

**Abstract** Stanley Cavell's thinking on music may appear an odd theme for a special issue of the *Journal of Music Theory*. According to Cavell, "although I have written very little explicitly about music . . . something I have demanded from philosophy has been an understanding precisely of what I had sought in music." In this introduction, a brief history behind the issue is presented and a comparison is drawn between the tasks of music theory and Cavell's "demands" upon philosophy. By glossing Cavell's notion of the "scene of instruction," questions of teaching, epistemic justification, intersubjective acknowledgment, and personal responsibility over one's critical language are introduced as central themes. One of Cavell's "scenes" involves David Lewin, and the friendship of these two figures is subsequently discussed. Lastly, these themes are related to the various articles in the issue, which are quickly introduced and loosely organized in groups for the benefit of the reader.

BACK IN 2008, I SUGGESTED to the Society for Music Theory's Music and Philosophy Interest Group that we read and discuss Stanley Cavell's essay "Music Discomposed." I had two reasons in mind. The first was commemorative: the collection in which the essay appears, Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?*, was originally published in 1969 and was rapidly approaching its fortieth anniversary. The second was personal: Cavell's thinking—and not only his thinking about music—had been influential in helping me think through various problems of contemporary music, problems that I place under the general heading of music and skepticism.

Despite my own personal interest, Cavell's work may appear as an odd theme for an issue of the *Journal of Music Theory*. Although an important thinker on aesthetics, Cavell has written no book-length treatment of music and only a handful of essays on new music, opera, and other sundry topics. This contrasts with his extended meditations on other media, such as film (*The World Viewed* [1971]) and drama (*Disowning Knowledge* [1987]). Yet music permeates Cavell's thinking, cropping up in unexpected contexts. Perhaps the reason for this is autobiographical. In *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994), Cavell describes his involvement with music as a young man, growing up listening to his mother's remarkable piano playing, joining a Latin dance band as a teenager, studying music as an undergraduate, and contemplating a life as a composer before finding himself ineluctably drawn to philosophy.

According to Cavell, "Although I have written very little explicitly about music . . . something I have demanded from philosophy has been an understanding precisely of what I had sought in music" (2000, 175). That

I would like to thank all the contributors for their wonderful (and timely!) work, Ian Quinn and the editorial board of *JMT* for supporting this project, and my coeditor, Stephen Decatur Smith, for his untiring help and brilliant editorial commentary. And a final thank-you must go to Stanley Cavell for nearly half a century of brilliant work. It is inspiring to share your "routes of interest."

“something,” which both philosophy and music share, is a certain pitch, a certain emphasis on the smallest details of enunciation, a certain way of hearing and rehearing our world and our languages, a certain responsibility to which we hold one another for every nuance in the shaping of a phrase, sentence, or idea. In this respect, the figure of the critic, analyst, or teacher is exemplary in Cavell’s thinking, for they are the ones who attempt to communicate this way of listening, of tracking such inflections by negotiating with the work and interrogating it down to even its minutest details.

By employing the phrase “scene of instruction,” Cavell tries to articulate the challenges that the teacher, critic, or analyst faces—challenges that are not simply those of tracking the work but also involve communicating the way in which the work is being understood and making it available to others.<sup>1</sup> The challenge is that, for Cavell, there is no guarantee that our communications with others will be understood. Our mutual attunement is a constant project, which allows for no surefire transactions. Cavell sums this up in a famous passage from *Must We Mean What We Say?*:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and communication, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (1969, 52)

You will notice that the passage begins by referencing learning and teaching, by addressing the care and fragility with which our projections are taken by others and are applied to diverse contexts. Without naming it explicitly, the passage obliquely invokes a “scene of instruction.” Such scenes are littered throughout Cavell’s work, the *primal scene* being found in his reading of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’” (Wittgenstein 1958, §217).

What justifications can I give when I have run out of ways of explaining the work? If there is no guarantee for our projections, how can we keep going? Cavell’s reading of the passage depends on understanding the term *inclination*. For Cavell, *inclination* registers the moment of hesitancy by the instructor—she is hesitant to say to the pupil, “This is simply what I do,” for

<sup>1</sup> For more on his use of “scenes of instruction,” see Cavell 1991, ch. 2.

such an utterance would abnegate her responsibility to make the point of the work perspicuous. Because nothing insures our transactions, one is constantly left in the position of having to elicit new and better ways of communicating what it is about the work that draws our attention and demonstrates its meaning and grip.

If one is starting to detect affinities between Cavell's "scenes of instruction" and the work of the music theorist, perhaps this is no coincidence. Indeed, one of Cavell's scenes of instruction involves David Lewin, back when they were colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley. Cavell often attended lectures and conversed with Lewin, seeing what many others subsequently saw in him—a gifted teacher with a unique capacity to invent new and better ways of communicating analytical insights. Referring to Lewin's teaching, Cavell writes, "Whatever bouts of intellectual loneliness I may since then have been tempted to, have been attended by the memory of those scenes of instruction—sublime instances of tracking the work that art does, of the rigor and the beauty one looks and listens for" (2000, 175).

If Cavell learned something from Lewin as a teacher—something about music's ability to be responsible for its minutest utterances, something of the intersubjective demand to refuse ending our explanations with the claim "this is simply how I hear it"—I think of this issue as an opportunity to respond to Cavell's teaching and to stage our own scene of instruction with him. For this issue, Stephen Decatur Smith and I solicited essays from a number of colleagues, giving them the open-ended demand to write about any aspect of Cavell and music they desired. Many gravitated toward Cavell's most famous essay on the topic, "Music Discomposed." (Perhaps this is no surprise considering that "Music Discomposed" was the essay we had read together in the interest group that generated the momentum behind this issue.) That essay, now securely entering its fifth decade, is the entry point for all queries about Cavell and music. To the reader, I gently suggest that those unfamiliar with "Music Discomposed" review it before tackling the contributions contained here. If you do, no doubt you will notice that the question of fraudulence pursued by Cavell is intimately connected to the communicative condition of the "form of life," detailed in that famous passage from *Must We Mean What We Say?* For Cavell, fraudulence is not simply a forgery or a fake, but a communicative interaction where the responsibility over its smallest details has been abnegated. This question of musical fraudulence, its necessary connection to artistic modernism and the significant role played by the critic in exposing or prevailing over its grasp, forms the center around which the essays by Eric Drott, Amy Bauer, Franklin Cox, and Lawrence Kramer circulate.

The four remaining essays could be grouped in twos. In the first pair, Michael Gallope and Stephen Decatur Smith take comparative approaches to Cavell's work, building up contrasts and points of intersections with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Theodor Adorno, respectively. In the second pair,

the topics of subjectivity and identity are foregrounded. Richard Beaudoin investigates the use of borrowing in Cavell's writing, drawing a connection between philosophical and musical transcription, and interrogates how borrowing allows the writer/composer to be simultaneously disclosed and dissimulated. Dmitri Tymoczko (taking a page from Cavell himself) weaves together criticism and autobiography, offering a series of reflections about the significant influence that Cavell, as a teacher, had on him—a real-life “scene of instruction.”

—*Brian Kane*

#### **Works Cited**

- Cavell, Stanley. 1969. *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1991. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. The Carus Lectures. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2000. “Philosophy and the Unheard.” In *Music of My Future: The Schoenberg Quartets and Trio*, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff, 175–83. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan.

**Brian Kane** is assistant professor of music at Yale University. 