

Philosophy of Song and Singing: An Introduction

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Philosophical studies of music in the analytic style have tended, with relatively few exceptions, to focus on a fairly narrow range of forms of instrumental music. This makes a certain amount of sense; the addition of words to music also adds a set of linguistic, cognitive, and aesthetic features that appear to be ancillary to the study of music as such, and may cloud rather than clarify discussions on the subject. Jeanette Bicknell's brief introductory text offers the beginning of a useful correction to this tendency, distilling the many issues and approaches to the matter and framing them in a way that serves both to introduce readers to central arguments in the philosophy of music and to advance the author's own claims on the subject of song and singing. Bicknell's ultimate aim here is to present a basic version of her account of song as social institution, in accord with her more general argument (seen also in her 2009 book *Why Music Moves Us*) 'that all musical experience is intrinsically and fundamentally social rather than personal or individual' (63).

There are two broad lines of argument that converge in Bicknell's case for song as social institution: a discussion of the ontology of song and a complex set of interrelated discussions concerning authenticity and the practice of singing as performance. The first two chapters, in

which she deals with the words of songs both in isolation and in their musical context, present the core of her ontological program. Bicknell characterizes her approach to the ontology of song as pragmatic in nature, charting a careful course between addressing purely philosophical concerns and respecting the conceptual apparatus developed by the various communities of practice in which songs exist; the first question we ought to ask in response to queries about the ontological status of a song is, she says, ‘Who wants to know, and why?’ (8). An ethnomusicologist’s answer to the question of whether or not two different performances of ‘John Brown’s Body’ are instances of the same song, for example, may in fact be quite different from a musician’s answer, and neither of these definitively determines what a philosophical answer to the question ought to look like.

Fundamental to Bicknell’s deployment of this approach is her use of Stephen Davies’ distinction between musical works that are ontologically ‘thick’ and musical works that are ontologically ‘thin.’ According to Bicknell’s use of Davies, most folk or traditional songs, which tend to leave quite a lot of room for variation, are ontologically thin – performers of such songs are granted considerable freedom to interpret the song, and doing so does not violate any identity conditions for the song itself. An aria like ‘Nessun dorma,’ however, is ontologically thick as Bicknell understands it – there is a much narrower range of acceptable interpretive differences among performances of arias as a rule. She further suggests that the conditions determining the ontological thickness or thinness of a song are embedded in the communities of practice in which these songs occur, rather than in the songs themselves.

Bicknell bears out her claims concerning the social embeddedness of song by turning to questions about the nature of singing as performance and what constitutes authenticity where sung music is concerned. Of particular interest is her careful distinction among three kinds of

authenticity for the singers of songs: authenticity as faithfulness, authenticity as sincerity, and authenticity as boundary policing. Authenticity as faithfulness (which Bicknell presents as an extension of Peter Kivy's treatment of authenticity as intention) involves fidelity to the composer's apparent design, and applies mostly to those forms of song which Bicknell describes as ontologically thick (art song, opera); indeed, it seems appropriate to treat ontological thickness as inextricably bound up with faithfulness of this kind. Authenticity as sincerity, on the other hand, has less to do with the intent of the composer and more to do with the persona and expressive activity of the singer herself, with some latitude granted depending on genre conventions. Singers of jazz standards, for example, are expressively sincere in a different sense from folk singer-songwriters performing their own compositions, but both may be held accountable for some genre-consistent form of sincerity of expression. Authenticity as boundary policing speaks to genre as well, primarily as a frame for representing and reinforcing community membership. Bicknell works this third sense of authenticity out through a discussion of Rudinow's classic argument concerning race and the performance of the blues, taking up a reading of Rudinow that treats authenticity 'as the kind of credibility that comes from having the appropriate relationship to an original source' (59). All three forms of authenticity are, she argues, socially constructed and operate in the context of specific communities – that is, judgments of authenticity are the expressions of members of a community of adherents (including both creators and audiences) of a musical tradition, and are often explicitly used to define and reinforce membership conditions in that community or tradition.

These socially constituted conditions are not, however, to be read as purely subjective matters of taste that leave no room for the possibility of objective aesthetic judgments. Boundary policing criteria, for example, are about more than just whether or not members of a community

of fans or performers *like* any given performance or song. They are also, as Bicknell points out, about things like history and ‘mastery of the idiom’ (60). They may include judgements about features of the performer’s persona, about instrumentation, and about the sonic properties or features of the song in question, all of which can be argued about without relying entirely on individual taste. If we follow Bicknell’s argument, then it would not be merely a matter of taste for blues purists to regard a blues record from the late Ravi Shankar as an example of something that is not *really* the blues, regardless of which songs were on the record or how competently they were made to sound more or less like conventional examples of music in the genre. The instrumentation itself (assuming the sole use of sitar and tabla) would be out of bounds, given the purist’s understanding of the history of blues music in practice. While the boundaries of a genre or tradition might change over time as the community of participants allows (e.g. Dylan going electric at Newport in 1965), the criteria in use to enforce them are not matters of individual preference, but rather depend on the consensus of that community.

The best of Bicknell’s case for song as social institution is found in the first half of the text, in which she establishes her ontological commitments and spells out her understanding of authenticity. Slightly less convincing (mostly because they don’t seem to go quite as far as they could) are the chapters that make up the second half of the book, dealing with recording technologies, the ethical dimensions of performance, song in the context of drama, the meanings of songs, and the motivation for singing. The discussion of technology – a brief chapter on Auto-tune and authenticity – is perhaps best taken as an extension of the earlier authenticity argument rather than a separate concern. It might have benefited from a more thorough treatment of how judgments about authentic expression relative to technologies of this kind occupy the intersection between sincerity and boundary policing; the bones of that argument are present, but the

discussion currently depends a bit too much on the author's own particular preferences regarding expressiveness, especially in her study of the use of Auto-tune in Cher's 'Believe'. Likewise, the chapter about ethical considerations in performance could stand further development, especially with regard to making a more robust case for the application of the concept of moral deference in the context of the performer's obligation to her audience. The chapter on the meaning of songs is the point at which the ontological and authenticity lines of argument explicitly come together, and it deserves a deeper treatment than it receives so late in the text. This is a set of very minor quibbles, however, about a book that realizes its stated aims as an introductory text very well, and as criticisms these points amount to little more than the expression of a wish to see much more of a good thing.

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