

From 9-11 to 02-02-2002 When Music(ology) Signifies

Both McClary's argument "On Ethics and Musicology" and my response are passionate pleas for the right to deal with meaning and signification in music. In claiming the right for musical interpretation we both recognize the ethical dimension in music from the start. After all, where meanings are revealed or generated, values immediately come in. As does the interest of the signifying subject. My example of the signifying tango at the royal wedding in the Netherlands on February 2, 2002, follows naturally from McClary's suggestion that music not only is shaped by, 'the much larger cultural world', but generates cultural meanings in its own right.

'The widespread prohibition of interpretation' is the vehicle with which Susan McClary drives into the debate on ethics and music. Her contribution, "On Ethics in Musicology", resists that prohibition and focuses on the recognition of an ethical dimension to music and musicology.¹

Her argument is a clear address about the right to deal with meaning and signification in music; in brief, the right of interpretation as a crucial dimension of musicology. As described by McClary, musical interpretation is not only a right but a responsibility, which, in fact, situates her as an ethicist *pur sang*. Because, where meanings are at stake, values immediately muscle in.²

"On Ethics and Musicology" is an appealing argument. For who would deny that interpretation and the attribution of meaning – which after all is a form of musicology – has ended up in the margins of musicological practice in the course of the twentieth century? That subjective interpretation has been eclipsed to make way for the putative objective criteria of formal analysis? I wouldn't. Nor would I deny her that 'the past never stands still'. A view by which McClary situates herself firmly among post-modern historians for whom researching the past is, as a matter of course, closely related to the construction of the present; for whom such a search is not a matter of gathering objective facts, but rather of constructing historical meaning and significance. And who would argue with McClary's call for explicitness about the signifying subject (male/female) and his or her interest in the resulting interpretation? Once again, I wouldn't.

Having said this there are certain aspects to her argument that I would like to comment on. In the first place, in reference to her remarks on how different categories of musicians reacted to the events of September 11, events

which an American musicologist with a feeling for cultural contexts clearly cannot ignore, especially within the context of a debate about musicology and ethics.

McClary mentions a difference in position taken up by, on the one hand, rock musicians – who 'banded together to mount concerts in support of those who had lost family members and to offer comfort and hope to a traumatized world' – and, on the other hand, high-art musicians (to use her term) whose best effort was to once again dig Beethoven's Ninth out of the closet. My question is: what is the ethical difference between these two examples? Just as with Beethoven, the rock concerts did not offer new repertoire with actual commentary on the events. Bruce Springsteen's newest album, *The Rising*, being of course an exception to the rest. 'Pop heroes are painfully silent on September 11', headed the Dutch daily *De Volkskrant* (August 8, 2002) in response to the release of *The Rising*. It is indeed surprising, as pop critic Gijsbert Kamer observes, that in pop music, drenched as its history is with social and political commentary and involvement, the events of September 11 have barely been dealt with in recently released songs. Pop musicians' support for the victims is comparable to the support offered by classical musicians, effectuated by comparable charity concerts. I see no basic difference between concerts programmed with either comforting pop songs or comforting classical tunes.

McClary's complaint, subsequently, about Karlheinz Stockhausen's reaction to nine-eleven, is understandable yet naïve. The German composer's jealous admiration of Bin Laden's 'spectacular achievement' is what might be expected from a modernistic composer. That is, the practicing of pure autonomous aesthetics as the result of a modernistic conception of art which ignores all ties to reality, may no longer carry much weight, as McClary

1 Despite the fact that McClary refers solely to musicology in her title, in her arguments she makes no systematic distinction between the ethical dimension in music and musicology. Accordingly, the activities of musicians, as well as the observations of musicologists (and, by extension, music journalists) are considered here in one and the same light.

2 McClary doesn't question the concept of ethics. Neither does she restrict the definition of the term 'ethics' in her use of it. She uses the terms ethics and ethical in a rather general way: the assessment of actions with the use of a set of moral values. I will use these terms in the same general, and indeed limited, manner.

suggests. Nonetheless, modernist ethics and aesthetics still prevail in most practices of music.

It goes without saying that Stockhausen's remarks were morally reprehensible. But only slightly more reprehensible than – to take a random example – the reviews published on the recent Dutch stage production of Rameau's opera *Platée*, set in an American-style amusement park. How hilarious the critics found it all: the Elvis imitation, the cowgirl, Mercurius' hobbyhorse, Coca Cola cans and line dancing, all of which set in the mythological world of gods and demigods and performed to eighteenth-century music. Not one journalist demonstrated the slightest empathy with the deeper layers of this staging, where the American amusement culture mirrored a part of reality – even became reality in itself – and could give way to a more profound critical reading. The most significant comment was heard in the lobby, where the water nymph *Platée* was described as a cross between Leni Riefenstahl and Shirley Temple. By their looks, indeed. The complexity of the aforementioned characters, however, certainly in this combination, also gives rise to underlying conflicts and transcends at least the fixation with the visual. But I digress.

My second point concerns McClary's wish for future musicology to be ethically involved. 'I would like to see musicology of the future leave behind its insulated refuge to examine the place of music within the much larger cultural world that shapes it but that also is powerfully shaped by it.' The end of that sentence is important; it is her last paragraph, left unillustrated.

An appropriate illustration would be about music which is not studied for its intrinsic meaning, but which generates powerful meanings in its own right. The example that immediately springs to my mind, as a Dutch critic, is an event that took place on February 2, 2002. The Netherlands was extremely proud of its own determination surrounding the royal marriage between Máxima Zorreguieta, Argentinean born, and the Crown Prince, that very day. The bride's father – Jorge Zorreguieta, in the seventies Minister of Agriculture during the Videla dictatorial regime – was explicitly excluded from the wedding, this in response to his dubious political role in a government tainted by untold numbers of victims. Difficult for the young royal pair, as well as for the very proud royal family not used to succumbing to such popular pressures, the people had indeed spoken clearly. Father or not, he was not welcome to the marriage, to *our* marriage. A strong statement. The rebound was even stronger, however, a masterly move, instigated by whom is not even clear. During the church service, after the expected and appropriate Schubert-*Ave Maria*, there was a particular tango *Adios Nonino*. Argentinean music, no

doubt about that. The bandoneon wailed, the bride and with her the rest of the country tried in vain to fight back tears. And never before was a rejected guest more obviously represented than in this slick arrangement of Piazzolla's tango, complete with mushy backing choir, and all of this in front of the world's television cameras. Through this music, the man who was responsible for so many disappearances, appeared to us in triumph: despite our refusal, he was there.

I agree with McClary. Whether music and ethics are in any way related is in fact irrelevant. Signified music – *in casu* musicology – is ethics. But not only that. Her and mine musicology is ethics of an uncertain kind. For we are dealing with a musicology that celebrates ambiguities; that manifests itself aware of the fact that each interpretation generates another, a musicology that welcomes the diversity of interpretation, shunning the search for final answers. Similarly, the ethical dimension to musicology is never certain nor exclusive. In such a musicology ethical meanings are necessarily ambivalent, even, and in all seriousness, provisional. And it is precisely because of such provisionality that critical debate and argument in musicology is a *conditio tacita*.³

3 My thanks are due to dr. R. Hoogland, drs. C. Wilson and prof. dr. E. Wennekes for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.