



Misreading Meyer: A Reply to Cochrane

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ABSTRACT: A response to Richard J. Cochrane's article "The Phases of Fire" which appeared in volume 1.1 of this journal. Two main aspects of Cochrane's presentation are critiqued: (1) that in a number of substantial ways Cochrane has misrepresented Meyer's account of conformant relationships in musical structure (which Cochrane refers to as "Meyer's concept of 'conformancy'"), and (2) that the tripartite notion of model, copy, and simulacrum does not map onto musical structures in general and Meyer's account of conformant relationships in particular.

[1] Let me begin by first citing a number of minor examples of where Cochrane, either explicitly or implicitly, misquotes or misconstrues various aspects of Meyer's argument. Right off the bat it should be noted that Meyer does not use the term "conformancy," but rather speaks of "conformant relationships."⁽¹⁾ Cochrane's transformation of this word from Meyer's adjectival use to a nominative reveals the way in which he has reinterpreted Meyer, as we shall see below. Another problematic alteration (in this case, an addition) to Meyer's argument is Cochrane's repeated use of the term "dialectic."⁽²⁾ While Meyer does speak of the tension between musical continuity and musical closure—indeed this is one of the guiding principles of his entire book—it is not accurate to describe Meyer's view of music as dialectic or dialectical. Indeed, Meyer takes Reti to task for the latter's dialectical approach to musical structure and his reification (not to mention blatant overuse) of conformant relationships.⁽³⁾ Yet another example of Cochrane's interpretive ventriloquism occurs in his summation and discussion of Meyer's "five factors for coherent musical structure."⁽⁴⁾ Here Cochrane notes that "copies must be separable units, or poses," a grammatical construction which implies that "poses" is Meyer's term, whereas in fact it is Cochrane's. As a final example, Cochrane claims that Meyer's analyses "show a development of large-scale, or macro-dialectics . . . out of smaller dialectically constructed units, down to the micro-dialectical copy itself."⁽⁵⁾ Here Cochrane seems to mistake hierarchic nesting (where in his characteristic fashion Meyer notes subordinate and superordinate relationships between various structural levels) with dialectic structure. Meyer explicitly denies that the structural patterns he describes are the product of recursive processes:

The way in which a particular parameter acts in articulating structure may be different on different hierarchic levels. For example, on lower levels dynamics and orchestration tend to contribute to the articulation of

rhythmic patterns, but on higher levels they generally serve in the structuring of large-scale formal relationships. . . . The syntax of particular parameters tends to change as one moves from one level of the hierarchy to another.⁽⁶⁾

This is in flat contradiction to the kind of conformant relationships that Reti pursues and that I infer Cochrane to be describing.

[2] Cochrane begins his essay by presenting Meyer’s “formula” for gauging the strength of perceived conformance/musical similarity:⁽⁷⁾

$$\text{Strength of perceived conformance} = \frac{\text{Regularity of pattern (schemata)} \cdot \text{Individuality of profile} \cdot \text{Similarity of patterning}}{\text{variety of intervening events} \cdot \text{temporal distance between events}}$$

With this equation (which Meyer presents as a summary to several pages of discussion) Meyer tries to unpack a relatively straightforward analytical notion: “the greater the variety of intervening events and the greater the separation in time between two comparable events, the more patent the shape of the model must be if a conformant relationship is to be perceived”⁽⁸⁾. In his exegesis of this equation Cochrane misconstrues a number of its terms. First, Cochrane claims that “regularity of pattern . . . is the most ill-defined of terms, but it seems to mean simply that a pattern which is very complex will not be easily recognizable when it reappears.”⁽⁹⁾ Cochrane ignores/omits Meyer’s inclusion of “schemata” in this term. Schemata are, of course, given substantial treatment by Meyer; indeed, a discussion of melodic schemata comprises the entire second half of Meyer’s book. In context it is thus clear that by “regularity of pattern” Meyer means syntactic regularity—that is, the extent to which a particular musical shape can be recognized in terms of its relation to a stylistic archetype (e.g., a cadential progression characteristic of a particular style). This term has nothing to do with the relative complexity of any particular pattern. Next, “Individuality of profile” does not mean, as Cochrane claims, that “the pattern must not be too like the surrounding music,” but rather that some aspects of the musical shape itself must be distinctive, and not just a presentation of generic syntactic patterns.⁽¹⁰⁾ “Individuality” is thus included to balance the generic features of a particular motive that are recognized by the first term of the numerator (for example, a figure that is a triadic arpeggiation) with other features (such as a characteristic rhythm) which give the otherwise generic shape a particular identity. Likewise “Similarity of patterning” does not mean, as Cochrane claims, “similarity between copies of the model” (for of course this is precisely the product that the “Strength of perceived conformance” is supposed to represent), but rather the ways in which various parameters are involved in varying subsequent presentations of a musical shape. Finally, the product of this equation is not “strength of the conformant relationship” but rather the “strength of the *perceived* conformance.” Meyer is keenly interested in the perceptual aspects of musical structure and musical experience. The terms in the numerator of the equation are those factors which make a particular musical shape easy to remember and recall when it re-appears, while the terms in the denominator are those factors which inhibit recall. Conformance is not simply a property of the musical object(s); rather it arises through our interaction with the musical object, hence Meyer’s use of the term “conformant relationships” and not “conformancy.” Meyer’s essential question is not ontological, but epistemic.

[3] Cochrane’s misappellation of “conformancy” reveals his own ontological reification of conformant relationships. Given that Meyer is interested in *perceived* similarities between musical structures, it follows that he is less concerned with the “real” similarities and differences between musical objects as he is with the ways in which listeners come to make judgements regarding similarity and difference. The validity or invalidity of analytic/listening judgements based on conformance-as-heard (to paraphrase Clifton) informs Meyer’s subsequent critique of Reti. Reti’s analyses are called into question not because the conformant structures he finds are not there, but rather (a) because many of the relationships Reti claims to be present are not likely to be perceived as distinct instances of conformance, and (b) even if they are perceived (perhaps with the help of Reti’s analyses) their musical relevance is often questionable.

[4] At the core of Cochrane’s critique is Meyer’s omission/exclusion of “the simulacrum” in the latter’s discussion of conformant relationships. Instead of speaking only of “models” and “copies,” Cochrane believes that a third term—the

simulacrum—must be introduced. It should first be noted that Meyer’s use the term “model” (or “model event”) differs substantially from Cochrane’s. For Meyer “model” is simply the first instance of a distinct musical shape in a particular musical context, whereas for Cochrane “model” assumes a higher ontological status. Cochrane gives “a favorite example” to explain his notions of model, copy, and simulacrum: The idea of a table (model), the table (copy), and a sculpture of the table (simulacrum).⁽¹¹⁾ Let us consider two ways in which this tripartite ontology might map onto a piece or pieces of music. Having done this we will be in a better position to evaluate Cochrane’s claim that “Meyer . . . views a whole piece of music as governed by the logic of model and copy.”⁽¹²⁾

[5] Let us first consider how the idea-table-sculpture example would map onto an entire piece of music and its relationship to other musical objects. Right off the bat we have the interesting problem of where to place the “model” of a particular piece—Is the “model” of Beethoven’s 5th symphony an a-priori sound object which Beethoven was fortunate to discover (versus a musical object which Beethoven brought into existence through his creative actions)? Is it an ideal structure that exists only in Beethoven’s head? Perhaps it is that ideal structure which is embodied in the score, or (since scores are only partial maps of the work-in-performance) in the apprehension of a score by a musically competent score-reader? Any one of these might serve as “models”. Then we have particular performances of Beethoven’s fifth. It is fairly safe to consider these, at least for the present purpose, as “copies” or instantiations of the ideal 5th symphony.⁽¹³⁾ And clearly recordings of a particular performance could be considered copies. But what would count as a musical simulacrum, the analog to the sculpture of the table? Perhaps some transmogrification of the score? (this is not so far fetched, as we have everything from Switched on Bach to Hooked on Classics— Beethoven’s Fifth with a disco beat).⁽¹⁴⁾ At the very least one would have to acknowledge that a simulacrum of Beethoven’s fifth would be based upon an artwork—not a sculpture of a table, but a sculpture of a sculpture. Note that this relationship (sculpture #1 to sculpture #2) is one between two items in the same ontological category, not between items in different categories.

[6] Cochrane does not concern himself with complete works as simulacra; his interest is in mapping the model-copy-simulacra onto intra-opus relationships. Let us examine this mapping with a concrete example. Consider the first four notes Beethoven’s Fifth as “motive X.” We then hear the next four notes. For the purposes of this discussion let us accept that we have two discernable structural units—we are not worried about which notes belong to which motive, etc., though of course these are often crucial questions. In comparing these two musical structures it would seem that we have but three options, as notes 5–8 can be (a) another instance of motive X, (b) something else—motive y (that is, not X), or (c) a variant of motive X—an X’. Of course, it is in option (c) where most of the musical and analytical fun is—what parameters are varied, what remains the same, and so forth. But what strikes one immediately is that we are not really dealing with a clear “model” which is ontologically prior to the “copy,” as we are unable to determine what the “ideal” or platonic model of the 4-note motive might be. Maybe the model is notes 5–8 (as in a bit of artistic cleverness Beethoven has given us the copy first and then the model); maybe it is some other structure we have not yet hear (or may never hear). Happily, this is not what goes on when we attend to Beethoven’s musical structure. What does seem to be going on are judgements of similarity between two musical objects on the same ontological plane. One need not appeal to any ideal structure in order to apprehend their relative similarity and/or salient differences. Here is an analogy: I have two red bricks which I will use in building a wall. They are both the same size and weight, but one is a little redder, while the other has a slightly rougher surface. Need I appeal to some Platonic brick in order to mediate my judgements regarding their similarity? The answer is no—I can attend to the relevant qualities (roughness, redness) to discern differences while my other perceptions (size, weight, shape, etc.) inform me of their similarity.

[7] When we add the notion of the simulacrum into this context the difficulties in mapping the model-copy-simulacrum ontology to intra-opus relationships become even more acute. Do we really want to claim that the second and subsequent presentations of Motive X are somehow akin to sculptural representations of the first presentation? Cochrane warns us that this is not the proper arrangement of relationships:

It is not that the simulacrum resembles the copy which resembles the model . . . the copy resembles the model, but the simulacrum resembles nothing, or rather: “If the simulacrum still has a model, it is another model, a model of the Other from which there flows an internalized dissemblance.”⁽¹⁵⁾

I am not quite sure what this means, but it at least seems clear that the simulacrum is not going to help us deal with the pragmatic question of whether or not the pattern formed by notes 5–8 of Beethoven’s fifth symphony are similar to the pattern formed by the first four notes, and if so, on what would our judgement of similarity be based. Cochrane thus seems to be making a bit more than is perhaps warranted of the presence of iterable elements in musical syntax (this may well be an occupational hazard of post-Derridean philosophy).

[8] At the end of the same paragraph Cochrane claims that Meyer “views a whole piece of music as governed by the logic of model and copy” and thus asks if Meyer thus prefers “a structurality [sic.] based on the single Ideal model, and the similarities and differences which the copies bear to it?” The answer to this question is clearly and easily no, as (again) this is the sort of “structurality” which Reti pursues and which Meyer critiques. Furthermore, Meyer does not claim that all hierarchic music is based on conformant relationships; conformant relationships are but one of several kinds of organizational strategies or “musical processes” on one level which give rise to coherent formal structures on higher levels (Meyer, pages 88–97, as well as the quote given above). And while Meyer is a structuralist, he is one with a keen cognitive bent: musical structure is significant to the extent that we can make sense of it. Meyer’s beef here, then, is not with hierarchic versus non-hierarchic music, but with intelligible versus unintelligible music. Meyer quotes Herbert Simon:

If there are important system in the world that are complex without being hierarchic, they may to a considerable extent escape our observation and understanding. Analysis of their behaviour would involve such detailed knowledge and calculation of the interactions of their elementary parts that it would be beyond our capacities of memory or computation. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Music, especially complex music, is not just something we hear—it is something we hear and remember. For without memory, without being able to apprehend and relate motives, phrases, sections and so forth, all one can do is listen to the succession of sounds. To put it another way, if one cannot remember a piece of music or passage, then one cannot make any determination of its complexity or coherence, its hierarchic or non-hierarchic nature. In *Explaining Music* Meyer’s focus is not on the music, but on the explaining of it, on the epistemic limits to our understanding of musical structure.

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Footnotes

1. Cochrane, paragraph 1.

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2. *ibid.*, paragraph 3.

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3. See *Explaining Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) pages 64–65. Though Meyer does entertain notions of music history in dialectic terms (*ibid.*, pages 56–59), this is a historical perspective, not an analytic one.

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4. Cochrane, paragraphs 3 & 4. Actually, Meyer’s “five factors” are not those which give rise to musical coherence, but are factors which delineate musical patterns, and to that end are mainly aspects of articulation and closure which serve to individuate units of musical structure (Meyer, 83).

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5. Cochrane, paragraph 6.

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6. Meyer, 89.

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7. Meyer, 49; Cochrane paragraph 1. (Cochrane presents these terms in an abbreviated fashion, i.e., C = R.I.S./V.T).

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8. Meyer, 49.

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9. Cochrane paragraph 1.

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10. This difference between generic structural patterns versus musical figures characteristic to a particular work has been discussed at some length by Eugene Narmour, who draws a distinction between “style structures” and “style shapes” in *The Analysis and Cognition of Melodic Complexity: The Implication-Realization Model*, (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1992).

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11. Cochrane, paragraph 7, from Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Athlone, 1990) 257. For another (and extremely entertaining account) of the notion of simulacrum see Umberto Eco’s discussion of “absolute fakes” in his *Travels in Hyperreality* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pages 1–58.

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12. Cochrane, paragraph 8.

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13. In *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, pages 86–88) Jerrold Levinson draws a very useful distinction between “performances” of a work (which we usually get) versus “instances” of a work (which exactly and completely fulfill the musical directives embodied in the score as executed by competent players); under this framework “instances” could serve as “models” while “performances” would count as copies.

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14. These are precisely the sorts of simulacra that Eco (op. cit.) discusses, e.g., Wax museum dioramas of Leonardo’s “Last Supper” that purport to be *more real* and *more authentic* than Da Vinci’s original painting.

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15. Cochrane, paragraph 8; the quote is from Deleuze, 258.

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16. Meyer, 80; from Herbert A. Simon, “The Architecture of Complexity,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 106.6 (1962): 477.

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