Review:

Listening Awry: Music and Alterity in German Culture. By David Schwarz. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, xxii + 216 pp.

REVIEWED BY KAREN FOURNIER

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Listening Awry: Music and Alterity in German Culture refines a body of theories about the act of listening that its author first proposed in his earlier *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* (1997), and describes a practice that he characterizes as "listening awry." Borrowing concepts from psychoanalysis, music theory, and literary criticism, Schwarz argues that a musical work will present its listener with a set of contrasting, sometimes opposing, perspectives that manifest aspects of the culture from which the work originates or within which it is received. Some of the perspectives explored in his text include the differences between the public and private spheres of musical experience, between historical and theoretical approaches to musical scholarship, and between the Lacanian "look" of the individual audience member and the returned "gaze" of the performer. Schwarz contends that, in seeking to understand a musical work, a listener will tend to focus upon one element in any contrasting experiential pair embodied within a work. When listeners choose a single vantage point from which to view the work, however, he maintains, their experience of that work necessarily will be impoverished. In the analyses that comprise his most recent study, he demonstrates how listeners should approach a work from a distance so that they might examine that work as a whole rather than as the sum of its contrasting parts. The notion of "listening awry" urges the listener to shift focus to those aspects of the musical experience that might seem peripheral, so that a more comprehensive picture of the work might emerge. In his own words, Schwarz explains that "listening awry" encourages us to

> [understand] musical meaning participating both at the level of purely objective, internal properties of a work and in conditions in social space that made it possible for such principles of cohesion to come into being in the first place . . . [and cut] against the grain of a fixed relationship between text and context (subordinating one to the other) (xii).

The concept is indebted to Slavoj Žižek's theory of "looking awry," which its author characterizes as a perceptual process that "[renders] visible aspects that would otherwise remain unnoticed" from a viewer's chosen vantage point in relation to a given object.[1] For Žižek, the prime perceptual contrast lies between the objective "look" and the subjective "gaze." The former

reveals an object for what it potentially can be, in the absence of a contextual bias, and the latter provides a context that will ultimately sharpen our perception and interpretation of the image. He suggests that,

> [I]f we look at a thing straight on, matter-of-factly, we see it "as it really is," while the gaze puzzled by our desires and anxieties ("looking awry") gives us a distorted, blurred image. . . . if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it "at an angle," i.e., with an "interested" view, supported, permeated, and "distorted" by *desire.*[2]

Although neither Žižek nor Schwarz describe their theories explicitly in this way, the twin concepts of "looking/listening awry" evoke some of the tenets of Gestalt psychology. Specifically, the notion of "awry-ness" as a shift in perception between the "visible" and the "unnoticed" or between "the internal properties of a work" and the "social space" within which the work is experienced find concrete illustration in the perception and interpretation of a class of Gestalt images known as "ambiguous figures." Like the "works" that we perceive as listeners, or the "things" to which Žižek refers as the objects of our visual attention, these images present their observer with two possible interpretations that arise from a mental switch between what psychologists differentiate as the "figure" (the object) and the "ground" (its context). When faced with an ambiguous figure, an observer is likely to fixate on one element of the image, relegating the other to the role of the "ground" in relation to the chosen "figure." However, common boundaries between figure and ground allow the observer to switch their relationship, so that the former becomes the latter, and vice versa. The switching process can be illustrated by the "Rubin Vase" (Example 1), proposed by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in 1915.

A viewer who at first experiences the figure of a black vase against a white ground can, with prolonged viewing and a shift of attention, comes to perceive mirrored faces in the original ground. In a second viewing, these faces become the figure against a black vase-shaped ground. Rubin accounts for the experience of the vase-face switch when he explains that,

> When two fields have a common border, and one is seen as figure and the other as ground, the immediate perceptual experience is characterized by a shaping effect which emerges from the common border of the fields and which operates only on one field or operates more strongly on one than on the other.[3]

This sense of shifting between two fields of perception can also be experienced in three-dimensional space as, for example, in the case of the "Necker Cube" (Example 2) proposed by the Swiss scientist Louis Albert Necker.[4]
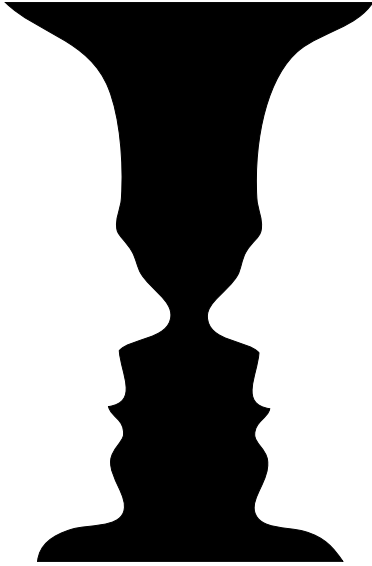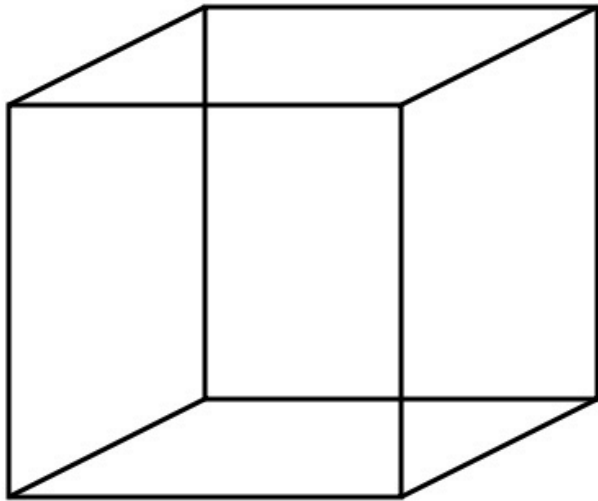
In this illusion, the cube alternately seems to protrude from the page upon which it is drawn in two different directions. Our natural inclination will be to choose one perspective from which to interpret what we observe. We can, for example, perceive the

1 See Žižek (1991, 3).

2 Ibid. (11–12).
3 Rubin (1958, 194).
4 Necker (1832).

EXAMPLE 1. *Rubin vase*

EXAMPLE 2. *Necker cube*

left-most face of the drawing as the *front* of an image that juts toward us in a southwesterly direction. Here, the lowest square in the image represents the figure against which the highest square serves as the ground. Alternately, we might interpret the left-most face as the *rear* of an image that juts toward us in a northeasterly direction. In opposition to the first interpretation of the cube, the lowest square in the image will represent the ground against which the highest square now serves as the figure. Unlike the case of the Rubin Vase, the sensory switch between two interpretations of an ambiguous figure in three-dimensional space seems to engender the sensation that the figure flips, or that it is somehow animated during, and by, the

process of the mental switching. In a recent comment upon this phenomenon, Richard Dawkins explains that,

> A major class of illusions, of which the Necker Cube is an example, arises because the sense data that the brain receives are compatible with two alternative models of reality. The brain, having no basis for choosing between them, alternates, and we experience a series of flips from one internal model to the other. The picture we are looking at appears, almost literally, to flip over and become something else.[5]

Given that it relies upon visual evidence to explain and support its suppositions, Gestalt theory seems like a natural way to clarify and illustrate Žižek's theory of "looking awry." However, we are left to wonder how this might extrapolate to "listening awry." How can our visual engagement with "figure" and "ground," as a way to interpret such ambiguous figures as the Rubin Vase or the Necker Cube, translate to our aural engagement with music? To answer these questions, we need to turn to a few examples from *Listening Awry: Music and Alterity in German Culture*.

Perhaps more than any other, the opening chapter reveals the degree of the author's indebtedness to Žižek. Here, Schwarz turns his attention to historical performance practice and provides an overview of the rise of the solo conductor in the eighteenth-century German symphonic tradition. With various references to the concept of "the gaze" as it is expressed by Sartre and Lacan,[6] Schwarz problematizes the issue of subjectivity when he suggests that the conductor embodies an "imaginary plane that both separates and connects audience and performer in the modern concert hall . . . like a mirror" (2). This suggestion arises out of Schwarz's interpretation of eighteenth-century concert-hall conventions, in which a conductor will gaze upon an audience before a work begins and after it has concluded. During the performance, the conductor's gaze shifts away from that audience and toward the orchestra. Schwarz explains that during a concert:

> The audience directly sees the musicians looking at the conductor and indirectly sees the conductor looking at the musicians. This moment is the appearance of the gaze. Eyes look; when eyes look at eyes looking, the gaze opens—a structure of displaced, transposed looks in the visual field of the Other (2–3).

Following Sartre, Schwarz suggests that the conductor's initial gaze upon the audience objectifies the audience or makes it conscious of its existence *as* an audience. When the conductor turns to face the musicians, they become similarly objectified. At this point, the audience assumes a voyeuristic role as they watch the relationship between the conductor and the orchestra from an objective distance and see their own relationship with the conductor mirrored in the eyes of the musicians who comprise the group. Parallels to the ambiguous figure in Gestalt theory are obvious. In the same way that the Rubin Vase ascribes dual functions to each of its elements, concert-hall conventions ascribe two roles to the audience: it is simultaneously the object to which a performance is directed (in other words, its figure), and

5 Dawkins (2006, 89).
6 See Sartre (1956) and Lacan (1977).

the subject who perceives and interprets aspects of the performance as they present themselves to the eye (or its ground). And like the shared boundary around which our perception of an ambiguous image switches or flips, the gaze of the conductor defines the role of the audience either as subject or object.

While Schwarz's opening chapter addresses the various roles played by the audience in the musical experience, in other chapters he explains ways in which "listening awry" might inform the practice of musical analysis. Schwarz's study of Webern's *Orchesterstücke*, Op. 6, for example, seeks to explain how music can represent such emotions as loss and trauma, particularly as these were experienced by the composer in the wake of his mother's death. Schwarz argues that Op. 6 lends itself to his type of analytical approach more readily than to scrutiny as "absolute" music (71). The divergence of this work from Webern's seemingly more "objective," non-programmatic approach to composition makes the "subjectivity" of this work all the more remarkable, in the author's view, which explains its choice. Schwarz points out that on the musical surface, trauma is represented through repetition, which gives the work a nervous and obsessive quality. But perhaps more interesting, the trauma of the nervous tic embodied in the repetition is supplemented by an unmistakable musical depiction of loss.

At the opening of the piece, Webern presents a four-note cluster, comprised of the pitch-classes C, C♯, E♭, E, that is symmetrical around the missing pitch-class, D, the repetition of which denotes obsession and trauma. The concept of "listening awry" helps to interpret this configuration and to set the tone for Schwarz's reading of the entire work.

As a signifier of trauma, the tetrachord surrounds, and is driven by, a pitch class that could complete the chromatic segment that it implies, but that never appears in the opening measures of the piece. Like such ambiguous figures as the Rubin Vase or the Necker Cube, the tetrachord can therefore draw the listener's attention to itself or, by virtue of its unremitting absence, to the missing pitch-class, D. In Gestalt terms, the cluster may serve as the figure against which "D" is the ground, or vice versa. And, perhaps, the confusion that arises from this dual interpretation of the four-note sonority is what represents the trauma experienced by the composer. When it finally does appear, midway through the work, embedded within a series of recurring neighboring figures, the missing D is the first unaccompanied note in the piece. In presenting the pitch-class in this way, Webern draws our attention to what has been omitted and forces us to change our perspective from the "figure" of the tone-cluster to the "ground" of the pitch that would complete that cluster.

A final example from the text will suffice to illustrate the scope and potential of Schwarz's approach as it addresses issues of cultural and historical context. In his study of fascist ideology as it expresses itself in songs from the 1930s and early 1940s, Schwarz seeks to demonstrate the potential of music to unite citizens in Nazi Germany into a "singular 'Volk' through music" (84). To set the stage for this discussion, he selects and describes songs drawn from the 1914–15 eleven-volume *Kriegslieder fürs deutsche Volk*, and the 1934 *Wohlauf Kameraden! Ein Liederbuch*

der jungen Mannschaft von Soldaten, Bauern, Arbeitern und Studenten, used extensively by the Nazi party (90–98).[7] Following Louis Althusser, to whom Schwarz is indebted, he discusses the title of these volumes, a musical invitation to "Arise, Comrades!," explaining the interpretation of the social and ideological implications of the greeting "Arise!" as a "hail [or] a performative gesture enacted in public space to locate the individual as a subject in relation to the state through a surrogate" (87). The hail that is implied in the *Wohlauf Kameraden* warrants various interpretations, all of which illustrate the duality between the private and public spheres and, by extension, between the individual who inhabits the former and the collective that represents the latter.

One interpretation of the title of the 1934 volume arises from descriptions of the relationship between those who participate in the communicative act of "greeting." This act engages two subjects, one of whom serves as the addressor, or the subject who initiates the social exchange, and the other, the addressee, or the object to whom the greeting is directed. Schwarz notes that while the unidirectional greeting, from addressor to addressee, defines clear roles for its two participants, ambiguity occurs in the relationship when a response to the greeting is formulated. In accepting a greeting from the addressor, the addressee acknowledges that "I am that 'you'" to whom the greeting is directed (87). But in the course of conveying an answer, the original addressee ("you") becomes the addressor ("I"), and the addressor similarly becomes the addressee. In this interpretation of the social relationship between subjects engaged in the performance of *Wohlauf Kameraden*, the hail, "Arise!," acts as a kind of shared boundary against which subjects can be perceived either as figure ("I") or ground ("you") depending upon the roles they assume in the communicative act.

While this characterizes social relationships as they occur between subjects "on the ground," Althusser also alludes to social space as another dimension that can shape the exchange between an addressor and an addressee. He argues that "I" subjects are constituted within particular social contexts, which means that any perception that an individual might have about his or her role as an addressor or an addressee is acquired within, and mediated by, the established social practices and reigning ideologies of the "you" collective. While we might perceive ourselves as "I" when we hail, or are hailed by another subject, the social practice that enables the greeting to occur in the first place, and to be understood *as* a greeting, reaffirms our status as members of a broader social group cohering around an ideology that shapes our behaviors and interactions. Althusser explains that,

> [W]hat seems to take place outside ideology [such as the "hail," which might take place in the street and thereby seem like a casual and benign gesture], in reality takes place in ideology . . . That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says "I am ideological."[8]

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7 The third volume of *Kriegslieder fürs deutsche Volk,* titled *Wohlauf Kameraden!,* provided much of the source material for the later volume.

8 Althusser (1971, 175).

This implies another duality that appears, in the case presented by Schwarz, to center around the title of *Wohlauf Kameraden* as a kind of ambiguous figure that prompts two interpretations. On the one hand, the greeting "Arise!" can be seen to foreground the subject, "I," who uses the phrase to invite other subjects to participate in the activity of singing (and, by extension, in the dissemination of a particular political ideology). Understood in this way, the ideological framework in which the individual is constituted serves as the ground against which the individual is positioned as the figure.

On the other hand, as a title, the greeting exists separately from its enactment by a subject and thereby represents a public expression that is constituted, as Althusser might say, in ideology. In this interpretation, the framework that makes the greeting possible becomes the figure, and the individual who may or may not enact the greeting becomes its ground. Schwarz draws liberally from *Wohlauf Kameraden* to provide illustrations of the ambiguity of "I" and "you." On the one hand, the songs within the volume invite the participation of the individual subject, or "I," because they feature march-like rhythms and easily performed diatonic melodies that inspire and facilitate engagement with the music. But when examined more closely, Schwarz points out, the various alterations made to the earlier songs in their restatements in the later version are seen to be ideological in nature, and are thereby intended to subsume the "I" subject into an objectified group of "you" subjects constituting the "singular 'Volk.'" This scenario is achieved, he demonstrates, through various devices; the appropriation of German folk melodies, the use of Handel and Beethoven as representations of the origins of German culture, and the nationalistic content of the lyrics, for example, help to underscore the political intent of the volume and to define the role of the singing subject, or "I," in the dissemination of the ideological message of the "you" collective. Further, from a musical standpoint, the appearance of songs scored in two parts, which were not a feature of the first volume of the 1914 songbook, force the singing subject, or "I," to accept the intrusion of another subject, or "you," into a shared performance space. Where Schwarz sees little ambiguity in the roles intended for the singers who performed from the original *Kriegslieder fürs deutsche Volk*, the later *Wohlauf* volume forces its singers to negotiate between their subjective engagement as individual performers of the songs contained within it and their objective engagement with the same works as citizens who are required to coalesce as a unified group around the ideological messages that run throughout the volume.

One reviewer of Schwarz's first book suggests that "as in psychoanalysis, significance abounds for those who attend to converging evidence,"[9] and this message carries through the current volume of essays. Schwarz's principle contribution to the field is to offer an analytical approach to music that aims to explain the richness of our engagement with musical objects. Not limiting himself to the score or to the social or historical context of its reception as the source of musical meaning, Schwarz challenges

the reader to incorporate as many perspectives as possible into an interpretation of the musical experience. At first blush, this might seem to be an impossible task, made all the more difficult by a text that seems to wander through a set of apparently unrelated analyses, but this is entirely the point of the exercise. Each new chapter asks the reader to shift perspective toward something new and to engage with the musical object in a way that differs from the engagement that characterizes the other chapters in the volume.

For this reader, one final comparison to Gestalt imagery might help to explain the objectives of the study. Although it seems counterintuitive, an ambiguous figure such as the Rubin Vase or the Necker Cube can be portrayed as a simple picture that captures the sum of its individual parts. The Vase, for example, can be described as a black-and-white picture that consists of two white elements that are separated by a lone black element.

In music, the parallel might be to explain a work as a set of relationships that exist between the motives and themes appearing on the musical surface or between the elements of its middleground or deep structure. However, in both cases, we would likely agree that these descriptions fall short in capturing the essence of either object. Our understanding of the Rubin Vase, for example, depends on our subjective engagement with the picture, out of which we will come to distinguish two embedded images and allow ourselves to oscillate between them. The meaning of the picture therefore lies neither in its simple black-and-white characterization nor in one or the other of its embedded figures, but in the interplay between competing perspectives that can be brought to bear on the image. This experience recalls Žižek's observation that an image "assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it . . . with an 'interested' view." Schwarz similarly suggests that the meaning of a musical work lies neither entirely in the score nor in its experience but, rather, is located somewhere at the confluence between a variety of dualities that he explores in the text: analysis versus interpretation, the characteristics of the object versus the perceptions of the subject, the view of the perceiver as the "I" who engages directly with the musical object or with other perceivers versus the "you" of the perceiver as perceived by others.

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9 Pyevich (2001, 85).

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