

**Book Review: Music's Making The Poetry of Music; The Music of Poetry
Michael Cherlin**

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In a letter to his colleague and friend, Moriz Violin, dated 10 April 1902, only a few days after the premiere of his string sextet, *Verklaerte Nacht*, Arnold Schoenberg wrote:

*I cannot release you from your promised letter with a full report about my sextet. You still have to write me about it. And then also "objective issues" that you have heard from the opponents. But in this regard one can conclude nothing from the critics. Babbling about artistic forms, program music, and the like, does not interest me at all. To the contrary, I would like to hear a few musical things about it. There was nothing to read about that in the reviews. I have, of course, no intention of bettering myself by following the advice of the critics and did not expect a comprehensive analysis. But I would indeed like to know what objection my opponents, musically—objectively, have against my work. So please write. Also in detail your relationship to this. (Haimo and Feisst, 2016, *Schoenberg's Early Correspondence*, p. 87.)*

Schoenberg was neither the first, nor the last composer or author to feel—in many cases, justifiably--that the critics had not addressed the issues he thought most important about his work. And you might think that any serious author, writing on a serious topic deserves no less. But, as many serious authors know only too well, even this barebones minimal standard is all too often not met. Michael Cherlin is, indeed, a serious author who has written about a succession of serious topics, certainly in his past two books (*Schoenberg's Musical Imagination* and *Varieties of Musical Irony: From Mozart to Mahler*) and in the present work as well. But this raises the immediate and obvious question: What exactly are the principal topics of this book? As it happens, it is not at all easy to answer and thus, in many ways, the answer to that question is at the heart of the present review.

One way to begin to answer the question I've posed, is to build upon the work of the mostly unsung heroes of academic research, the anonymous librarians at the Library of Congress who carefully read the books they are assigned and identify the topics using Library of Congress

subject headings: LCSH. On page v of the front matter of Cherlin's book we have the following:

Subjects: LCSH: Music--Philosophy and aesthetics. | Music and philosophy. | Music and literature. | Music theory --Philosophy. | Music--Religious aspects -- Judaism.

If we compare the headings and the book's text, we can readily see that the anonymous librarians are mostly correct. These are indeed most of the principal subjects under discussion in Cherlin's book. Most, but not all; sometimes, the librarians get it wrong—not by sins of commission, but rather, by sins of simple omission. That is, not including issues that are—or should be---at least as important as the ones they did include.

What is omitted, and how do those omissions influence the book's character and structure? It is the nature of modern scholarship that many scholars stick with a very narrow range of topics. Some even rewrite the same book, over and over again. In their defense it might be said that a comprehensive knowledge of the primary and secondary source materials is often a sine qua non for academic research and writing, not so easy to accomplish if an author is flitting from discipline to discipline or subject to subject.

That is not all we miss via the LCSH: the present book is far more autobiographical than we might have expected or anticipated. We learn much about the author that those who have not been so fortunate as to make his acquaintance did not know. [In the interests of full disclosure, I should state that, to my knowledge or memory, I have met Cherlin only once or twice at SMT/AMS meetings. He reviewed my 1990 book, *Schoenberg's Serial Odyssey*. I have no objections to that review.] Returning to the subjects at hand (autobiographical elements in his book): Did you know that Cherlin spent the Vietnam War years as a clarinetist in the US Army Band? Or that after many decades of service at the University of Minnesota he is now Professor Emeritus, and retired to a place, far warmer than Minnesota (admittedly not a high bar)? Or that in his time at Yale, he was a guest in Professor Harold (the *Anxiety of Influence*) Bloom's home for tea and academic advice? Or that Cherlin's parents spoke Yiddish at home? Or that Cherlin's musical tastes extend well beyond the classical western canon? These are all essential aspects of the narrative, but not included or maybe not includable in the Library of Congress subject headings.

Why then did Cherlin make so many autobiographical excurses? Did we really need to know about any of the topics limned above? Could he have omitted the various autobiographical descriptions included in this book? Or, separated off the autobiographical ideas as a separate book?

Hardly

Cherlin's Judaism is not a bit of ethnic color in an otherwise gentile society, but an integral part of his philosophy and thought. Emmanuel Levinas is given considerable attention in Cherlin's book, not only because Levinas' philosophical ideas are fascinating on their own, but also that they flow in large part from Levinas' Judaism. So too for Cherlin; he is not engaged in Judaic ideas solely because of the interest of the ideas, stripped from their part in his background.

Thus far, I have described a number of topics that have helped stamp this book with its peculiar character. Is there anything else that gives this book its special character? Several further bits of information should help us create the conditions for a useful answer. For decades Michael Cherlin has been a professor at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Give the idea, that nothing is done or thought in isolation, we should expect that also to contribute to his ideas.

In his book, "*A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*," the author, Stephen W. Hawking, notes that:

*Someone told me that each equation I included in the book would halve the sales. I therefore resolved not to have any equations at all. In the end, however, I did put in one equation, Einstein's famous equation, $E=mc^2$. I hope that this will not scare off half of my potential readers. (Hawking, 1988 *A Brief History*, pp.vi-vii).*

Cherlin has attempted something very similar: In a book of more than 300 pages and whose Library of Congress Classification is ML he includes not a single example in musical notation. Since the ninth century in France, musicians from the western traditions have felt that the benefits of pitch and duration notation far outweigh the debits, but Cherlin has decided to speak on the highest level to his audience and with the obvious belief that he would far more than halve his audience with each example containing music.

The absence of musical examples highlights one particularly important aspect of Cherlin's book: it is clearly intended as part of a pedagogical project. Just as Hawking wanted to teach

about the complicated topics of astrophysics without deterring his readers via equations or talking down to them, so too it is for Cherlin. He is clearly trying to communicate about many topics without deterring his readers with musical examples and while not talking down to them. Not that the book under review is a textbook, per se. To draw one final comparison with Hawking's work, Hawking states that:

... modern science has become so technical that only a very small number of specialists are able to master the mathematics used to describe them. Yet the basic ideas about the origin and fate of the universe can be stated without mathematics in a form that people without a scientific education can understand (Hawking, 1988, p. vi.)

It would appear then, that Cherlin faces a similar situation; as practiced today, music theory is so technical that only a very small number of specialists are able to understand the musical examples used to describe them. Like Hawking's, Cherlin's book is written in such a manner that the basic ideas that he discusses can be stated without music examples in a form that people without a technical musical education can understand. Just as much as a copy of Hawking's book adorns many a bedside night table (e.g., mine) where it is read, and reread by non-scientists constantly, so too, I could reasonably imagine that could be true for Cherlin's book as well.

That Cherlin's book has pedagogical origins and bases is readily visible from three other important vantage points. 1): The book is dedicated to Cherlin's teachers 2): One of Cherlin's former students, Phil Ford, has written a fine mini-review of Cherlin's book as part of the front matter for this book, and 3) Cherlin himself has included a detailed and extensive homage to his own *Doktorvater*, the late David Lewin, a giant of many fields who is also the giant upon whose broad shoulders we all have stood and thus have been able to see so much that would otherwise not have been seen.

If we summarize what we've seen about Cherlin's book, thus far, we might be fairly certain that it is about music and philosophy and criticism, and that it has many autobiographical elements. In addition, we have now concluded that it is meant for an intelligent audience, one that likes music and/or philosophy but not necessarily meant for musicians or philosophers only. But this is not all; we can do and say more.

If I were at a bookstore or library and looking at the new books, the cover art might attract my interest. It is a magnificent photograph from (I assume) the Hubble telescope or something

like it, in which a spectacular spiral galaxy is presented in all of its majesty. Alas, other than two appearances on p. 171, there is no further use of the word “galaxy” in the book.

If we still think that the book’s author, title, or cover art or the subject headings are still insufficient and do not give us enough information about the character of the book, we might turn to the table of contents. If we do, we quickly see that we have tapped into the mother lode, Here are the chapter headings and titles:

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1. Music as Fiction	9
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7. Phrase as Musical Event, Wave as Musical Metaphor, and the Silence of Musical Space	113
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9. Smooth Space, Striated Space: Nomadic Space, Agrarian Space	177
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Some more traditionally oriented readers might feel that they have walked into a rather strange intellectual world. Some of the terms and phrases (middle voice, intersubjectivity, nomadic space, and so on) might be unfamiliar, either generically, or by unfamiliar usage. Some readers might find this a bit off-putting, and might become estranged from the book. I think that Cherlin has done what he could to see that few readers will stay estranged. The clarity of his thinking and writing, means that readers will not have to sit in confusion for long about the terms.

There is one more thing that we can do to understand thoroughly Cherlin’s project: read his preface. On p. xxi Cherlin has a subsection of the preface entitled “Synopsis: Guide through

the Labyrinth.” He starts by stating that “a reader of the manuscript that became this book suggested that an overview of the whole would be helpful, a guided tour of what to expect.” On the other hand, readers like Cherlin himself, “generally prefer to see where a book is taking us as we get there.” Cherlin continues: “Readers of the latter disposition often skip the part of the introduction that outlines the chapters to come. We might liken the two sorts of readers to two sorts of persons visiting a museum for the first time. There are those who prefer proceeding with a map in hand, a pathway to guide them through the labyrinth of rooms, a guide toward finding, for example, an anticipated portrait by Rembrandt. An alternative is to wander haphazardly or at least without a floorplan before us, so that the portrait of Rembrandt, as we happen upon it, may take us by surprise.” (Cherlin, 2024, p. xxi).

Although the present reviewer is definitely a charter and lifetime member of the “wander haphazardly” school—to the point of not knowing there was a synopsis on the first reading of the book--almost every other reader will want to start with Cherlin’s extremely helpful and clear synopsis.

This, to my mind is the most fundamental aspect of the book: incredibly clear organization and writing, helpfully filling in the steps we might otherwise overlook. In the end, what we get is virtually an encyclopedia of the philosophy and practice of music as seen through the perceptive eyes and ears of the author (hence the extensive autobiographical excursions.)

In the final decade of the 20th century, a standup comedian, Jerry Seinfeld, and a comedy writer, Larry David, teamed together to pitch a pilot to NBC that was to be a show about nothing—absolutely nothing. What Cherlin has done is to give us the inverted mirror image of a show about absolutely nothing. Instead, Cherlin has written a book about absolutely everything. In Phil Ford’s Foreword, he refers to the underlying idea as “Everythingology”, (p. ix). In the course of the chapters to come, eleven of them, in two large parts, Cherlin moves seemingly effortlessly from one idea and associated authors to other ideas and philosophers. Is it possible for anyone to have a full-time university musical career and to have read and understood all of the philosophers and ideas that Cherlin has read, understood and absorbed, and then integrated into his thought universe?

Usually when a philosopher discusses so many different topics and authors it is all too easy to assume that there could be superficiality, particularly when we have “only” something in the vicinity of 300 pages of text. Disabuse yourself of this notion, pronto. The denseness of the text is staggering, particularly when we see how carefully Cherlin writes. Obviously, the ideas

here have been percolating in Cherlin's thought for all forty years of his academic career, gaining clarity and force with each retelling.

At the risk of seeming like one of Schoenberg's critics, babbling on about issues that are not so important in the author's eye, I would argue that there is one area, however, where I think Cherlin should have examined one subject in some detail but which is not in this book. And that is the music used in synagogues for the cantillation of the Torah and Prophets as well as the music which had existed but which is now lost for the singing of the Psalms. Criticizing an author for the omission of an idea has a long and disreputable history. It is the easiest and most unfair of criticisms to critique an author for that which is not there. (See Schoenberg's letter, above.) I point out the omission of this topic not as a criticism of Cherlin, but in disappointment that he did not turn also down that path. Particularly given the recent publication in of an interesting summary article on the cantillation of the Bible, "Eastern Ashkenazi Biblical Cantillation, An Interpretive Analysis, by Yonatan Malin, (*Yuval*, vol. x, 2016).

In short, this is an excellent book, by a first-rate author, who in the memorable words of his former student, Phil Ford, has "forgotten more about music, music theory, poetry, fiction, literary theory, philosophy, and religion" than the rest of us will ever learn. Kudos.