Questions on "The 1980's Consensus"

Q1: Read chapter 4, "Metric Ambiguity and Change." Lester presents interesting discussions of Brahms's 3rd Symphony, first movement, and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, third movement. Summarize Lester's discussions of these two pieces.

      Lester's chapter 4 discusses occasions in music where the listener cannot discern or has trouble discerning the notated, regular meter of the work. He divides these situations into two categories: 1) those ambiguities that occur at the beginning of a piece or some long pause where a lack of metrical information allows any sort of aural determination to be made, and 2) those metrical ambiguities that occur in a musical passage once the governing meter of the piece has already been established, this latter ambiguity often resulting from "persistent cross-accentuations" (86). As an example of the first type of ambiguity, Lester uses the opening of Brahms's 3rd Symphony. The notated meter of the first movement is, for the most part, in $\frac{6}{4}$, a meter that implies the division of the measure by two dotted half notes. The opening theme of bar 3 in the violins, however, seems to suggest a division of the measure into three half notes, i.e. an apparent meter of $\frac{3}{2}$. Throughout this opening, the meter sounds as if it shifts between duple and triple divisions of the measure (a hemiola effect), not fully establishing the notated meter until bars 13-14 (95). Lester draws a metaphor between this metrical ambiguity and the harmonic/tonal ambiguity of the opening, both ambiguities being developed in the rest of the movement. Thus for Lester, the alternation between major and minor mode is a parallel to the metric alternation between duple and triple (96-97).

      Lester goes on to discuss pieces in which the measure acts as the music's main beat, i.e. the *tactus*. Such situations, common in scherzos and other fast movements, give no indication as to how to group the basic pulse of the music, the only known entity being the persistence of the measure-level beat. Lacking any notated grouping of measures into a standard pattern of meter above the level of the *tactus*, some pieces easily sound like large-scale versions of $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$. Many works, however, specifically use this ambiguity of the hyper-barline to shift and play with where strong and weak beats seem to occur.

      The third movement from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony stands as an example of such ambiguity of hypermeter, where the measure is acting as the music's main pulse. Lester attempts a standard pattern of duple grouping, but this view is contradicted by changes of harmony such as in bars 6 and 10 (110). He also tries to adopt a more flexible approach by using a single hypermeasure of 3 beats to represent measures 3-5; however, the surface durational accents that supported his original duple arrangement cause this second view to be problematic as well (111). In summary, Lester admits that "no definitive version is possible among these conflicting accent-causing factors" (112), forcing him to allow that a listener or performer might use whatever grouping (or lack thereof) they choose.

Q2: Kramer does, however, differ from L & J and Schachter on one important issue, namely, higher-level meter (pp. 102-107, 112-120). Read these passages carefully. What is Kramer's view on this issue?

      For one, Kramer does not believe that meter has to necessarily be regular, especially at all levels. He feels that the listener does not actively count meter beyond simple pairs of beats. Metric irregularity can occur at any level via a change of the expected strong-weak pairing. These metric irregularities are integrated into deeper regularities of the piece. Thus, seemingly

paradoxical, Kramer defines meter as basically regular on all levels but with frequent irregularities.

Kramer is also interested in discovering the sources of hypermetric irregularity, i.e. what causes hypermeasures, which we may expect to be four or eight measures long, to end up as some non-standard length. He posits that hypermeasures can become irregular through three processes: extension, contraction, and overlap. Using these terms, Kramer seems to imply that irregular hypermeasures derive from some prototypical hypermeasure, either extant in the music or at least in the listener's expectations. The specific analysis that Kramer provides, though, shows hypermeasures as resulting from changes to metrical groupings.

Using the opening to the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 8, Kramer builds a metrical graph in his Example 4.12 (107). In this graph, which shows an example of overlap between an extended 12-bar phrase and a contracted consequent phrase, the spacing between strong points in the meter varies according to the accents in the musical surface. At higher levels, however, these variations begin to disappear and a more regular structure emerges. Having such irregularities of metrical structure at lower-levels, though, openly goes against the "well-formedness" rules for meter as proposed by Lerdahl and Jackendoff, particularly rule number four. But Kramer argues that meter must be tied to events in the music, not laid out like some sort of grid, for "it is the music's events that determine meter in the first place, and it is the music's events that provide the information that can realign it" (107).

Kramer also disagrees with Lerdahl and Jackendoff regarding whether meter can be extended to the very highest levels of the piece. By allowing for a metrical structure that has flexibility in the number of weak beats between each strong beat, Kramer has already opened up the possibility for extending meter to high levels of hypermeter. Kramer is also careful to distinguish between metrical accents and rhythmic accents when discussing hypermeter, for he feels many theorists, including L&J, allow rhythmic accents to disallow for hypermeter in certain cases. As an example, the classic theme from the first movement of Mozart's Symphony no. 40 is brought out again. Kramer shows how the ambiguity that L&J felt about the hypermeter of the theme disappears if one separates the rhythmic grouping from the metrical structure (116). As an extension to Kramer's argument for the highest levels of hypermeter, he relates deep-level metrical structure to the deep-level tonal structure of the *Urlinie* (118). Just as the fundamental scale degrees underlie broad tonal motions, fundamental metrical accents (such as the beginning of the recapitulation in sonata form) underlie the surface-level meter of the work.

Q3: More than Lester and Kramer, Benjamin can be seen as challenging the Schachter/L&J view in some fundamental ways. Read pp. 355-365. Here he directly takes issue with L&J; how, exactly? What points is he making about the Stravinsky and Mozart examples? Do you find his critique convincing?

Benjamin has two main reservations with L&J's theory. For one, Benjamin is leery to completely dissociate grouping and meter into two distinct categories. Moreover, instead of grouping structures being something overlaid on top of a regularly occurring metrical pattern, Benjamin prefers to see meter as subservient to grouping. According to Benjamin, "accent and grouping are the basic...modes of partitioning musical time and...meter is a secondary construct, imposed on the interaction of group structure and accent" (359). The second point Benjamin makes is that by standardizing and codifying meter into necessarily regular patterns of strong and weak beats, L&J have made "traditional tonal music look dull from a metric standpoint" (359).

With this critique, Benjamin seems to be falling into Kramer's camp, where metrical structures are more flexible and dependent on the musical surface.

   With the Stravinsky example, Benjamin is concerned as to how we "partition time," i.e. where the bar lines stand in relation to groups. Seemingly ametric, the Stravinsky resists analysis with the methods of L & J since the notated meter appears divorced from both the grouping structure. Certainly the meter does not exist separately from the grouping structure in the Stravinsky as some sort of regular pulse as L & J would require. Yet Benjamin shows how the Stravinsky excerpt can still be hierarchically grouped; he conjectures that notated meter itself potentially derives from the pattern of accents.

   In an effort to show how the theories of L & J are not just inadequate for music other than traditional tonal music, Benjamin uses an example from Mozart. He seems to want to prove how meter is dependent on and informed by the grouping structure. While interesting, Benjamin's theory does not really offer any clear methodology for deriving grouping structures, nor does it provide any specific way in relating meter to grouping as he implied in earlier statements. He does bring up good points about the problems of requiring some sort of inherent regular meter in musical pieces, though, particularly when issues of twentieth-century works are taken into consideration.

WORKS CITED

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