

Reviewed by John Covach

[The person] who really wishes to learn by analysis of works of art, that is to learn about aesthetics, is neither admirer nor critic, but permits analysis to reveal separately each and every fibre of the fabric of art, to throw light on all, often very different, relationships wherein beauty dwells and in the confluence of which there resides the power of a work of art.¹

The philosopher and psychologist Johann Friedrich Herbart is often placed among the first nineteenth-century aestheticians to argue a formalist position with regard to music.² Herbart’s writing about music arises in the context of his concerns with aesthetics generally, as well as in the broader context of his overall philosophy—a philosophy that constitutes, in part, a reaction to that of Johann Gottlieb Fichte.³ The suggestion that uncovering what is “beautiful” in music—or least what is most meaningful—can be best accomplished through analysis of music’s formal properties is hardly unfamiliar to music theorists in North America. We can easily trace the formalist tendencies of our discipline back through the writing of Schoenberg and Schenker to Eduard Hanslick, who relied heavily on the writing of Robert Zimmermann, himself a student of Herbart.⁴

This brief consideration of Herbart’s early formalist position suggests how intimately analytical approaches can sometimes be bound up with aesthetics, and how the history of aesthetics—and specifically the history of musical aesthetics—might inform current analytical and theoretical practices.⁵ But this thumbnail sketch of formalism also points to a problem that has often resided at the very heart of musical aesthetics as a discourse. Herbart, writing as a philosopher, approaches music as a particular instance within the context of broader philosophical considerations; and in this way at least his writing on music is much like that of Hegel or Schopenhauer. A writer such as Schenker, by contrast, approaches music as his central concern, turning to philosophy and aesthetics primarily in the course of justifying claims about music that arise out of the musical experience itself. This latter approach is indeed the one most familiar to theorists, and Schenker can be seen as sharing it—though some would argue not much else—with theorists like Rameau and Schoenberg. Besides the musicians and the philosophers contemplating aesthetic issues in music, one might also identify a third group: those who are concerned chiefly with aesthetics itself, and tend to consider music in the context of the other

¹This passage is drawn from paragraph 88 of Johann Friedrich Herbart’s *Schriften zur Einleitung in die Philosophie* of 1813. This and other excerpts from this work are translated in Ruth Katz and Carl Dahlhaus, eds., *Contemplating Music: Source Readings in the Aesthetics of Music*, vol. 1 (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1987), 362–79. The same passage is also cited by Lippman (p. 294).

²Monroe Beardsley, for instance, characterizes Herbart as a “pioneer” among formalistic aestheticians in his *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present Age: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 240.

³A brief summary of the place of musical discussion within Herbart’s philosophy precedes an excerpt of his writing in Katz and Dahlhaus, eds., *Contemplating Music*, 359–61.


⁵Following continental philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, one could argue more strongly that all analytical and theoretical positions are founded on aesthetic bases and that one cannot help but interact with the history of aesthetics. The softer version suffices to suggest that music theorists might find the study of musical aesthetics and its history useful to their current concerns.
arts; the principal training among such aestheticians can either be in philosophy or in one or more of the particular arts.

This is an admittedly over-simplified parsing of the field of musical aesthetics, one which I introduce only to underscore what I take to be a central problem with thinking about musical aesthetics as a single field of study: when such diverse sets of disciplinary concerns are brought to bear on the aesthetics of music, the result can be a field with a genuine identity problem. In fact, it can often seem as if there are really three fields of musical aesthetics, rather than one. Following the outline given above, one can distinguish between the aesthetic concerns of musicians and music scholars; the aesthetic (and as part of that, music-aesthetic) concerns of philosophers; and the musical concerns of aestheticians.6 For the purposes of the present review, such an overview of this perhaps-not-very-unified field sheds some light on two issues that arise in considering the books to be discussed here. First, this characterization of the field helps us to appreciate the degree of difficulty one encounters in undertaking a history of musical aesthetics as Edward Lippman has done. Second, we can begin to understand how it is possible for two books devoted to musical aesthetics to seem—though this may be mostly on the surface—to have almost nothing to do with one another.

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Edward Lippman’s history is a truly substantial work, and when one combines this history with the three-volume anthology of aesthetic writings that he has edited, it is clear that Lippman has made a tremendous contribution to furthering the study of musical aesthetics among English speakers.7 Lippman’s command of the broad body of knowledge he chronicles is magisterial, and one has the sense throughout the book of being guided through a sometimes very complex jungle of aesthetic thought by the secure hand of someone who has been this way many times before. Lippman’s history is the best survey of musical aesthetics we have to date, and we are not likely to see one that surpasses it in sheer breadth for some time.

Given the problems with the diversity of the field of musical aesthetics outlined above, Lippman’s organization of his material is of more than passing interest. The wide scope of his project makes it necessary for him to draw together various types of writers: there are poets and writers (Wackenroder, Tieck, Hanslick, for instance), philosophers (Burke, Kant, Schelling, Nietzsche), and musicians (Mattheson, Rameau, Wagner). While it may amount to falling into old biases, one might note that musicians tend not to be very good philosophers, and philosophers tend to be naive musically, at least in the eyes of musicians. What musicians such as Wagner and Schoenberg, for example, do compositionally with Schopenhauer’s “metaphysics of music” is far more interesting than what Schopenhauer himself says about music.8


7Lippman’s three-volume anthology, Musical Aesthetics: A Historical Reader (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1986–90), is divided into three volumes by chronology: 1) “From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century”; 2) “The Nineteenth Century”; and 3) “The Twentieth Century.” The Katz and Dahlhaus anthology cited in note 1 is in four volumes organized by topic, and then chronologically within each topic area. Thus these two anthologies complement one another nicely.

8Schopenhauer’s taste in music was conservative, and it is unlikely he would have thought much of the Wagner music dramas that were composed so much under the influence of his philosophy. Drawing from Schopenhauer’s correspondence, Rüdiger Safranski reports that the philosopher, after receiving a copy of the libretto to The Ring from the composer, asked an acquaintance to pass the following remarks on to Wagner: “Thank your friend...
All this makes it difficult for the historian to pull such diverse material together into sections and chapters that cohere, and there are bound to be spots in which only the most tenuous connections can be made.

Lippman’s strategy is primarily to proceed chronologically and then by very broad topics within certain time periods. He divides his history into five large sections. The first section is a brief overview of ethical and harmonic views of music that originate in Greek thought and an account of how these views are interpreted in the Western tradition up to 1600. The second section covers the emergence of aesthetic issues in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; it chronicles how music came to be viewed as a fine art, surveys the role played by notions of rhetoric and expression in thinking about music, and considers seventeenth-century views of opera. These first two sections combined are only fifty-five pages in length, and are perhaps better seen as setting the stage for the much longer third section (141 pages), which focuses on the eighteenth century. If the first three sections are taken together in this way, the book falls neatly into three sections overall: the eighteenth century (with a historical introduction that contextualizes the key issues); the nineteenth century; and the twentieth century. This arrangement also aligns well with the three volumes of Lippman’s anthology.

From the arrangement suggested above, and from the way the three large sections are organized internally, I tend to view Lippman’s single lengthy survey more as three almost self-contained books. The eighteenth-century “book,” after providing the background information noted above, takes up three large topics: galant aesthetics; imitation and expression; and operatic aesthetics. The nineteenth-century “book” takes up four large topics: romantic aesthetics; emotional realism; formalism and autonomy; and the idealist tradition. The twentieth-century “book” is divided up according to four large topics: theories of meaning; conceptions of objectivity; the phenomenology of music; and the sociology of music. Inside of each topic area, the material is organized in most cases by author and chronologically, resulting in a series of discussions that tend to focus on one writer at a time and are relatively self-contained. This arrangement of material is fairly closely coordinated with Lippman’s anthologies, allowing the material in the history to be used as a convenient extended commentary on the readings provided in the anthologies.

As impressive as Lippman’s history is, however, it is not without certain drawbacks. The single-author commentaries are a little too self-contained, and this leads to sections that lack an overall sense of purpose or focus. Commentary on one author will often simply break off and discussion will switch to the next author without any real sense of transition. As cogent as each individual commentary is, we are sometimes left with a sense that Lippman is covering material chronologically, and not really driving ahead in terms of the development of the topic at hand. Chapter 9 on emotional realism (from the nineteenth-century book) provides an example of just such an instance. The chapter begins with two paragraphs that contrast the musical romanticism of the 1820s and 30s with the music of the 1840–60 period, and that introduce the notion of the “aesthetics of emotional realism” (239). This is followed by three and a half pages on Kierkegaard’s essay “The Musical Erotic,” which appears in the first volume of Either/Or of 1843. With no transition whatsoever,

Wagner for sending me his Nibelungs, but he should give up his music, he has more genius as a poet! I, Schopenhauer, remain faithful to Rossini and Mozart.” This in the late 1850s! See Rüdiger Safranski, Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 347.

9It is worth noting, though Lippman does mention this in passing, that the aesthetic position articulated in this essay is not necessarily Kierkegaard’s. The character writing in the first volume of Either/Or takes an aesthetic approach to life generally, in contrast to the character writing in volume two.
Lippman then launches into a twenty-eight page discussion—the longest in the book devoted to a single writer—of Wagner’s writing, dealing only with his work from 1849–51. Lippman’s interpretation of Wagner’s writing on opera is brilliant, filled with insights that can only come from years of careful study and consideration. But then, just as abruptly as we entered into this discussion, we come back out again on page 270 with a consideration of Herbert Spencer’s view that music arises biologically, out of animal-like expressions of pain and pleasure. I do not dispute the viability of considering these authors and issues together in a single chapter; but one senses that here the material is merely placed together with seams showing.

A similar kind of problem is present in terms of the overall organization of Lippman’s history. The volume begins without the benefit of a preface or introduction; many readers, however, would have welcomed some kind of discussion of the various issues involved in separating musical aesthetics out from aesthetics generally, music theory, or the philosophy of music. How has Lippman decided what to include in his study? Other considerations of the history of musical aesthetics tend to begin from the Greeks and proceed forward giving more weight than Lippman does to the period before 1700. Why does Lippman emphasize the period after 1700? Lippman does address these issues in places throughout the book. For instance, he considers the distinctions that might be made between musical aesthetics, music theory, and the philosophy of music at the beginning of the twentieth-century book (351–53). He argues that the “first stages” of musical aesthetics can be found in the sixteenth century, and how the “formative period of the subject was completed only during the course of the eighteenth century” (19); but this discussion arises in Chapter 2, already in the section of the book Lippman designates as Part Two. As Hayden White has observed, all historical writing involves interpretation. What the reader misses in Lippman’s study is an explicit articulation of the interpretive bases of his work.

As suggested above, Lippman’s history is perhaps best viewed as three books bound together as one. Just as the self-contained single-author commentaries tend to create problems of flow within chapters, so the self-contained character of the three “books” creates difficulties in following the historical development of musical aesthetics at the broadest level. Though Lippman at times draws connections between various authors—and these are very helpful when they occur—the writing generally does not tend to engage issues of large-scale historical interpretation. In this light, it is interesting to compare Lippman’s history with Carl Dahlhaus’s writing on musical aesthetics, especially his Musikästhetik of 1967. Dahlhaus does tend to focus on the broader historical issues, and his writing is well-known for its ability to bring together a wide range of authors around carefully considered and focused sets of concerns. But if Dahlhaus’s approach has a major drawback, it is that he tends to spend little time

(Judge William), who takes an ethical approach. Thus, Kierkegaard is writing through the mask of the esthete in volume one, and the voice one hears in the essay Lippman discusses is not necessarily that of the author.


12 Carl Dahlhaus, Musikästhetik (Cologne: Musikverlag Hans Gerig, 1967); translated by William Austin into English as Esthetics of Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
outlining the work of the authors he engages; his summaries tend to be condensed, and his discussions often assume that the reader already possesses a basic familiarity with the writing to which he is referring. The particular strength of Lippman’s work is that he is able to provide engaging and insightful summaries of the writings of a wide range of authors. Thus, the work of Dahlhaus and Lippman can be seen to be complementary, and taken together—though certain interpretive differences are sure to arise—they form a substantial and balanced introduction to the history of musical aesthetics.

Placed within the context of current writing in musical aesthetics, Lippman’s study certainly does an impressive job of addressing a need within that literature for a comprehensive survey of various positions and lines of thought that have been advanced in the European tradition since 1700. Considering the number of disciplinary perspectives that have formed the background for discussions and debates in musical aesthetics, Lippman’s accomplishment is a significant one. He seems as much at home discussing Tieck and Wackenroder in the context of early nineteenth-century romanticism as he is in considering Victor Zuckerkandl or Thomas Clifton in the context of twentieth-century phenomenology. It is a book that will soon be considered seminal reading for any student of musical aesthetics.

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John Rahn’s Perspectives on Musical Aesthetics is in many ways a completely different kind of book from Lippman’s. Rahn has collected twenty-seven articles that have appeared in Perspectives of New Music over the last decade. Rahn’s collection follows a tradition established by Edward T. Cone and Benjamin Boretz, who also published collections of essays from Perspectives devoted to various topics. But while those collections focused on the music of certain composers (Schoenberg and Stravinsky), a central repertory (American composers), contemporary music theory, or problems of notation and performance in new music, this set is far less focused. In fact, as thought-provoking and engaging as almost every chapter in this collection is, it is unclear at times how some of the pieces have anything directly to do with musical aesthetics.


The essays are for the most part interesting. Some are quite engaging while other seem somewhat weaker; and according to each reader’s own interests, some are bound to have more appeal than others. Rather than focusing on what I might take to be the merits of the individual contributions,

I instead address my remarks primarily to how well the essays work together as a collection around the theme specified by the editor. What is new about these essays in this context—since they have already appeared in print in *Perspectives*—is that they are brought together in a volume devoted to musical aesthetics. It is only proper, then, to acknowledge that it would not be fair to criticize the authors for how well their respective contributions align with the overall theme of the book. I am thus viewing the book as a collection fashioned by John Rahn, and I am mostly concerned with the ways in which the book makes a contribution to the study of musical aesthetics.

In his “Introduction: The Aesthetics of *Perspectives,*” Rahn creates a context for the chapters that follow. He begins with a series of questions: “What is aesthetics, and why worry about it? For people who produce art, aesthetics is an everyday working issue, one that comes up at every decision point: What shall I do next? When I am composing a piece of music, and have reached the natural end of a phrase or subsection, what shall I do next?” (1). Rahn goes on to write elegantly about the personal stakes involved in artistic creation, and from the paragraphs that follow, one can discern that his approach to musical aesthetics is principally oriented by the creative act. Later in the introduction Rahn explains that the chapters in the book “reflect the practical orientation sketched above: in addition to pure pleasures of speculation, these essays serve the interests of the working musical artist. The issues that are alive in this context are not necessarily those of traditional academic or philosophical aesthetics. For example, there is very little here about Beauty or the Sublime, probably because these concepts are not strong factors in everyday decision-making nowadays, at least among composers” (3).14 But aside from telling the reader what aesthetic issues are not at stake, Rahn does little more to clarify what issues ultimately are at stake.

Rahn provides introductions to each of the six sections, and one might expect to find here some indication of what aesthetic issues are to be encountered in the section that follows. But unfortunately, these introductions are too brief to be of much help, and readers are left to decide for themselves exactly what issues the essays hold in common. Despite this lack of editorial guidance, a couple of the sections work quite well. The second section, “Contemporary Music and the Public,” begins with a dual presentation by Pierre Boulez and Michel Foucault that raises a number of interesting issues dealing with the reception of modern music. There then follow essays by J. K. Randall and Benjamin Boretz, with an essay on Randall and Boretz by Fred Maus in between. Without editorial commentary, the Boulez-Foucault chapter stands well on its own; the issues engaged are mostly familiar to anyone who has followed modern music, and not much needs to be said to prepare the reader. But for the reader unfamiliar with the recent writing of Randall or Boretz, those chapters are likely to seem enigmatic. Fortunately, Fred Maus’s piece does a marvelous job of introducing the reader to the aesthetic dimension in the writing of Randall and Boretz, placing the authors in the context of the aesthetic writing of Leo Tolstoy, R. G. Collingwood, and John Dewey.

The sixth section, “The Survival of Aesthetics,” consists of an in-depth review by Susan Blaustein of relatively recent texts on modern music by Pierre Boulez, George Rochberg, and Michel Foucault. The topics of Beauty and the Sublime certainly played a major role in eighteenth-century aesthetics and they received their most influential formulation in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* of 1790. But Kant was certainly no composer, nor were the many philosophers both before and after him who employed these notions in their aesthetic writing. Thus, in the way that these ideas are understood in “traditional academic or philosophical aesthetics,” it is not clear that they ever played a role in “everyday decision-making” among composers.

14Rahn’s ironic distinction here, between issues considered in one branch of eighteenth-century aesthetics and those addressed in his own collection could lead to misunderstanding. The topics of Beauty and the Sublime certainly played a major role in eighteenth-century aesthetics and they received their most influential formulation in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* of 1790. But Kant was certainly no composer, nor were the many philosophers both before and after him who employed these notions in their aesthetic writing. Thus, in the way that these ideas are understood in “traditional academic or philosophical aesthetics,” it is not clear that they ever played a role in “everyday decision-making” among composers.
and Thomas DeLio. Blaustein quotes all three authors at some length, so her review has the advantage of contextualizing the writing of each author as well as allowing each to speak in his own voice. Blaustein is fairly negative in her assessment of DeLio’s work, and DeLio has more to say—in his own voice, to be sure—in his reaction to Blaustein’s review. The section concludes with an essay by Herman Rabbe sympathetic to DeLio’s work. This section could certainly have benefitted from the kind of contextualization that Maus provides for the second section, but because the chapters themselves are in this instance so interrelated, the section coheres nicely.

Other sections of the book do not fare as well. For instance, the fifth section, entitled “Music and Literature,” begins with a substantial essay by Arthur Nestrovski on “Joyce’s Critique of Music,” in which Nestrovski does an admirable job of situating his observations on Joyce within the context of “academic” and “philosophical aesthetics.” What follows Nestrovski’s chapter is a collection of brief essays by Arthur Berger, Herbert Schwartz, and Delmore Schwartz, with an introduction to the essays by Arthur Berger. It is perhaps curious that these essays are in fact a reprinting of a reprinting; they first appeared in 1936 in a periodical edited by Berger called The Musical Mercury and were subsequently reprinted in Perspectives. These essays are followed by short poetic pieces by Clayton Eshleman and Kenneth Gaburo. Certainly each chapter in this section is interesting enough in its own right, but the student of musical aesthetics might expect some kind of explanation as to why these particular pieces are gathered together here; why did Rahn choose these particular essays? how do they inform issues in musical aesthetics? and how do they inform one another or other essays in the volume? The absence of such editorial commentary significantly weakens the book as a collection devoted to musical aesthetics, whatever the merits of the individual essays.

As indicated above, it is somewhat troubling that Rahn’s collection and Lippman’s survey seem—on the surface, at least—to have almost nothing to do with one another, even though both are devoted to musical aesthetics. To some degree this might be expected; after all, Lippman’s book surveys historical positions in musical aesthetics, while Rahn’s collection is devoted to writing—with the exception of the Musical Mercury essays—that has appeared in the last ten years. But Rahn himself acknowledges that “actions take place in cultural and historical contexts, which at once supply a larger set of possibilities than would be available in the absence of such a context and pretty much constrain choices to that set or a related set of possibilities, if only by abreaction” (2). What then, one might ask, are the historical and cultural contexts in which these essays might be situated? If Rahn’s book is devoted to musical aesthetics, then the proper context would seem to be the various cultural and historical contexts of musical aesthetics. But the problem with this formulation is that it assumes that there is a single field of musical aesthetics, and the implicit charge is that Rahn has not properly situated his collection within the discourse of that field. As I argued above, however, there is not really a single field. Rahn’s collection arises within the tradition of musicians concerned with aesthetic issues (there are some exceptions), a group whose historical context is the writing of composers such as Rameau, Mattheson, Wagner, Schoenberg, and Sabbitt, and not (or not necessarily) within the traditions of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, or Husserl, or aestheticians such as Schiller, Hanslick, or Dufrenne. The question, then, is not so much whether Rahn’s book is situated within the tradition of musical aesthetics; but rather, it is a matter of determining which tradition it can be situated within.

While Rahn only vaguely articulates the tradition in which his collection can be placed, the essays in this collection at various points also touch on issues that have been central in
many discussions and traditions within musical aesthetics. This is most obvious in the essays by Douglas Collins and Rainer Rochlitz, as well as in the essay by Fred Maus cited above. Collins engages the writing of Jacques Attali, and in so doing much contemporary French philosophical thought. Rochlitz takes Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic writing as his point of focus. Eric Gans and Arthur Nestrovski are both careful to position their writing within the appropriate aesthetic traditions as well. But even in other essays where the presence of some tradition is less obvious or remains completely unarticulated, one is none the less present. In his own essay, “What is Valuable in Art, and Can Music Still Achieve It?” John Rahn enumerates and discusses a number of categories that have a long history in aesthetic writing. He takes up the following issues: craftsmanship, expression, self-expression, music and the sacred, art as a communicative action, and the necessity of originality. Though it would require an essay of its own to do so, each of these topics could be traced within the history of musical aesthetics. Such a study would reveal that Rahn’s positions sometimes extend or repeat positions taken by earlier authors.15 Thus, while the two books appear to have nothing to do with one another on the surface, more careful consideration reveals that in some ways they address common issues and problems.

While I have been somewhat critical of both books under consideration in this review, I find both to be valuable and welcome additions to the current literature on musical aesthetics. Both are also available in paperbound editions, which makes them affordable and encourages their use in upper-division and graduate courses devoted to issues in musical aesthetics. Each book deserves a place on the shelf of any scholar interested in philosophical approaches to music.

15Rahn’s remarks about music and the sacred, for example, could be compared with the romantic writings of Wackenroder, Tieck, and Hoffmann, with Wagner and the tradition of art-religion, or with the aesthetic dimensions of Olivier Messiaen’s writing. This is not to say that Rahn’s writing is somehow derivative of these earlier sources, but rather that it is informed by being placed in the context of those other writings.