wackenroder and Bell find it hard to refrain from infusing life into the music is because *it is a perfectly natural thing to do*. There is nothing unusual about listening to non-programmatic music and perceiving actions, conflicts, failures or victories.

[9] One of the best explanations for why people might respond this way comes from theories about empathic or mimetic listening. Kivy addresses these ideas by way of Noel Carroll and Jerrold Levinson. Carroll notes "a tendency to *imagine*, imagistically or otherwise,...the kinds of movements, and perhaps associated activities and habits of mind, suggested viscerally by the movement in the music" (quoted by Kivy on page 87). Similarly, Levinson suggests that "we end up feeling as, in imagination, the music does" (quoted by Kivy on page 102).⁽⁴⁾ Kivy is doubtful about such "psychological conjectures" (93)—he expresses frequent skepticism that the field of music cognition has produced anything worthwhile on the topic—but he does not dismiss the concept of empathic listening out of hand. Rather, he simply argues that such responses do not represent the kind of listening he prefers. In other words, he rejects Carroll's "imagining process," because "that is just the kind of 'mind wandering' that, according to the formalist account, is destructive of his canonical listening mode" (94).

[10] This ultimately gets to the heart of Kivy's book. Kivy wants to maintain that the profound beauty of absolute music is a mystery—he insists, over and over again, that it cannot be explained with analogies to literature—and he wants to protect a "pure" form of listening that isn't sullied by other peoples' programs. Kivy is entitled to this, of course, but one wonders if this listening strategy offers anything of value to the modern music analyst. He isn't happy with Newcomb's analysis of Mahler or Maus's analysis of Beethoven or Robinson's analysis of Brahms, but what would alternative analyses by Kivy look like? What would he imagine in the music? What would he offer other than the option of sitting back and trying as hard as possible to eliminate the outside world?

[11] Despite all of this, most readers will agree with Kivy's two main objections to the concept of musical narrative: (1) Narratives do not exist as immanent properties of absolute music separate from the imagination of the listener/analyst, and (2) musical narratives are not the same as *literary* narratives (Kivy, for instance, is fond of pointing out that the analytical stories of Maus, Newcomb, Robinson and Karl are nothing like the stories of Shakespeare). This is not breaking news; the objections have been around for quite some time and have been duly acknowledged and addressed in much recent work—see [Almén 2008](#), [Hatten 2004](#), and [Klein 2004](#) in particular—but Kivy unfortunately focuses his critique solely on the book *Music and Meaning* ([Robinson 1997](#)), which makes his entire project come across as hopelessly outdated.⁽⁵⁾

[12] Is there anything, then, that we should take from Kivy before proceeding into the narratives of the twentieth century? There is this: despite all of my objections, some of Kivy's dissatisfaction with musical narrative rings true. This review has criticized Kivy for not adequately considering the suggestive aspects of music analysis, but—to be fair—many of the authors that he cites confuse the issue by implying that their narratives are indeed *in* the music (as opposed to being a product of their own imaginative interaction with the music).⁽⁶⁾ And although Kivy certainly goes too far in referring to musical narratives as “monstrously *uninteresting*” (his italics, 197)—even naming a section on Newcomb “The vague and the vacuous” (143)—his general complaints about the idiosyncratic narratives of others won't be entirely unfamiliar even to the most fervent narrative theorists. Creating a musical narrative is an intensely personal endeavor, always springing from our own imaginative reaction to a given piece. Small wonder, then, that the narratives we tend to prefer most are often our own. And the most successful narratives are usually those that are deeply rooted in strongly inter-subjective, empirical observations—a foundation of insightful details that teach us something new about the music even if we don't follow the author into every flight of fancy.

[13] Fortunately, *Music and Narrative since 1900* offers many analyses that fit that description quite well. The book is loosely split into a familiar binary: theory in the first half, analysis in the second. But this is a predictably fuzzy boundary given that most authors can't discuss the one without the other. The essays are somewhat uneven, as would be expected with contributions from nineteen authors, but there are many flashes of brilliance and the book as a whole makes a strong case for the significance of narrative beyond the Romantic era.

[14] The collection seems to have arisen primarily as a response to general concerns about the role of narrative in atonal, modernist music, but it ultimately covers a much broader catalogue. In fact, there are only a few essays that directly engage early modernists (including Debussy, Schoenberg, and Webern). The rest of the book features work on twentieth-century tonality (Britten, Ives, Shostakovich, Prokofiev), British avant-garde (Musgrave, Birtwistle), popular music (Pet Shop Boys, Kevin Eubanks), twentieth-century opera (Saariaho, Måche, Dusapin, Dazzi), minimalism (Lucier), and music written within the past twenty years (Thomas Adès and Salvatore Sciarrino).

[14] There isn't space to cover any of this in detail so I'll constrain myself here to some general thoughts about the book's theory/analysis divide and what it might suggest about the current state of the field. First, narrative music analysis may no longer need to be defended, but this book reminds us that narrative-oriented theorists are still much better at discussing the challenges and problems that arise with music and narrative than simply creating musical narratives themselves. The methodological chapters are strong—Klein's essay in particular is a must-read—but this is unsurprising given that many of the authors (including Klein, Hatten, Almén, and Lawrence Kramer) have been forging their arguments for years amidst a great deal of skepticism about the value of the narrative approach. No wonder, then, they have much valuable advice about how to approach twentieth-century music from a narrative perspective.

[15] But the best way to defend the value of narrative analysis is to *produce* a compelling narrative analysis. Talking about story-telling is no substitute for story-telling itself. And twentieth-century music poses real problems in that regard. It is somewhat disappointing, then, that the best narrative analyses in the collection, by Matthew McDonald and Sumanth Gopinath, involve virtuosic hermeneutic interpretations of tonal songs (by Ives and Britten, respectively). These essays are successful because, among other things, they draw upon a vast amount of information: textual sources, biography, historical context, intertextuality, musical topics and much else. But nobody will be surprised that such songs would allow for deep hermeneutic inquiry. What about the hard cases? What kind of stories might we tell about a Webern String Quartet? A Philip Glass piano piece? Or the aleatoric music of Cage?

[16] Several authors are adamant that meter, tonality, and familiar forms are not needed to generate good analytical stories. And authors like Klein make a convincing argument that tensions between “neo-narrative” and “anti-narrative” are part of what makes modern music interesting. The pieces may not yield to simple stories about victory or defeat, but that doesn't mean there aren't other tales to tell.

[17] I generally sympathize with this optimism, but I also can't help feel a Kivyish skepticism creep over me while reading

about possible narrative approaches to the kinds of music that are most “narrative-resistant” in a commonsensical way. Consider the case of minimalism. Hatten and Almén offer a short discussion of Arvo Pärt’s *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) and Joshua Banks Mailman discusses Alvin Lucier’s *Crossings* (1984). Despite obvious challenges in identifying agency, conflict or “transvaluation” in *Spiegel im Spiegel*, Hatten and Almén argue that we can nevertheless conceive ways in which Pärt’s music could engage a sense of narrative.⁽⁷⁾ Simply imagining that the piece might break away from its rigid process (even if we know it won’t) can lead to “a productive tension between, on the one hand, a potential transvaluation constantly on the cusp of materializing and, on the other, the predetermined plan that undermines this potential” (81). Mailman takes a similar approach: he notes a lack of potential for agency or transvaluation in *Crossings*, but argues that we can create narrative interest by providing our own imagined possibilities: “We may imagine our protagonist in bed being awakened slowly by the rays of the sun through venetian blinds on the morning of his execution...or, more optimistically...the morning of an Olympic figure skating competition or chess championship match” (139).

[18] Few would dispute our ability to create such imaginative scenarios—minimalist music, arguably, is especially well-suited to exactly the kind of “mind wandering” that so bothers Kivy (see paragraphs 8 and 9 above)—but the danger is that it reduces the music to a soundtrack in search of a scene. And it’s hard to imagine how these suggestions could blossom into a coherent, well-developed narrative. As a form of listening, it goes without saying. As an analytical strategy, it’s underdeveloped at best.

[19] Perhaps the most revealing essay in this regard is by Arnold Whittall, who writes about the struggle to apply Alménian archetypes—comedy, tragedy, romance, and irony—to the non-programmatic, instrumental music of Schoenberg and Webern. Whittall doesn’t hold the same skepticism as Kivy, but he recognizes an ambivalence in much modern music that defies any easy consensus about narrative outcomes. He judges Almén’s 2008 analysis of Schoenberg’s op. 19, no. 4, which interprets the piece as an example of “extreme tragic irony,” as a fairly peculiar, idiosyncratic reaction:

Almén’s negative response to the Schoenberg seems to me like that of a listener trying to reconstruct a first hearing of this piece when it was new by someone knowing something of Schoenberg’s recent personal life (the suicide of his wife’s lover, the painter Richard Gerstl) and predisposed to map this fact onto the music: all is “alienation and...disintegration,” with any forces that might make for cohesion—and even enjoyment—suppressed (91).

He then briefly contrasts this with his own interpretation of the piece: “exuberantly witty,” with an unresolved play between “forcefulness and delicacy” (92). But Whittall is reluctant to squeeze any of these thoughts into a fixed, narrative archetype. He isn’t opposed to narrative analysis—he sees it as a perfectly valid mode of discussing our personal reactions to music—but he is skeptical about the inter-subjective resonance that any given narratives might have in the face of such ambivalent scores. And given the analyses in the book as a whole, it would appear that the best narrative work is being done not on the atonal instrumental music of early modernism, but on overtly programmatic pieces, often with tonal or neo-tonal implications.

[20] Nevertheless, one of the greatest qualities of the book is that it has immediate pedagogical value for anyone who teaches twentieth- and twenty-first-century repertoire. Indeed, the book could easily become the central text for an undergraduate or graduate course on twentieth-century analysis. Despite the reservations above, narrative is a broad enough concept to encompass traditional set-theoretic approaches while also allowing for expansion into topics and genres traditionally neglected in general courses on post-tonal theory. In fact, the essay by Hatten and Almén offers an introductory, textbook-like survey of narrative approaches that could itself become the template for a complete course (the essay offers quick bullet points about the various narrative complexities in the work of dozens of composers).

[21] As several authors point out, there is still no real consensus on what musical narrative means. What is most important, though, is that it always raises questions that have the potential to teach us something new about the music we love best. Fred Maus introduces his essay on the Pet Shop Boys with a remarkably humble statement to that effect: “In working on the essay, my experience and understanding of these songs, and the roles of narrative in their meanings, became richer; I hope this will be the case for my readers as well” (255). There is still far more to be said about narrative since 1900, but this book

takes us a long way, and certainly makes our understanding of the music richer in the process.

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Footnotes

1. The first section of Kivy's book summarizes the views of various formalists and their "quarrels" with literary interpretations of absolute music. Kivy acknowledges that readers might skip this section without harm. The third and final section poses a question: If the value of absolute music cannot be explained with reference to literary content, how can we explain it? Kivy ultimately leaves this question unanswered.

[Return to text](#)

2. David Temperley (2001) makes a crucial distinction between "suggestive" analyses, which posit new ways of experiencing music (starting from the assumption that others won't hear it the same way the analyst does), and "descriptive" analyses, which attempt to explain *why* people hear music in a particular way (starting from the assumption that most people hear it the same way, even if unconsciously). Temperley shows that analysts are not always clear about which type of analysis they are doing. This is certainly true for narrative analyses and it frequently causes confusion in both of the texts under discussion here.

[Return to text](#)

3. Kivy notes the emergence of "new musicology" in the 1980s and 90s, which makes his adherence to "the music itself" more stubborn than naïve.

[Return to text](#)

4. Arnie Cox (2011) has expanded on these ideas more recently, explicitly linking them with attributions of agency and narrative analysis.

[Return to text](#)

5. It is especially unfortunate that Kivy wasn't able to engage Almén's book, which offers a "sibling model" in which "literature, drama, and music share a potential for meaningfully ordering events in time, but differ with respect to their degree of referential specificity" (2008, 14). Almén contrasts this with the "descendant model" (Kivy's model), in which musical narrative is—at best—an imperfect descendant of literary narrative. As for the possibility of narrative as an objective

property of music, Almén writes, “It is the observer who ultimately makes connections between events. There can be no unequivocally true or false explanations, only more or less convincing ones” (31).

[Return to text](#)

6. Kivy quotes two compelling examples of this sort of thinking. Newcomb, for instance, writes that in music “aspects of agency are not continuously displayed, nor are aspects of narration. Both are intermittently operative” (131). This implies that agency and narration are indeed properties of the music. And Robinson leaves herself open to legitimate skepticism when, in discussing a Brahms Intermezzo, she says, “if we do not interpret the piece as a [persona’s] psychological drama in which powerful emotions are tracked and experienced, we cannot understand why the piece is so powerfully moving” (104).

[Return to text](#)

7. Almén (2008) borrows the term “transvaluation” from James Jakob Liska. According to Almén’s summary, “all narratives...involve *the transvaluation of changing hierarchical relationships and oppositions into culturally meaningful differences*” (his italics, 2008, 41). This is a difficult concept to explain succinctly, but it tends to involve (1) identifying meaningful musical oppositions (e.g. major vs. minor, up vs. down, dance topics vs. Sturm und Drang) and then mapping them onto cultural differences (e.g. aristocracy vs. working class). Transvaluation involves a change in the hierarchical rank of these opposing elements over time.

[Return to text](#)

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