

which he alerts us could be incorporated within the critical project, not left outside. To be sure, his open declaration of revulsion on experiencing sonic alterity jars against our desire for tolerance. But we can frame this differently: his frankness brings us into confrontation with aspects of humanity (in ourselves) that we wish not only to overcome but tend also to evade. If we read it afresh, his work could well contribute to our quest for less categorical and more adventurous ways of engaging with sonic experience.⁶⁶

Appropriating Said

KOFI AGAWU

BORN in Palestine, educated at a British boarding school in Egypt and later in the United States, Said is typically scripted as an influential literary and cultural critic, a passionate advocate for the Palestinian cause and a prominent public intellectual. In the course of a lifetime of active research he produced an extraordinarily wide range of criticism and scholarship, for which he is justly celebrated today. As a fellow traveller in the field of postcolonial studies, I find many aspects of Said's work stimulating and inspiring. I believe that the daily practice of musicology would be significantly enhanced if musicology opened itself up to key elements in Said's thought and method. Assembling an adequate portrait of such a(n imagined) musicology would, however, require far more space than is available here. So I will limit myself to two tasks: first, I will rehearse some of the conditions that made Said's work possible; and secondly, I will suggest that a particular idea of his, the notion of contrapuntal reading, can be fruitfully adapted to an adjacent area of scholarship, namely research into African music. Thoroughly worked-out positions on these (and related) topics obviously lie beyond the scope of this intervention, but perhaps this ensemble of fragments will indicate some of the potential in appropriating Said.

Three basic, practical activities define Said's background: reading, listening to music and writing, including the development of a critical vocabulary. Said read voraciously and in several languages (Arabic, French, German, English). This lends a certain authority to some of his more sweeping claims about the 'West' and the 'Orient'. Of the figures who shaped his intellectual horizons, three writers or groups of writers are often mentioned. First is the eighteenth-century Neapolitan Giambattista Vico, whom Said acknowledged as 'the single most powerful intellectual influence on my life'.⁶⁷ A chapter on Vico appears at the end of his second major book, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*.⁶⁸ There he explains the sources of this particular affinity and contextualizes them with reference to American and French critical

⁶⁶ In an expanded version of this paper I address Said's sensing in the piano recital as well, and suggest it affords us insights into a broader range of musical experience as well as a return to the political. See Rachel Beckles Willson, 'Value and Abjection: Listening to Music with Edward W. Said', *Against Value in the Arts and Education*, ed. Emile Bojesen, Sam Ladkin and Robert McKay (forthcoming).

⁶⁷ *Edward Said: The Last Interview*, at 54:59.

⁶⁸ See above, note 2.

theory. Second is Joseph Conrad, acknowledged as ‘the great figure of my imaginative life’.⁶⁹ The subject of Said’s doctoral dissertation and first book, Conrad, too, became a frequent point of reference because he embodied key values stemming from the historical experience of exile and its imaginative rendition as literature.⁷⁰ Third, Said acknowledged the influence of, among more recent writers, Auerbach, Foucault, Adorno and Jankélévitch, in particular the last author’s writing on Fauré.⁷¹ This bare-bones list is in its own way familiar to musicologists because some of these same writers feature prominently in musicological texts by Gary Tomlinson, Carolyn Abbate and Stephen Rumph, among others.⁷² The list may even be a source of comfort (at least initially), for it appears that, as a reader, Said shares our – contemporary – critical culture.

As a listener, Said was drawn to Western classical music (as opposed to jazz, popular music or non-Western music), and his interests centred unapologetically on a veritable canon of great composers (Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, Richard Strauss), together with their most distinguished interpreters. He loved this music, played a certain amount of it at the piano (‘played ... to win’, as Michael Wood characterizes his playing),⁷³ and wrote about it with increasing intensity in later life. While Said’s embrace of this particular canon speaks to a certain investment in the aesthetic, it simultaneously raises questions for those who admire the evident diversity in his literary and political criticism and wish to imagine a similarly catholic approach to the world of music. Just as *Culture and Imperialism* acknowledged the work of Third World writers and critics, so – wishfully speaking – Middle Eastern music might have received affirmation from a prominent scholar of Middle Eastern origins like Said. At stake here is the question of identity (including self-identity) and its cultural trappings, but exploration of this question is always in danger of terminating in a dead end if premised on the existence of fixed or pure categories, or if framed as an ethical imperative. Said’s musical tastes were shaped by an authentically cosmopolitan ethos, not a strategic one. There is nothing ironic about his passion for classical music.

Of Said’s two main groups of writings – those on music, on the one hand, and those that deal with history, literature, theory, philosophy and politics, on the other – I have some doubts as to whether those on music hold a transformative potential for musicology.⁷⁴ For example, the worldliness of music – a subject broached in *Musical Elaborations* – remains a complicated topic in philosophical aesthetics, history and analysis, requiring a comprehensive and nuanced consideration of a variety of factors that shape production and reception. And the severity of performance occasions – another subject discussed in the same book – demands elaboration using a combination of tools from both the sociology and the psychology of music. These tools are not abundantly on display in *Musical Elaborations*. Indeed, I can find nothing in the

⁶⁹ *Edward Said: The Last Interview*, at 55:25.

⁷⁰ Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA, 1966).

⁷¹ See for example, Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Fauré et l’inexprimable* (Paris, 1974).

⁷² See Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago, IL, 1993); Carolyn Abbate, ‘Jankélévitch’s Singularity’, in Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Abbate (Princeton, NJ, 2003), xii–xx; and Stephen Rumph, *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics* (Berkeley, CA, 2012).

⁷³ Michael Wood, ‘On Edward Said’, *London Review of Books*, 25 (2003), 5.

⁷⁴ See my review of *Musical Elaborations* in ‘Wrong Notes’, *Transition*, 55 (1992), 162–6.

book that is either helpfully original as a critical opening or that might be considered the last word on the subject.⁷⁵

It is to the non-musical writings, then, that we might turn in order to draw a few lessons for musicology. One way to begin is to consider the conceptual scaffolding that supports Said's writing. This is in itself a huge undertaking, and likely to tempt us into a hasty and opportunistic appropriation of his vocabulary. Still, we have to make a start somewhere; so, for reasons not just rhetorical but also ontological, let me follow Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan in setting out a Saidian lexicon consisting of 33 terms and names.⁷⁶ Some (like narrative, style and theory) will be readily familiar from cognate usages in musicology, but the worlds constructed by the collection as a whole are distinct from those prioritized in mainstream musicology:

affiliation; Eric Auerbach; beginnings; between/betweenness; centrism; Joseph Conrad; contrapuntal criticism; culture and imperialism; democratic criticism; exile; humanism; the intellectual; linguicity; narrative; nationalism; oppositional criticism/consciousness; orient/oriental/orientalism; philology; postcoloniality; professionalism; representation; secular criticism; speaking truth to power; specular/border intellectual; style; text/textuality; theory; 'travelling theory'; Giambattista Vico; virtuosity; voyage in; worldliness; Zionism.

The very possibility of a list like this is evidence of a certain stability of vision in Said's intellectual outlook. As we would expect, there are internal resonances as well as dissonances among the items. The list nevertheless provides some indication of the theoretical topoi that animated Said's thinking.

It is probably best to think of these items as subtending various continua: between the worldly and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract, and the personal and the extra-personal. Some terms gesture towards formalism and constructivism, while others depict power politics. Between these framing extremes are hybrid combinations that serve to complicate our understanding of ways of world-making. The actual language with which Said composes out these keywords would require separate treatment, but it is worth observing that his prose generally eschews the complexities associated with other prominent exponents of postcolonial theory, notably Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. The use of clear language may represent an ideological choice, however – striving for a certain kind of mastery. It may also lead to under-complicating otherwise complex issues. Whether the choice was personal or shaped by the civic and academic institutions in which Said was formed, the significant point is that he embraced the communicative potential (and presumably ideological charge) of clear language in order to reach a larger reading public. His field of vision was not narrowly confined to that of fellow specialists.

Said's critical armoury was put in service of a practice of close reading not as an end but as a means to an end. It is here that we glimpse the disruptive potential of his project. An early text like *Beginnings* (1975) is not conceivable outside this technology of reading, of ferreting out assumptions, drawing connections by deploying occasionally flamboyant affiliative gestures. Similarly, the influence of *Orientalism*, a text widely regarded as foundational in the field of postcolonial theory, stems in part from the author's repeated close readings of a range of writers who seem to share a representational premiss in rendering the Orient as knowledge.

⁷⁵ For a contrasting appraisal, see Rose Rosengard Subotnik's review of *Musical Elaborations* in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 46 (1993), 476–85.

⁷⁶ Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, *A Said Dictionary* (Oxford, 2012).

(Repetition is an especially important technique in this book.) We may well be dealing here not only with an epistemological constant in the Western imagination of the Orient, but perhaps with a cognitive constant as well.

Reading closely and reading with a comparativist's mindset such that one is simultaneously inside and outside the text (setting aside for now the argument that the text has no 'outside') appears to be Said's method. Although close reading as such is not unfamiliar from some branches of music study (music analysts in particular often make extensive use of the technique), it is sometimes frowned upon. In the production of knowledge about sub-Saharan African music, for example, the sort of note-by-note analysis and speculative projections about meaning routinely found in journals like *Music Analysis* and *Music Theory Spectrum* has been slow to gain normative status. Although theoretical works exist in which African musics are rendered as systems, introspective close readings of individual repertory items are fewer. This is in part because close reading, whether practised by a deconstructionist critic like Derrida or a music analyst like Schenker, is typically associated with a Western (i.e. non-African) way of doing things. Said's example is instructive in this respect. He upholds the quite self-evident belief that there is simply no substitute for textual production resulting from close attention to the forms, styles and processes of cultural objects and the intricacies of their reception. Close reading is always a means to an end – a flexibly conceived goal that may well recede the more closely we approach it.

Reading contrapuntally means reading across genres and repertories, texts and contexts. A contrapuntal reading denies fixity to conventional boundaries (generic, linguistic, cultural, or even 'textual' as distinct from imagic or sonic). In the production of knowledge about African music, for example, where ethnography and history have remained privileged modes of enquiry since the 1960s, a contrapuntal reading has the potential to counter insularity, undermine tunnel vision, promote sideways looking and encourage the connoisseur's art of making unexpected connections – all of this aimed at bringing insight.

The literary scholars Abiola Irele and Brent Edwards have separately made a case for a contrapuntal reading of African music, the one implicitly, the other explicitly. Introducing a special issue in 2001 of the journal *Research in African Literatures* devoted to music, Irele acknowledged ethnomusicology's role in foregrounding the role of music in society, but he was critical of some of its forbidden juxtapositions:

It seems inconceivable that the first movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 4, with its wonderful flute ritornello, could evoke the Igbo tradition of ozo and atilogwu music, yet to anyone who cares to listen, the similarities in instrumental color and rhythmic pattern can be striking. And I recall the remark made by the late Fela Sowande about how much the opening theme of the second symphony by Sibelius evinced for him a Yoruba quality that he came to feel an especially strong bond with the great Finnish composer on account of this passage. Ethnomusicology ignores such connections, and tends to operate a constriction of African music in such a way that this music becomes enclosed within a narrow range of perception and discourse, serving at best as an exotic mode whose interest resides in its strangeness, its very otherness, and at worst as a curiosity, with hardly any reality outside of its anthropological significance.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ F. Abiola Irele, 'Editorial: The Landscape of African Music', *Research in African Literatures*, 32 (2001), 1–2 (p. 1).

Irele's desire to juxtapose sonic environments of ostensibly different provenance, and to make (apparently) far-flung connections in order to expand the range of perception, goes to the heart of a contrapuntal reading. Deep-lying convergences between distantly placed objects and processes can enhance our understanding of texts. To discourage the making of such comparisons (on grounds, for example, that they emanate from different cultural, economic or geopolitical contexts) is to block roads to potential insight.

In an essay on the sound of anticolonialism, Edwards similarly advocates a contrapuntal reading of the colonial archive.⁷⁸ Referring principally to the monumental archival work of Hugh Tracey, he acknowledges 'the complicity of ethnography with the colonial enterprise'. Edwards's own burden is to counter the occlusion of the political by advocating readings of texted songs from the colonial archive that cut across 'purported divisions' signalled by categories like 'folk', 'professional', 'modern', 'traditional'. He is looking for 'reverberations that may be less a matter of specific and traceable patterns of movement and influence than a pattern of similar concerns or predilections, the parallel recourse to related figures in the musical imagining of social change in the broadest sense'. What we might expect from such contrapuntal readings are unexpected convergences at a deep structural level, affiliations across generic and class lines, new configurations within dominant histories, and a persistent 'problematizing' of previously sacred or untouchable domains. The fear of anachronism, which used to be a disincentive to bold thinking, would be thrown out of the window, and a new attitude to fostering coevalness would be installed in its place.

In the early twentieth century, comparative musicologists produced, among other things, taxonomies of gross features of African music as well as accounts of tone systems.⁷⁹ During the ethnographic regime of the second half of the twentieth century, scholars produced detailed studies of repertoires associated with individual ethnic groups.⁸⁰ In the last few decades, theoretically inclined scholars of world music have focused on temporal and pitch structures drawing on the resources of music theory.⁸¹ What remains as a supplement is analytical engagement with individual repertory items (a dirge, a play song, a dance-drumming composition) carried out in the spirit of Said's contrapuntal reading and along the lines indicated by Irele and Edwards. In this way we can deepen our appreciation of African music's entanglements with other music while tapping the insights of individual listener-critics. The global discourse on African music will almost certainly be enriched in the process.

⁷⁸ Brent Hayes Edwards, 'The Sound of Anticolonialism', *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, ed. Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Durham, NC, 2016), 269–91.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Marius Schneider, *Geschichte der Mehrstimmigkeit*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1934–5), i: *Die Naturvölker*.

⁸⁰ See, for example, John Blacking, *Venda Children's Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis* (Johannesburg, 1967).

⁸¹ Notable examples include Jay Rahn, *A Theory for All Music: Problems and Solutions in the Analysis of Non-Western Forms* (Toronto, 1983); *Analytical Studies in World Music*, ed. Michael Tenzer (New York, 2006); and Mark Hiljeh, *Towards a Global Music Theory: Practical Concepts and Methods for the Analysis of Music across Human Cultures* (Farnham, 2012).