Musical Ambiguity
and Musical Analysis

I want to talk about what we analyze when we analyze a piece of music. But I need to approach this question by first clearing away some assumptions that normally—and perhaps quite rightly—keep us from addressing the issue. The influence of (indeed, indebtedness to) the later thought of Wittgenstein will be evident to those familiar with it, particularly *Philosophical Investigations*, part II, and the notes from his last few months published under the title *On Certainty*. But of course Wittgenstein is not to be blamed for my use of the tools he devised.

Suppose we are sitting under an apple tree when an apple suddenly appears on the ground beside us. You say that the apple fell from the tree, though neither of us has seen it fall; I insist that it has welled up from the ground like fairy gold. I am clearly mistaken about a fact. It doesn’t matter whether I *know* anything about apples and where they come from—I am making a mistake. (Even if an apple were to appear on the ground in a forest when no one was there, I would be mistaken to assert that it had welled up from under the ground. Even if I am really just “telling a story,” you are quite justified in saying I am making a mistake as long as I allow you to think my explanation is of the same kind as yours.) In this example, a mistake is simply a lack of correspondence between a statement that is supposed to represent what is the case and what is in fact the case.

To return to our scene in the woods: Later, when a number of apples have fallen to the ground, we begin to play a game with them. The game involves grouping the apples in certain ways and not others. At one point in the game, I group the apples in a way the game does not allow. I am not making a mistake about a fact; I am showing that I don’t know how to play the game.
Recall that in everyday life we sometimes let others admit to a mistake rather than to ignorance—as a way of their saving face—but of course this is not what is really going on. It is just that it seems a lesser gaffe to make a mistake about a fact than not to know how to do something (such as play a game).

Someone might say that I don’t understand the game. But, aside from perhaps making me feel better, does this accomplish anything? Does it, for instance, give us a better picture of what is going on? Surely it is simpler just to say that I don’t know how to play the game (despite my feelings) and leave it at that. To talk of “understanding” is more like talking of a situation where there are facts about which I can be mistaken—except that, in the case of understanding, the “facts” are somehow inside me. A game does not consist of facts. Disentangling making a mistake about something on the one hand and misunderstanding something on the other is very difficult and fortunately not necessary, as long as we distinguish both of these from not knowing how to play a game.

Another difficulty that is best avoided for the most part is the whole question of following rules. For present purposes, when I speak of someone as knowing how to play a game I imply that that person acts in accord with the rules, without experiencing them as limitations. For instance, no speaker of standard English ever says “Me saw her,” and it is not something that anyone has to think about to avoid. Compare “You and me, we saw her,” which, though it is nonstandard, sounds like English, whereas “me saw” does not. “Me saw” definitely breaks a rule; “You and me, we . . .” might at most be called “poor form.” Or maybe there is a conflicting rule about using the objective case when “pointing” for emphasis, as in “Me [put thumb to chest], I saw her.” Notice that a rule is not something that you have to know as such, as long as you know how to play the game. That is why it makes more sense to think of rules as descriptions of what people do and don’t do when playing a given game even though the term seems to belie this.

So if I know how to play our game, I simply won’t make an unallowable grouping of apples. I might make an ill-advised grouping but not a wrong one. If I know how to play the
game, but, say, due to impairment of some kind—being distracted or drunk—I do make a wrong grouping, it is not a case of my making a mistake (as if I were to say, “Oh, I thought I could group them like that!”) but a case of my being able to say quite literally, “I do know how to play the game, but I am not myself right now.”

In one sense, games consist of the manipulation of objects (like apples)—in other words, of moves. But we can also manipulate objects in our heads, as when we read the moves of a chess game that has already taken place. All that is required is that we know how to play the game.

Notice that when we replay the game of a master in our heads it is not required that we should have been able to play that particular game in the first place. We are still playing the game in the sense of manipulating objects.

Yet we want to say that there is a difference between playing and replaying.

Suppose that instead of replaying a game in their heads, two average chess players replay a game that had been played by two great masters. They memorize the moves and act out their parts very convincingly (perhaps adopting little “eccentricities of genius” in their manners and seeming to think intensely before they make their moves). We are watching them. You claim that they are not really playing the game because they don’t fully understand the moves; I maintain to the contrary that they are playing. (This time, at least I am certainly not making a mistake.)

Now suppose that two great masters are playing. Because there are a finite number of moves in chess, and because, in fact, certain series of moves constitute part of the strategy of the game, these two masters find themselves replaying for a number of moves the game that two other masters played previously. Since I obviously don’t understand the difference, let us say that you happen to enter the room just as this replay begins and then have to leave just as it ends. If you consider the replay in this case somehow different from the other, how do you know? Suppose the two masters are replaying a segment of a game they themselves had
played before; or suppose it is with the roles reversed, so that each is making the moves the other had made previously; or that only one of the two is replaying an earlier game.

Let us go back to the case of the two amateur players replaying a game between two masters. Suppose at some point one of the players makes a new move (that is, does not replay the previous game). As a result, the game proceeds differently after that. Are they now suddenly playing, whereas before they were not? Does it make a difference whether this was caused by a memory slip or a burst of enthusiasm? If it was a memory slip, was it a mistake—the move didn’t correspond to the “script”—is the rest of the game a mistake (even if you want to say that they are really playing for the first time)?

Although we want to say that there is a difference between playing and replaying, it is difficult to pinpoint where the difference lies. The obvious answer of chronology dissolves when we think about it: Even the masters’ game might be only the first recorded instance of that particular series of moves. Even if we could establish some way of distinguishing between play and replay, how would we apply it with certainty? After all, we admit the possibility that in playing, an average player might have an “inspired” moment or some extraordinary “luck” and so play “like a master”; certainly a master might be “off stride” one day and play hardly better than an average player. No one will find this as difficult to allow as that apples well up from under the ground—that simply doesn’t happen!

Although it seems to make sense to say that this person plays better than that one, it doesn’t make sense to say that this person knows the moves better. One either knows the moves or not; expertise resides somehow in playing. Again, one can make the wrong move in the sense of giving one’s opponent an advantage, but one who knows how to play chess will not, say, move the rook diagonally.

Suppose that one of the amateur chess players starts giving an evidently extempore running commentary about the play—not just a description of the moves but a discussion of the strategy involved. All of the onlookers (who all know how to play the game and also
recognize this as a replay) find the talk informative and convincing—except for you. Now I think I am justified in saying that you are carrying skepticism too far; to be frank, I am beginning to wonder whether you really know how to play the game.

Suppose it were the norm to replay chess games in the way I described. There might be a tendency as a result to pay attention to the accuracy of repetition—to notice “mistakes”—perhaps at the expense of appreciation of the game itself. But surely the game itself would remain the same. The difficulty we have distinguishing play and replay might seem to decrease in this case, but that would be an illusion based on the assumption that we ought to pay attention to the accuracy of repetition when it is clear we should not.

In fact it is the norm to replay chess games, but only in our heads, as we said before. It might even be that we sometimes give ourselves a running commentary in our heads as we play—but it would be wrong to think of that as constituting the game.

Giving a running commentary is not something we usually do when playing a game. But there are unusual situations in which we seem to be forced to do it. When Wittgenstein discussed the well-known optical illusion of the duck-rabbit, he pointed out that this was a special case of “seeing as,” that is, “Now I am seeing it as a duck; now I am seeing it as a rabbit.” But he denied that we usually see this way: “It would have made as little sense for me to say ‘Now I am seeing it as . . .’ as to say at the sight of a knife and fork ‘Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork.’ ”2 It is the specially designed “ambiguous” picture that seems to call for a running commentary, whereas usually running commentary is both unnecessary and quite peculiar.

In the case of a game being played with running commentary, a reverse illusion may be created: Because I try to explain the moves of the game I may come to believe that my explanation is part of the game and in fact causes the moves. In speaking about a piece of
music, for example, I might very easily slip from saying “this is what I heard” to saying “I heard it as this.”

In an early sketch for the *Philosophical Investigations* called the “blue book” (from the color of its binder), Wittgenstein makes the point that grammatical parallelisms can mislead us to expect parallel experiences. This is most a problem when we are examining experience theoretically—that is, giving a running commentary.

To show how we can be misled, he asks us to compare parallel questions and the nonparallel responses they get: (1) “How do you know he [as opposed to someone else] has pain?”—“He is moaning.” (2) “How do you know you have pain?”—“I feel it.”

It is not just that different sorts of “evidence” are offered in the two replies; notice the shift of emphasis in the second pair. “I feel it” is as peculiar a reply as “I am moaning” would be.

Music analysis, however, often wants to pretend that one can say the equivalent of “I am moaning” sensibly—in other words, give a running commentary as if it were objective evidence. Unfortunately, analysts do of course say, “I hear it as . . .” (and are discouraged from saying “I hear it [that way]”—which is the only sensible thing to say, even if it cannot be justified).

What is under scrutiny in this passage of the “blue book” (as in much of Wittgenstein’s late work) is the theoretical stance and, in particular, its limits. In a manner of speaking, theory (from θεώρειν, to look into, observe, contemplate) “desires” to see through to the common element beneath surface diversity. But suppose (Wittgenstein is saying) there is no common element, that there are only “family resemblances,” which can be made to seem identical only under misleadingly parallel questioning. Theory’s desire will tend to overwhelm its reason (as sexual desire has been known on occasion to overcome rational arguments against incest, for example).
That last comment was mine, not Wittgenstein’s (better get back to chess and music).

Like chess, music doesn’t consist of facts for us but of moves (or “motions,” as we call them). The factual aspects of music—fluctuations of atmospheric pressure caused by vibrating bodies and converted into nerve impulses that our brains interpret as sounds—are so far from coinciding with what we mean by the word as to make it faintly ludicrous even to mention them.

We can extend the analogy of music with chess somewhat further, saying that one of the versions of the music game is tonality, individual games are pieces of music, and the players are composers and performers. But since we have found it so difficult to distinguish play and replay in the case of chess (with a corresponding difficulty distinguishing players and replayers, i.e., composers and performers of music), perhaps we should let one category encompass two whose distinctness is so difficult to describe. Seeing performers as (re)composers simply carries the problem forward, as if in disguise. It seems to make sense, however, to call composers performers—that is, players of the game of tonality and, in the instance of a particular piece of music, the first performers.

This may still trouble you. Therefore, let us see if we can undermine our conflation and force ourselves to accept the “commonsense” view of players and replayers (that is, composers and performers) as distinct at least insofar as we are talking about music.

1. One might object that composition is distinct from performance in that, before a composer writes out a piece of music, nothing exists for the performer to perform—composition is a precondition of performance.

Suppose a composer sits down at the piano one day and improvises. Later, the composer writes out exactly the same pitches, rhythms, dynamics, and so on. It is clear that the piece existed as a performance before it was written out although the agent of both was in fact a composer.

Now suppose someone else had improvised the piece first (without the composer’s having heard it). One might object that it is unlikely a performer of (one assumes) lesser
ability could have improvised a piece that a “genius” like Beethoven struggled to write out over the course of months or even years. Again, I don’t want to deny what seem the obvious differences in people’s ability to play the game. But suppose Mozart sat down and improvised a piece that Haydn later wrote out (not having heard his friend’s improvisation). One may object that each had his own style and would therefore not have created the same piece in this way. Very well, suppose Mozart’s improvisation had been deliberately in the style of Haydn. (Does one want to deny that Mozart could have done it?)

Add to these hypothetical arguments, if you will, that composers often speak of writing down a composition as if by dictation; that they speak of seeing a piece as a whole in a flash of inspiration; that they speak of revision as a process of getting closer to the “original idea.” One needn’t accept a literal-minded Platonic interpretation to see that the composer’s experience with respect to the piece is not sufficiently distinct from the performer’s experience of it in performance to be called something else. (To make a very rough analogy, one way to understand Schenker’s conception of levels of structure is to think of levels closer to the foreground as performances of more remote ones.) We probably have the different words composer and performer only because of the obvious but superficial differences between sitting alone at a desk writing and sitting before an audience playing.4

2. Attacking from another direction, one might say that the composer provides a set of instructions; all the performer has to do is follow them to the letter and the piece will be realized—the performer as computer executing a “program.”

But almost no one who has performed a piece of music under any circumstances could accept this. (Nor could anyone who has heard a computer execute a music file!) Every performance differs; there is no such thing as a definitive performance.

When it happens that a piece I am performing doesn’t seem “new” to me, it is only that I’m not playing the game very well that day. This may seem to discount the role of memory in evolving a performance over time, but what I want to say is that memory is part of one’s commentary rather than part of one’s experience of playing: “I used to play it as
that, but now I play it as this.” Perhaps we imagine one “idea” replacing another in our heads (like one piece taking another on a chessboard)—but we really experience only our performance now.

A better analogy for how one way of playing a piece replaces another is to how one note “replaces” another in our ears when we hear a tune.

The idea of a definitive performance implies that “owning” a piece in this way is as good as being able to play the game—a philistine idea record companies naturally want us to buy even more than that we buy any particular performance.

And if record companies appeal to the bourgeois desire to own performances, then perhaps theory appeals in part to a desire to own the game of music itself.

My title, “Musical Ambiguity and Musical Analysis,” may seem somehow incorrect. It seems right to speak of “musical ambiguity,” but we usually say “music analysis.” The difference is that ambiguity is supposedly in the music (a property of it), but analysis is of the music (treats it as an object).

Also, because musical, when used to speak of a person, connotes knowing how to play the game, if I refer to “musical analysis,” I imply (somewhat impolitely) that there is “unmusical analysis.”

Yet ambiguity cannot usually be in the music. A move in a game cannot be ambiguous—ambiguity can only arise in giving a commentary and then mistaking the commentary for the game (“I hear as this” instead of “I hear this”). Of course, a composer can create a musical situation in which we seem to be forced to give a commentary as with the duck-rabbit illusion, but the music is no more ambiguous than the lines on the paper that make up the drawing.
It now appears that whereas we thought there was something wrong with my second term, it is really the first one that is wrong. Strictly speaking, there can be no musical ambiguity but only *metamusical* ambiguity. The ambiguity is not in the music but is an effect that arises in analysis (which may be musical or unmusical, depending on the analyst).

You might object that my saying ambiguity is relatively rare implies that each piece has an individual and essential “nature” and that there is usually only one right way to hear it (perform it, etc.). But I maintain that it is just because a piece can only be experienced as a performance that it is not ambiguous. In contrast, only something that really is essentially *some thing* (like a wolf dressed up as Grandma) can be ambiguous, that is, can seem to be something it isn’t or can seem to be undecidable.

Not that a piece can be anything I say: My point is, baldly, that the need to decide is what creates ambiguity.

It may well be that the “most interesting” aspects of a piece are those that give rise to the most disagreement among analysts, but that begs the question; the response should be, “Most interesting to whom?” (Presumably, to analysts seeking fodder for analytical disagreement.)

Within a *vital* artistic tradition—a description we might doubt now fits tonal music—questions arise only at the edges, when great artists push the boundaries. This is where the evolution of a tradition takes place. The importance of such innovation can easily be overstated, however. (In keeping with the idea of creativity as innovative, it sometimes seems as if every doctoral dissertation in music theory is expected to establish a new “paradigm,” even though Kuhn stressed that most of science—“normal science”—is what occurs between paradigm shifts.)

We can also conceive that several subtraditions coexist within a tradition. Like dialects of a language, they would be mutually comprehensible for the most part but differ on fine points. One instance that has been suggested to me is the insoluble disagreement
between those who hear tonic arrival as inherently strong metrically and those who do not. I can accept the possibility of such variation within a tradition—but only with the proviso that what people say they hear when they set out to theorize and what they in fact hear can be very different. My caution is based on the perennial power of reification, on our disposition to find evidence that fits what we believe, and on the plain fact that it is so hard to say what we really hear. As Wittgenstein leads us to acknowledge, I can know equally well the height of Mont Blanc and what a clarinet sounds like, but I can’t say what I know equally well.⁵

In the transmission of the first kind of knowledge, my telling you the height of Mont Blanc gives you exactly the same knowledge as your going out with a ruler to measure it yourself. My telling you what a clarinet sounds like is, by contrast, hopeless; the only thing to do is to show you.

This is the basis of the distinction I once benightedly tried to make between stories (telling) and pictures (showing).⁶

Showing someone what a clarinet sounds like is most easily done by playing a clarinet; this would correspond to an “analysis” of a piece of music that consisted of merely playing the piece (the unachievable ideal that Hans Keller seemed to be striving toward). Actual analyses must be more ambitious: they are interpretive. Some would say that this is where the telling comes in, and to be sure, analysts do a lot of it—Schenker rather more than most. Schenker graphs, though, are not a telling but a more ambitious kind of showing how the music goes.

The knowledge transmitted in an analysis is like that of, say, a painting that tries to convey the sound of a clarinet. If you and I were both to do paintings of this sort, some other people might think yours conveyed the sound of a clarinet better than mine—was more “clarinetlike.” Similarly, one analysis may be more “convincing” or “musical”—closer to showing how the music goes—without having to establish an essential structure, that is to say, “the way the piece of music really is ‘in itself.’”
Of course, this begs the question in the same way that the expression *knowing how to play the game* has. Of whom are we speaking? The best judges of an analysis within a certain tradition of music (as of any performance) of a work within that tradition would be experienced listeners. This does not entail exclusion any more than it would to ask that someone who proposed to judge our clarinet paintings know what a clarinet sounds like.

I want to avoid being mistaken for some kind of arch-conservative, and by invoking tradition I have moved onto even thinner ice than I have been skating on until now. But one needn’t be making a fetish of tradition to acknowledge that it conditions experience. And I will assert that analysis is by definition a heuristic performance within a tradition; it is one of a family of practices conducted according to a governing ideology. In other words, analytical knowledge differs from other knowledge in having no truth value except the pseudo–truth values that exist within an ideological framework. (To return to Mont Blanc for a moment: its height has one true value—all propositions stating its height, though they may vary according to units of measurement, are equivalent; the sound of a clarinet has no truth value at all—any proposition we can offer will amount to the completely tautologous one that “a clarinet sounds like a clarinet.”)

These pseudo–truth values do in fact exist; they inescapably condition our responses to the products of our culture. That means the music really does go a certain way (within certain tolerances) for experienced listeners. However, although the pseudo–truth values are inescapable, I don’t believe they are necessarily oppressive; remember that if traditions are “handed down,” they must also be “taken up”; they are not simply representations of what Marx called “false consciousness”—except inasmuch as they are mistaken for real truth values—because they provide a basis for human solidarity. In plain words, to do analysis is to *share* both pleasure and a kind of knowledge.

Think of analysis as the elderly parent of a middle-aged child, theory. Theory is sincerely concerned for the welfare of analysis. (It is that very sincerity that makes theory a bit
overweening in the relationship.) Theory doesn’t think it is safe for analysis to live alone anymore and insists that analysis move in with it. My question is not whether theory is right or whether analysis is right to resist. Unlike those questions, the one I ask does have an answer: Given the circumstances, will analysis lose something by moving in with theory?

I have allowed that a true ambiguity might occasionally exist in a piece of music. In such a case, “hearing anew” (playing the game) would dispose me to hear it as sometimes a “duck,” sometimes a “rabbit.” Even so, only a commentary would establish the shift of perspective.

The more common experience of hearing anew in tandem with memory is, however, closer to this: “Yesterday I heard a duck; today I hear a white mallard with lovely iridescent green and gold markings.” That is, through memory I seem to experience a filling in of detail—not that I literally hear detail I hadn’t heard before but that suddenly I “hear” how the detail takes its place as part of the whole. This is how a performer may be said to compose in the literal sense of to put together—and this is the sense in which the listener is a performer, too.

If music were normally ambiguous, it ought to be possible to perform $A-B-C-D$ as both a fourth progression and a third progression ending in a neighboring motion *simultaneously*. That one can play it one way today and the other tomorrow does not constitute ambiguity unless you assume that it “really is” one or the other—or somehow *both!* Again, this is not to deny that one way may be better than the other (because, for example, it fits better with its context) but only to deny that it is better because it corresponds to the “true nature” of the music.

Compare a lepidopterist collecting specimens with a music analyst collecting readings from parts of a piece of music. As bits of evidence accumulate, a larger pattern may emerge in both cases. The analogy is flawed, however, because the pattern that emerges in scientific study is (one hopes) based on material relations—a given butterfly really is descended from
and thus genetically related to some other butterfly. In contrast, even if one were to find a chart in the composer’s hand showing the “evolution” of a motive, genetic relations in a piece of music can never be more than metaphorical.

A reading is better if it increases our pleasure in the piece; often a hidden unity in diversity is revealed. Unity is not the only source of pleasure in music, of course, but simple diversity is seldom as much fun as unity and diversity combined.

Analyzing a piece of music is like giving a running commentary on a game that one is replaying in one’s head. The structure of a piece of music is an illusion that accompanies giving such a commentary—only the commentary has a structure. Or better, say that the commentary is the structure.

This is not to say that there can be no good (“musical”) analysis of a piece of music but only that such an analysis accompanies a performance by one who knows how to play the game and is convincing only inasmuch as the audience also knows how to play the game. A good analysis cannot tell us something we don’t already know (though we may not be aware that we know what we know, or may have forgotten it).

Remember that in playing a game one of the most exhilarating things is being reminded just how well one knows how to play.

Isn’t analyzing music another “game” then? In a manner of speaking, yes, perhaps. But I would say it is a game of a different order. And it is not merely that it is a game that is dependent on another—a “metagame,” if you like.

Let us go back to chess and ask, Is it possible to play chess as something else? Surely, aside from such things as the pleasure of an intellectual challenge or the assuagement of a need to compete—which could find other outlets—the primary object of playing chess is to win. Inasmuch as chess players play for another reason (to humiliate their opponents; to gain
fame and fortune), they are playing another game (not, strictly speaking, a “metagame,” however) in which winning a chess game is a move.

It is clear that one can play the music “game” for similar reasons. The question remains, however, whether the existence of a different perspective (another game one is playing) means that one really plays the first game (chess, music) as... Let us compare the situation with the duck-rabbit illusion, which also involves a shift of perspective but adds a commentary: “Now I am seeing it as a duck; now I am seeing it as a rabbit.” If I am “seeing as” in this way, I am not really seeing in the usual sense. Anyone who is playing chess well enough also to be playing the “humiliation” or the “fame and fortune” game must surely not play chess as, but simply play chess. (Chess masters are known for playing a number of games of chess at the same time—why not chess and the humiliation game at the same time, as well?)

Music analysis, in contrast, entails commentary; it is always in danger of slipping into “hearing as.” It is difficult to imagine a player playing chess as (that is, making a chess move whose sole purpose was to advance the player’s prospect of gaining fame and fortune) and strictly as a result of doing so—winning at chess; it is, however, not at all difficult to imagine a certain musical analysis being made as a move in another game—making an analysis that will be a good move in the “academic advancement” game, for example. In other words, in the case of chess, to win at the fame and fortune game you have to win the chess game, too; in music analysis, you can win at the academic advancement game by “throwing” the analysis game. That is what makes music analysis a game of a different order.8

All this talk of “knowing how to play the game” may seem to establish a “privileged position.” Imagine someone who does not know how to play our first game (the one with the apples) watching us. “You’re just moving apples around,” this person might say, and many
people are now saying that this is *all* that can be said without privileging some ideology. You might be surprised to read that I agree.

My point (after Wittgenstein) is different, that “knowing how to play the game” is a *way of life*, not a theoretical stance. Any theory, of course, will privilege some ideology as inescapably as any physical position privileges some perspective, but this does not apply to unmediated experience. I know that there isn’t supposed to be such a thing, but I believe that plainly false. There is no experience about which we can say anything that is unmediated, yes, but I would go so far as to say that *all* experience, as such, is unmediated—except by the pervasive sorts of categories that Kant proposes, which are a priori to and part of any possible experience. Experience is the one thing we *must* privilege to avoid utter solipsism (and is, in fact, the one thing we do in practice usually privilege).

The theorist who says of our game “You’re just . . .” is obviously wrong. For the players to respond, however, would be to enter into the theoretical, and the discussion could only devolve to some form of “Are not”—“Are too”; that is, unless the response was simply “Learn the game.”

Thus, the two tendencies that lead to error in what is sometimes broadly described as “anti-foundationalism” are (1) the tendency to deny that there is justification for any privilege whatsoever and (2) the tendency to want to privilege all theoretical stances equally (because, ironically, equally unprivileged). This vibration between opposing tendencies is caused by people being trapped in the inherent contradiction of trying to deconstruct theory theoretically (like Archimedes wanting a place to stand from which he could weigh the world).

Abstinence is our only recourse. Let us remember that, as with other dangerous practices in the real world, we do have checks on theory such that theory practiced with care maximizes the theoretical gain and minimizes the experiential loss. This is so clearly more desirable than its opposite that “safe” theory ought to be privileged unquestionably over “unsafe” theory.
Be that as it may, theory remains a dangerous practice. That we know it is so is one of the theoretical gains of our time; to desire to make it completely safe is, however, to privilege wishes over reality.

I am not likely to say that a piece of music is ambiguous unless I am analyzing it. But when I say it, I have already slipped from saying “this is what I heard” to saying “I heard it as this.” I have, in other words, slipped from a game I know how to play into a situation consisting of facts about which I can be mistaken.

Thus the use of the word *ambiguity* in music analysis—again, not always, but most often—is like the polite excuse we make for those who evince ignorance—we say they must be mistaken (as if the game consisted of facts)—except that ambiguity is an excuse I make for *myself*.

POSTSCRIPT

This essay grew out of a number of years of thought about the philosophical bases of Schenkerian analysis, particularly work I did in connection with my dissertation. I sketched the outlines there, but when an article based on the dissertation was published, I was persuaded to drop the sketchy discussion and to promise in a footnote a future treatment.

In the event, this essay was for the most part written very quickly (and in an entirely unexpected form) during the first few days following the second Schenker Symposium, at the Mannes College of Music (March 27–29, 1992). It then underwent an aging process—perhaps the only advantage a nonacademic theorist like myself has—and is now about as smooth as I can make it. “Ambiguity” was very much in the air at the symposium. While I would like to think that I have netted it once and for all, this is certainly a vain hope, for anyone who has taken the trouble to reason along with me will no doubt be aware that I have made some of the same points as Carl Schachter in his essay “Either/or.” Obviously, I have
made the points here in an entirely different and far less musically sophisticated way, but it
seems that they do bear repeating—and probably always will.

NOTES

   Anscombe, tr. (New York: Macmillan, 1953); *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and
   1972).


3. *Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations,” Generally Known as The Blue
   condensed presentation here, based on a number of pages of discussion, is mine.

4. I have to acknowledge (briefly) that I am evading the possibly protracted struggle a
   composer sometimes experiences in attaining a satisfactory final piece. With respect to the
   issues I am discussing, however, such a vexatious experience (1) is—even for the
   composer—entirely hidden, once the piece arrives at its final shape, by the final shape; and
   yet (2) can be unearthed and reexperienced by the performer (through studies of sketches,
   etc.—or simply, *imaginatively*, e.g., by asking why the composer made a given choice at
   some juncture) in the course of preparation for a performance.


7. “Analytical” knowledge is akin to the Kantian idea of the analytic (as opposed to the synthetic) but must not be confused with it. Like Kant’s class of propositions, everything that comes out of an analysis must somehow be in the analyzed object to begin with. A full consideration of this issue is completely tangential to the key concerns of this essay, because the knowledge in question here is bounded by, in Wittgenstein’s term, a “way of life.” To clarify, however: It seems obvious that analytical statements must also be a priori and that synthetic statements are a posteriori, but Kant proposed that synthetic a priori statements were also possible (and that analytic a posteriori statements were not). Since “analytical knowledge,” as used in this essay, involves contemplation, it is clearly synthetic in Kant’s terms, but the claims made are a priori. Recently, Saul Kripke has proposed that the analytic-synthetic axis be replaced by necessity-contingency and claimed that (in addition to the obvious necessary–a priori and contingent–a posteriori) both necessary–a posteriori and contingent–a priori statements are possible. “Analytical knowledge,” as used here, is contingent a priori.

8. I acknowledge the influence of Heidegger’s analysis in Being and Time of Dasein’s authenticity (as contrasted with das Mann’s way of being). Others—Stanley Cavell, for one—have noticed intriguing parallels between Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The former apparently was aware of the latter but had little use for his thought, and professional philosophers have mostly accepted their lack of connection. For Wittgenstein this may have been a matter of style more than anything else, and it’s certainly understandable. But the parallels between “Being” and “that of which one must remain silent” ought to be pursued by someone who is up to the task. May I add that I had not read any Cavell at the time this was
written? When I did, I found it both highly congenial and was quite abashed to discover that in the essay “Must We Mean What We Say?” (in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, updated edition, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), he had made some of the same points both far more effectively and in a voice I found at times spookily like the one I adopted in the present essay.


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