



Boretzian Discourse and History

Author(s): Jann Pasler

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for Ben

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of retrieving it and extending it so as to *have* it more substantially, with more specific identity, with more vivid reality." Discourse, likewise, becomes for him in "Music, as a Music" (1999: 57) "a way to feed off of vivid experience, to try to hold on to it, to have it beyond its live-action-time, to maybe re-position it (and maybe yourself) so as to be able to re-experience it, perhaps to fix it as a permanent renewable asset of consciousness." It is part of the "constellations of musicking behavior." Ben has compared the relation of discourse to music as poetry to love (2003: 561), but has also seen it as something more radical. In order to unplug himself from "the security of well-ordered referents," his strategy has been to "immerse discourse in music . . . to enfold it within music by making it be music." When it is "read as someone's internally self-formed verbal-intellectual drama," discourse can be as "valuable [an] access to someone's vivid ideas and visions" as music (1999: 58, 61).

From 1972 until recently, Ben has avoided the discourse that is history. Earlier in *Meta-Variations* and elsewhere, he defines it as a "collection of facts" leading to "general principles" or "a set of merely conventional constraints reflecting an exterior *Zeitgeist*." Even though it seems "far more opaque and analytically refractory than that of music itself" (1971: 331), he does acknowledge that history provides a structure with which to compare musical styles, and when he seeks to understand the transition between Schoenberg's op. 9 to op. 24—"some notion of what is being emancipated, and from what"—he proposes his own stylistic idea: that we think of this music as "motivic" rather than through its relationship to tonality (1969–73 [1995]: 29, 52, 77 n. 24, 342–3, 355). When his concerns shift and Ben comes to understand music as "first and foremost, behavior, the behavior of individuals and groups of people in a variety of environmental circumstances, all the characteristics of which bear on the meaning of the music in question" (1990: 300), he leaves history behind, not recognizing that it might help him understand such behavior. The closest he gets in 1985 is warning about anything in which "knowing replaces searching" or "discipline replaces engagement"—an implicit critique of a certain kind of historical attitude and method. In 1999, without impugning history directly,¹ he goes after discourses that tend to "transfer into the music itself the very characteristics and functions of representation and metaphor they attribute to it" (1999: 59). These can be "aggressively ascriptive," reducing music to "a surrogate for verbal language." When discourse ascribes meanings to music, he points out, there is a risk: "musics as musics can become virtually unrecoverable except as illustrators of saying" (1999: 58–9).² Sad, but true (although there are composers and cultures that might object and feel misunderstood by such a statement).

In “PROLOGUE TO (‘Whose Time, What Space’)” (2002a: 514–9), Ben takes on “professional discourses” that are radically different from the writing he advocates in conjunction with musical experiences. This time he explicitly opposes historical facts (which he calls “public-global facts”) to “person-localized facts” and characterizes history by its “inescapable” truths that “directly and significantly affect everyone’s life.” When it comes to “truths about music as a historical phenomenon”—“demonstrable historical facts,” most of them stylistic, some related to value judgments—he admits they can play an active role in one’s consciousness in that they “help you to locate yourself and some music in terms of appropriate personal distances and so-created typicalities.” However, he counters, its “fact-telling vocabularies . . . [are] not necessarily connected to the experienced facts of any person’s life.” In other words, history can lose its connection to the lives it is recounting. Moreover, the truths of history, its “generalities” and “certainties,” are not necessarily always relevant, for “if something is true in its context doesn’t mean it’s relevant or palpable in every context.” After this provocative but insightful statement, Ben argues vehemently against thinking that something can “determine or affect the experience of some music transaction at some person-time moment. . . . However powerfully [purely private-seeming] experiencing is affected and inflected by the public discourse it is still in their terms that anyone’s actual experience actually takes place.” Up to this point then, Ben relegates history to a distant concentric circle around his concept of music—ever present, but as far as we are conscious, not part of our private experience that is music.

Later that year Ben admits in his “Prologue to ‘Little Reviews’ (Life in the Slow Lane)” (2002b: 528–9) that “there is at least one real-life, music-affecting sense for the ‘history of music.’” This is music that touches your own history and place in time. Whereas in 1991 he argues for protecting “a person’s inner music-experiencing history,” “the entire intuitive music-experiencing history a person may have already accumulated,” from “hearing anything which is ontologically in the verbal—or symbolic—referential-linguistic . . . experiential-intellectual language” (1991: 351–2), in 2002 he recognizes that traces of the past in the present—or personal memory—are part of one’s history. What does it mean, he asks, to experience the sounds of a “dead” composer whom you knew personally and had previously “ontologized” as living? In this case, what one has retained “has nothing to do with the stylistics of their music.” Whereas normally Ben celebrates the particularity of each listening experience, this time he worries that he may be “tuning in from the wrong ‘social’ position” and feels the “need” for history to counteract “an unmediated, uninhibited interaction,” “distill his instinctual

responses,” and “distance reception from pure interpenetration.” Here, it is neither “facts” and “general principles” nor personal memory that he hopes will encourage new appreciation of music by a deceased contemporary, but an acknowledgment of the contingencies of time and place, his own as well as the music’s: “everything that you read about or hear in music is an output of a particular life history at a particular moment, and its truth or expressivity is the truth and true expressivity of that, and, really, only that, moment” (2002b: 529). What you get as you “compose it for yourself out of your own moment” is “access to that moment.”

For some of us who practice music as performer and listener, but not as composer, access to that moment is the subject of great desire. Listening brings one into a relationship with music, perhaps what Swedenborg calls “the correspondence between spirits.”³ Interest in a specific piece of music often begins with love for it, not primarily intellectual fascination. It is a truism that love implants a desire for understanding; that the greater the attraction, the greater the desire for understanding. I’m not among those who seek in music “something opaque to the category of ‘understanding.’” Perhaps understanding music is not “what people are after in seeking to receive or produce it” (1999: 61), but this has been and is important to me. My wanting to understand how and why music affects us—or what Ben calls “the intuition of ‘meaning’”—is part of the musical experience, part of the discourse we have with ourselves that helps the work unfold and enter our consciousness.

When we are drawn into some music and feel tantalized to know it, we often go to the composer both for more of the same and for a larger sense of the beloved work. If music is “any kind of work or play you actually need it to be, as only music can be,” a “purposeful intentional utterance” as well as a “materially sensible phenomenon” (1999: 56), then grasping it fully entails bringing to the fore and considering what composers, performers, and listeners have needed in it or as it and intended it to be, in the sense of which Ben writes. To the extent that a work, and especially a composer’s oeuvre, interfaces with one’s consciousness, one’s predilections, one’s needs and desires, the intersection of some past moment and one’s own moment is electric. History then becomes far more than an accumulation of facts, categories, and “organizing perceptions,” the long litany of what Ben calls the “public-in-the-world phenomenon.” It is not the articulation of “appropriate personal distances and so-created typicalities” that appeals. Of course, there are—and Ben’s oeuvre is a testament to this—“purely private seeming experiences of music which have apparent properties entirely unrelated to the whole array of public facts and images” (2002a: 517). But there are also ways to

experience music from the past and make sense of it that support and enable the desired access and interaction to which Ben refers.

In recent years I have been focused on interrogating and decrypting a certain past. Like Ben, I'm less troubled by postmodern anxieties over facts and the possibility of truths in part because I've read too many histories (of French music) that were not about verifiable truth, but strategic invention. Of course, as with any building blocks, it is the choice of facts, together with what one does with them, that makes facts historical and salient.⁴ They can easily be arranged, like notes, often creatively and imaginatively, or ignored altogether. Like music, history is the representation of an understanding, rooted in the expression of intuition. If it has narrative coherence, like language it can have symbolic power, for better or worse. While it is certainly a historian's construction, to the extent that history aspires to represent the past, as Paul Ricoeur points out, it is not fiction (2004: 190).

Ben is disturbed by what makes historical discourse "highly explicit and powerfully determinate." But what if its purpose is not to reduce the music it discusses, whether to general principles such as style or the historian's personal agenda, but to flesh out the contingencies and rich complexity of the particular moments under its gaze, the moments in which music was conceived, created, performed, and heard, acknowledging the collective as well as personal memories it evokes and embodies? This would mean that "person-localized facts" and events involving distinct or unique social relationships (such as specific instances of music-making) are just as important to establish and study as "public-global facts." The attempt to understand their contingencies constitutes a historical object based on activities as much as works or ideas. The truth of contingencies neither collapses into relativism nor aspires to the certainty Ben associates with "principles." Instead it turns history into an engagement with the social ontology of music, and has the potential for addressing the very "behavior" that interests Ben. In making space for our own contingencies, such facts, moments, and events also serve as user-friendly bridges to the present.

There is no doubt that history adds a "double-consciousness" to the process of experiencing music and risks overwhelming music in a preoccupation with third-order concerns, beyond the time and space of its perception. However, this does not necessarily cut against Ben's desire for a "single-valued, single-consciousness" that focuses attention on "not necessarily what you hear [music] as, but . . . what you hear as it" (1999: 57). Ironically, understanding music's identity as always negotiable, never certain or generalizable, in part because music is not just the facts of a score but also an event subject to all kinds of contingencies, can make

one as open to the contingencies of history as might “double-consciousness.”⁵ Moreover, experiencing the music at the same time as observing the music and observing oneself responding to it, with all that implies about what one brings to the experience from one’s own memory bank, is not necessarily “discourse-driven.” Transcendence through music and internal discourse can proceed simultaneously without the use of words. Rather than embodying the desire to “control, institutionalize, hierarchize, authorize,” historical inquiry can enhance the “world of thought and experience” that is music and enable “a species of expressive/intellectual substance to accrue to musical discourses” (1999: 58 and 2003: 562).

While we may differ on the value of history, Ben’s attitudes have profoundly affected my desire to pursue such an inquiry and write history that contributes productively to our experience of music. This began with our conversation and correspondence in the early 1990s when Ben articulated a way of thinking that helped me understand an attitude toward discourse that we share. In my 1992 review of Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings*, I used his notion of “question-spaces” and “discovery-spaces” to refer to what interested me in her book—her questions (or “searching”) more than her conclusions (or “knowledge”). Since then, I’ve embraced this notion as a kind of method. Questions for me are not so much about interrogating something as engaging in a certain manner. They articulate an interest and a way to connect or give the conversation a place to start. It is answer-spaces that I look for in return, more than answers per se. Ben’s question- and answer-spaces help us reconsider not only the way we construe analysis and interpretation, but also the exploration and the writing of history. To do this we must see a close relationship rather than a dichotomy between understanding and knowledge.

In some ways, Boretz’s question-spaces are an expansion on the hermeneutic method outlined by Hans-Georg Gadamer. As Gadamer puts it, this implies a “theoretical attitude toward the practice of interpretation, the interpretation of texts, but also in relation to the experiences interpreted in them and in our communicatively unfolded orientations in the world” (1987a: 337). This attitude begins in the effort to understand some experience, such as an artwork. For Gadamer, “the experience of the work of art always surpasses in principle any subjective horizon of interpretation—that of the artists as well as that of the recipient.” Even if aesthetic qualities “ultimately transcend the limitations of historical origin and cultural context” and “the achievement of understanding, which encompasses any historicism in the sphere of the work of art, overcomes any historicism in the sphere of aesthetic experience,” still these works also take place in and speak to the course of history as well as to a conscious-

ness about having taken place in history. It is the “hermeneutic universe” that brings together art from the past and the sense that “its world still belongs to ours.” Understanding thus “belongs to the effective history of what is understood, to the history of its influence” whether its creator suffers from the anxiety of influence or not; “understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood” (1987b: 341–3).

Gadamer frames the search for this understanding in questions more than answers. Given that works of art, like any other kind of expression, exist in time and space, if “every statement [or art work] is a response to a question and the only way to understand a statement is to get hold of the question to which the statement is an answer,” then works of art function both to open up “the broader contexts of meaning encompassed by the question and deposited in the statement” [art work] at the same time as narrow the field of possibilities in which a work situates itself. Certainly the perceiver adds his or her own “interests” to those of the artist and “without an inner tension between our anticipations of meaning and the all-pervasive opinions, and without a critical interest in the generally prevailing opinions, there would be no questions at all” (1987a: 332–3).

Where I think the Boretzian concept goes further is in the additional place granted to “conscious and unconscious interests at play” (1987a: 333) and in a broadening of the vague presuppositions and implications involved in any question. While Gadamer calls the understanding derived from such questions a “risk” and a “dangerous adventure” because it has a “far smaller degree of certainty than that attained by the methods of the natural sciences,” understanding nurtured within Boretzian question-spaces, I would argue, has a much higher probability of encouraging “a growth in inner awareness, which as a new experience enters into the texture of our own mental experience”—Gadamer’s definition of a success (1987a: 335–6). The “relentless inner tension between illumination and concealment” that constitutes both understanding and consciousness is not forced into a compromise (1987a: 331); its complexity can just be, sometimes “without reductive imagery, representation, or definition”—Boretz’s ideal experience (1999: 61–2).

Question-spaces can also operate somewhat differently from questions. Whereas questions, even broad ones, tend to be oriented in a given direction and at some point become teleological, that is, motivated by a linear force (as in traditional histories), question-spaces allow for geometrical relationships to serve as conclusions. To the extent that the exploration of such spaces unveils interactions and networks of connection between people, practices, and artworks, question-spaces allow for multiple linearities, nonlinearity, and simultaneities. In this sense, question-spaces are

like Saussure's synchronic analysis; they can involve a whole series of intersecting interests that share a certain time and place. Meaning in such contexts comes from contiguity and interaction in time and space more than from linear development or cause and effect. The pleasure of using question-spaces to write history comes from holding many diverse elements in one's mind at once and from watching connections emerge and concurrent stories unfold, as with Georges Perec's novel, *Life: A User's Manual*. The result may not be a completed puzzle as in the novel, but hopefully a richer understanding than even language can provide.

Rather than pursuing specific answers to specific questions, I've come to approach writing history as a non-teleological movement through these "spaces" as if in a landscape. Meandering in "question-spaces" demands soft-focus, emboldens intuition, and encourages trust in our own reactions. This is almost like Ben's concept of listening as a kind of "do-it-yourself composing" in that it places "creative-intellectual responsibility" on the historian for what is perceived, the "thought *in* music" as well as the "reflective output" of the process (1988: 272, 277–8).

To establish the facts that in turn propel my history, I've found that question-spaces require me to examine a far wider range of material and bring a different attitude toward them than in traditional history. The huge amount of facts one has to face in broadening one's inquiry through question-spaces is not necessarily an impediment to understanding—for me, ironically, more breadth enables more depth as if two interdependent coordinates on the field of knowledge. Abundant facts can be pleasurable to the extent that they loosen the grip of what Gadamer calls "prejudgment" and challenge one to process them through creative assimilation. This rewards keeping options for meaning open rather than forcing them into prescribed molds. It presumes that understanding is not merely an extension of what one already knows, a dissolution of the unfamiliar into the recognizable, but multivalent by nature, many-layered, and not reducible to language. The "access" this process provides seems more real to me than seeking answers or investigating foregone conclusions because it doesn't settle into laser-beam narrowness, but rather stays wide-band and, as such, more like life. Question-spaces also leave room for my own subjectivity to meander and explore, to plug in or not at various places, to seek depth of connection or surface playfulness, and hopefully not to collapse into the pretense of mere objective observation. From this perspective, "contextuality" is not just "another verbal-reality hook, another mode of representation reductively ascribable to music" (1999: 61), but part of the being at the center of the inquiry.

If questions "[construct] the historical object through an original carving out from the unlimited universe of possible facts and documents,"⁶

question-spaces allow for a fluid relationship between fact and event, music and musical activity, the personal and the social aspects of music. Question-spaces respect the interdependence and the correspondence of phenomena. As such, they are ideal for coming to grips with the complexities and contingencies of both music and performance. They encourage us to describe the “confusion and incoherence” of life without being overly “ascriptive” or sliding into “coercion, conviction, or manipulation.” This kind of engagement with the past calls on us to be “imaginative, thoughtful, creative, intricate, acute and profound” while remaining rooted in reality. It thus sets the context for a history, in Ben’s words, ideally to bear the imprint of “the entire residual experiential content of ‘music’ in our world” (1999: 58).

The answer-spaces so discovered inevitably pose new questions that spin out more searching in a chain-like, multifaceted, and multi-directional manner. Such a method, then, presumes that understanding is not just the articulation, rediscovery, or “ascription” of meaning through thought or discourse, but is instead “*transformative, productive* of new meanings.”⁷ (Those of us who write—about history or anything else—often discover new meanings in the process of writing: part of the payoff for deep engagement with the activity.) While understanding may always have a linguistic element, a tendency to slide into discourse, it has its fulfillment in the “transformation” it produces in the listener, a transformation that may affect subsequent experiences of an artwork. This encourages one to remain in the “searching” mode indefinitely, to recognize the “limitless possibility of interrogation, expression, and understanding” and, just as with a work of art, never to settle on any final meaning. I may wish to reconstitute a certain past in its depth and breadth, but its meanings are inevitably those that feed my imagination today, that speak to me here and now especially when I’m led to “discovery-spaces” that urge us to reconsider what we thought we knew. Such historical writing, despite what it may appear, proposes a postmodern perspective on the nature of inquiry and the purpose of understanding. Instead of reinforcing the grand narratives, history can be a medium for expanding our experience of music (in the largest sense), our creative understanding an extension of the work’s creativity. The danger, of course, is that in working with too much particularity and mutability, we could fail to adequately explain anything, or in using an abundance of facts to disconcert meta-narratives, we might lose touch with the music.

In leaving meaning open and vibrating, its signifiers still in endless play and projecting meaning that escapes the boundaries of individual answers, question- and answer-spaces nevertheless encourage a kind of conversation with a work in its time and place that includes us in our time and

place. Musicologists the likes of Gary Tomlinson and Richard Taruskin have bantered about the usefulness of reconstructing questions as part of the attempt to “converse” with a text, with the former convinced the exercise is valuable in part because of the way it engages us and the latter dismissive of what he calls the “fictiveness” of intersubjectivity with a dead other.⁸ Still, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, there is an advantage in one’s outsideness to the world of the author and the text, an advantage brought out by the attempt to converse in question- and answer-spaces. If we substitute artistic or art for foreign or foreign culture in this citation, Bakhtin sheds interesting light on the nature of understanding that we can bring to an artwork through such a conversation:

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. . . .

In the realm of culture, outsideness . . . is a most powerful factor in understanding. . . . A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue. . . . We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without *one’s own* questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign. . . . Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched.⁹

In important ways then, Boretzian question- and answer-spaces help us to confront, at least somewhat, and to deflect the charges of narcissism and arrogance that Rob Wegman finds rampant in historical writing about music. Ben may inadvertently echo some of Wegman’s sentiment when he writes, “Art is the name given to the Ego masquerading as the Soul for purposes of material or social capitalization” (2003: 559); however, Ben realizes that to know we must introspect our own experiences. Question-spaces enable that process in useful ways. Those that nurture intuition in a field of outsideness do not collapse into delusions or lead to indignation about a past that we purport to know but that has let us down. They do not allow us to engage in “merciless self-criticism, perpetually reminding ourselves of our failings”—doing this would lead us to turn away from the music, thereby losing the whole reason for the endeavor. And answer-spaces do not lead to the sense that what we have understood is merely “the reflection of the viewing subject, the product

of our historical imagination” in part because this product is not the only end game.¹⁰ Besides encouraging respect for the outsideness that remains beyond our grasp, there is also the “growth in inner awareness” that emerges through the creative process of writing history. With the openness of meaning these spaces tolerate, we’re not led to overstretch our claims or feel despair, shame, or embarrassment when we can’t nail down an answer with certainty. Moreover, question- and answer-spaces are too illusive to participate in “a search for legitimation.” What they do is enable an “ontological tension” between who and what we bring to an artwork and “its spectrally present subject.” This, quite wonderfully, “creates a potential field for experiential content uniquely indigenous to that space” (2003: 563). With such a method, history can participate in a “vibrant metaphorical dance” with our perception of music (2003: 563).

NOTES

1. In this essay, history appears only in a list of uses to which music can be put ("the verification of historical and scholarly accuracy") and implicitly as a theory of style that he is beginning to reject.
2. In *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), Jean-François Lyotard points out that the "being-now" of music can also be forgotten "when it is taken up in the tight weave of musical rhetorics . . . which regulate, if not determine, its occurrence: rhetorics of harmony, melody, instrumentation, and so on" (176).
3. Ibid., 178.
4. In his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Paul Ricoeur comments on the constructed notion of a historical fact and its difference from both empirical fact and event: "A vigilant epistemology will guard here against the illusion of believing that what we call a fact coincides with what really happened." He also warns of the "need to resist the temptation to dissolve the historical fact into narration and this latter into a literary composition indiscernible from fiction" (178). When it comes to the word "true," he speaks in the sense of "refutable" and "verifiable" and sees the "search for truth" in history running through "all three levels of historical discourse: at the documentary level, at the level of explanation/understanding, and at the level of the literary representation of the past" (179, 185). Such notions have influenced my use of these terms in this essay.
5. I am grateful to two anonymous readers for their stimulating comments on an earlier version of this essay, and to one of them in particular for this insight.
6. Antoine Prost, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire*, cited in Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 177.
7. In his *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), G.B. Madison points out that this idea links Gadamer's hermeneutics to deconstruction (113–4).
8. In musicology Gary Tomlinson has probably taken furthest Gadamer's idea of "reconstructing questions." See his "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Cur-*

rent Musicology 53 (1993): 18–24 and *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Richard Taruskin critiques this in his *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xxi–ii.

9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986), 6–7, cited in Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, xxiii.
10. Rob Wegman, “Historical Musicology: Is it Still Possible?” in *The Cultural Study of Music*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (New York: Routledge, 2003), 136–45.

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