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Post-structuralism and Music Theory (A Response to Adam Krims)

Joseph N. Straus



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ABSTRACT: In a recent article in this journal, Adam Krims has argued that mainstream music theory, with its organicist bias, is fundamentally incompatible with post-structuralist thought. This commentary is a defense of theory-based analysis in a postmodern world.

[1] Adam Krims's recent article in this journal, "Bloom, Post-Structuralism(s), and Music Theory," raises a fundamental issue facing our field, namely the troubled relationship between our familiar analytical methodologies and the post-structuralist aesthetic now so prevalent throughout the humanities: "The very premises of our field—inventing models of musical structure and analyzing pieces as exemplars of structure—dissonate with that which recent critical theory has to teach us." Krims adduces my recent book, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Straus 1990) as a case study, and an object lesson, of this dissonance: "Creating, then, a work (a book, an article, a course) of music theory that draws on post-structuralist theory always creates a conflict of which that work will be a trace. In the case of Straus, organicist premises must return in order for music-theoretical discourse to take place. This is not Straus's fault, if one wants to consider it a fault at all: it is an uneasy confrontation between ideological systems that offer their own resistances to each other."

[2] Rather than respond to Krims's detailed and perceptive critique of the role of Harold Bloom's theory of influence in my book, I would like to launch a brief defense of theory-based analysis in a postmodern world in order to ease the "confrontation between ideological systems" that Krims describes.

[3] It is true that analytical studies during the past thirty years have often been directed toward the demonstration of organic coherence. It is not true, however, as Krims suggests, that this has always been the case or that it need be the case. In my book *Remaking the Past*, for example, I frequently describe a kind of musical coherence that is fraught with unresolvable tensions and is thus decidedly anti-organic in nature: "While the best twentieth-century works are certainly coherent, they are not necessarily organically so. Their coherence is won through a struggle . . . Traditional elements are incorporated and reinterpreted, but not effaced. Rather, the past remains a living, forceful presence" (Straus 1990, 184–85). Musical works may be understood as coherent in different ways—the organicist model is only one among many. In works that can be understood to bespeak an irreconcilable structural conflict, as with works that can be conceived more organically, analysis remains our crucial, indispensable tool for describing musical relationships.

[4] Even in the presence of an explicit and thoroughgoing post-structuralist ideology, one committed to tracing discontinuities and resistance to totalizing explanations, analysis remains and must remain an essential part of the enterprise. In exemplary works of "new musicologists" like Abbate and Kramer, traditional analytical categories like subdominant harmonies and sonata form play a central role, as indeed they must. One cannot talk about musical structures without analyzing them, without invoking theoretical categories. Whatever one's ideology then, the question is not whether or not to analyze, but simply how and toward what end.

[5] Krims argues that the analytical methodology of my book, generally pitch-class set theory broadly construed, is "steeped in the tradition of 'organic coherence,'" that it is "extremely traditional—in other words, highly structuralist and organicist,"

and is thus incapable of mapping a post-structuralist world of disruption and discontinuity. But I do not believe that there is anything inherently modernist, structuralist, formalist, or positivist (those four dark horsemen of recent critical theory) about pitch-class transposition, for example, any more than there is something inherently French Baroque about the subdominant harmony. The subdominant harmony was first described as such under certain cultural, geographical, historical, and biographical circumstances. Nonetheless that concept has proved protean enough to play a useful role in many different contexts. If it maintains a trace of its origin, it is not a trace that prevents its successful adaptation. Similarly, to observe that two collections of pitch classes are related by transposition in no way requires one to assume the entire burden of modernist ideology and culture. Like the subdominant harmony, the concept of transposition, while not a transcendental or neutral term, can nonetheless be appropriated toward a variety of critical and theoretical ends.

[6] Just as there is a long history of musical scholarship lagging behind trends in other fields, there is an equally long and parallel history of musical scholars envying the achievements in other fields. Certainly we have much to learn from post-structuralist thinking in other fields, and much recent work in our own field shows that we have begun to do so (see, for example, [McClellan 1988](#) and [Littlefield and Neumeier 1992](#)). At the same time, I hope we will not abandon the powerful and sophisticated analytical technologies we have developed through thirty years of intensive communal effort. We might temper our envy with the realization that our colleagues across the disciplinary fence have nothing like the ability we do to describe the elements of their art, nothing comparable to our intervals (ordered and unordered), our unfoldings and reachings-over, our transformational networks. Instead of leaving these precision tools to rust from disuse, let's learn to employ them whatever the critical enterprise. Post-structuralist thought has placed a great emphasis on the disruptions and discontinuities of all kinds. If analysis is to play its necessary role in serving a post-structuralist ideology, let us insist, then, on analytically precise, and theoretically grounded "contextual definitions of unrelatedness," in Agawu's phrase ([Agawu 1993](#); see also [Burnham 1992](#) and [Whittall 1993](#)).

[7] Methodological self-reflection is good for our field, and we all have reason to be grateful to "new musicologists" like Abbate, Kramer, and McClary, and Tomlinson and to "new theorists" like Krims for forcing us to question our habits of thought. At the same time, we should not forget what led us to become musicians and music theorists in the first place. Most of us entered this field and remain in it because we take deep pleasure from close engagement with musical works we care about. We enjoy explaining to ourselves and others how musical works are put together, how their parts relate to each other and to the larger wholes they comprise. We like imagining and describing musical structures. I know that the concepts of a "work," a "larger whole," and "structure" are hotly contested in contemporary critical theory. Nonetheless, until it can be shown that our pleasures and enjoyments are immoral or harmful to others, I hope we may continue to indulge them. In Stephen Blum's words, "Musicologists can learn to tolerate many varieties of love—including some that may strike guardians of our morals as fetishism, idolatry, or some other 'perversion'" ([Blum 1993](#)).

[8] Our traditional analytical modes, including pitch-class set theory and Schenkerian theory, have proven their effectiveness. I hope we will not abandon them on the false grounds that they suffer some ineradicable stain of their origin. I do not wish to see us put either our analytical methodologies, or each other, to some kind of postmodern loyalty test. ⁽¹⁾

[9] Too often, our traditional methodologies have encouraged us to insist on exclusive meanings in the works we study, to claim that we know how the music really goes, and to condemn "wrong" or "incorrect" interpretations. This sort of authoritarian posturing in the guise of neutral, objective, transcendental description has been rightfully criticized throughout post-structuralist thought. Is it too much to hope, then, that post-structuralists will take seriously their own celebration of openness, diversity, and eclecticism and will thus refrain from enacting a similar ban on traditional analytical methodologies or on analysis itself? I would hope rather that the post-structuralist music theory that Krims alludes to but does not describe or exemplify would have a place for close engagement with musical structures, for precise analytical assertions grounded in systematic theory, and thus for the traditional pleasures and rewards of music theory.

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Footnotes

1. Gary Tomlinson (1993) and Lawrence Kramer (1993) have provided an instructive recent example of judging and censoring work based on ideological purity. For Tomlinson, Kramer's work "reveals patterns of thought that not only already threaten to harden into new orthodoxies of postmodern musicology but that have, at the deepest level, moved little from the putative truths they aim to leave behind (18) . . . He substitutes modernist internalism and aestheticism, both carrying still the potent charge of nineteenth-century transcendentalism, for postmodern contingency and localism (20) . . . Instead of postmodern doubt, play, and problematizing of the communicative relation, Kramer offers a too-familiar modernist mastery" (21). For Kramer, "Despite his sophisticated talk about metasubjectivity and the plural construction of knowledge, Tomlinson's version of musical ethnography is at bottom positivistic . . . There are no clear means by which to distinguish this program from what Donna Haraway tartly calls the god-trick of modern epistemology" (32).

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