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Écoutes

Harris M. BERGER, *Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture*

Ruth Herbert



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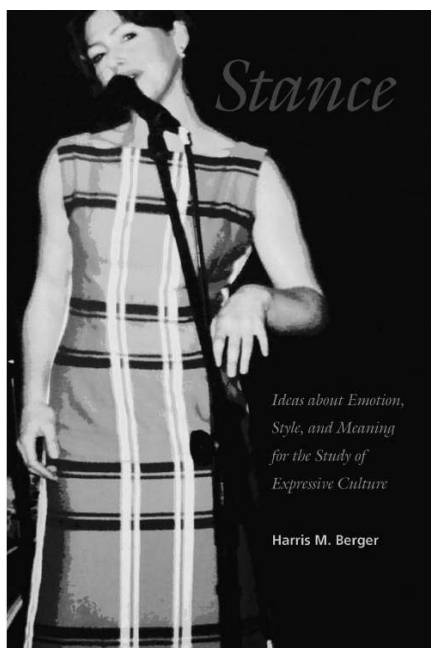
Musical Style and Social Meaning...

porary bite and power. When sat alongside Hawkins's edited anthology, the collection of Scott's own writings is shoddy and casually produced. My copy is poorly manufactured, the front cover falling away from and not adhering very well to the rest of the book. More disappointingly, the chapters appear as a series of scanned or photocopied original articles – it resembles the cheap photocopied reading packs that we once gave to students for course study before it was so easy to

download articles. As the physical book as artefact comes under threat from various digital alternatives I find it a great shame that the publishers have not done this major thinker the honour of putting out a text with more deserved care and attention to detail. It is a shame that they have expended little effort on the visual appearance of the volume.

Keith NEGUS

Harris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.



Although reception is a central theme within Popular Music Studies, it is rare for research in this area to centre on the subjective quality of unfolding, lived experiences of music. In *Stance* Harris M. Berger invites scholars to reconsider processes of artistic creation and dissemination from a phenomenological perspective, highlighting reception as an intrinsically constitutive process, as opposed to one that involves “merely registering pre-existing forms and bestowing meaning upon them” (27). The processual nature of reception is described as an “active grappling” that influences both experienced meaning and perception (27). The subject matter of Berger’s book is inclusive, reflecting his scholarly involvement in the fields of popular music studies, ethnomusicology, folklore and performance studies; expressive, not merely auditory culture is his focus, including a range of examples from diverse array of activities such as music, dance, wrestling, film, novels, stand-up comedy as well as aspects of everyday life.

Berger provides not a methodology as some reviewers have suggested, but a theoretical framework for the interpretation of experience (including experiences of listening to music), located in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and drawing particularly on the ideas of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Todorov. The utility of this framework is that it facilitates a meshing of the cognitive, sensory and affective threads of subjectivity, rather than privileging cognitive meaning (an organising tendency within cultural studies) or affect (an organizing tendency within psychology).

The pivotal theoretical construct of the book is "stance", which possesses an affinity with terms familiar within cultural theory such as "habitus" or "gaze" but cannot be completely identified with them. Neither is it equivalent to "reception" – a broader term encompassing "immediate activities of sense making by which words and gestures have their mundane meanings ... to the most formal exegesis as well as all forms of affective, sensual or bodily responses" (137). Instead, stance is defined as "the valual qualities of the relationship that a person has to a text, performance, practice, or item of expressive culture" (5). Echoing perspectives on perception and meaning from ecological theory (e.g. Clarke, 2005), stance constitutes the product of the interaction between perceiver (including acquired patterns of response, preferences, current mental set), situation and properties specified by activities and objects. In this way, Berger's theory of stance serves to "reconnect text and context at its constitutive level", recognising expressive culture, society and history as different "domains of practice" rather than different "orders of reality" (99).

Notes de lecture - Dossier « Écoutes »

Berger identifies three main forms of stance related to the creation and consumption of expressive culture: *performative stance*, *compositional stance* and *stance in the practice of reception*, (or *audience stance*). Contributory factors to all these forms of stance are an individual's past experiences, training, plus broader cultural and social experience. Viewed in this way music listening experiences inevitably involve a "rich multilayered unity of meanings" (15). Thus, even apparently "autonomous" modes of listening – such as a close analytical attentional focus on acoustic attributes and musical style – are revealed to be actually heteronomous in character. The listening scenarios Berger discusses reference listening experiences of composers and performers as well as audiences (in both solitary and group contexts) ranging from hearing a piece by Chopin in a recital hall, folk ballads at a restaurant or a heavy metal concert to the interactive listening apparent within a small jazz ensemble.

Berger is quick to point out that stance is not a unitary phenomenon. Obviously, the stance of the listener encompasses awareness of the stances of performer and composer (what Berger terms *stance on the other*). Additionally, subjective experience may be informed by *facet stance* (the quality of engagement with different aspects of lived experience), *meta-stance* (observation of stance-aspects of one's own experience), *sedimented quasi-stance* (abstracted style qualities), *stance on power* (two examples given are stage-fright or charisma). Berger terms the interaction of various stances *total stance*. All stances may emphasize certain experiential components, or 'qualities' including perception of facility or infacility, affective characteristics and "timbres of attention and action" (28).

Stance

At times it has to be said that the number and complexity of stance types discussed can feel overwhelming. But Berger does support his argument with examples linking terms to specific aspects of subjective experience. The phenomenological perspective upon experience which is introduced in his book is particularly insightful and useful for those interested in mapping subjective engagement with the arts. It allows for a focus on the immanent meaning of objects of expressive culture (termed “noema”), but equally on the processes of engagement, so-called “noetic” modes such as imagination and perception. Berger’s framing of the activities of listening, performing, composing as “noetic sub-modes” is interesting, as is his discussion of four key dimensions of experience; temporality, intensity, location (attentional foreground, background) and meaning content (144). Taking the first of these for example, the impact of temporality upon subjectivity is shown to be profound, including both the pacing of thought and the influence of processes such as *iteration* (where one event shapes experience of the next) *retrospection*, (where a current impact alters understanding of what has passed, as with the punch-line of a joke) and *protention* (perception/anticipation of the next moment, as when reading a sentence). All these processes are highly relevant to music listening.

Much of *Stance* is engagingly written, although the number of illustrative examples provided in the text is slightly disorientating and the exclu-

sive use of the gender-specific pronoun “she” is somewhat distracting. The abundance of specialist terms also appears initially disconcerting, but Berger uses phenomenological vocabulary selectively and explains all concepts clearly, stating early on that “while phenomenology is central to the book it is not a work of philosophy per se” (xvi). Rather, his intention is to connect organising ideas from different disciplines. A key offering of the book is the way in which it highlights the relevance of phenomenological perspectives to ethnography, “sensitizing researchers” in terms of the phenomena they may choose to study, the kinds of interview questions asked and the assumptions, observations they make (xix). As such *Stance* provides an interesting additional theoretical resource – alongside qualitative phenomenological psychological methodologies, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) – for researchers interested in investigating the interaction between expressive culture, mind and context, whatever their primary field of inquiry. *Stance* certainly possesses the potential to usefully inform ethnographic studies of music listening located in both solitary and group contexts.

Ruth HERBERT

Reference

CLARKE E.F. (2005), *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*, New York: Oxford University Press.