Review of Lydia Goehr, "What Anyway is a 'Music Discomposed'?", in *Virtual Works—Actual Things: Essays in Music Ontology*, edited by Paulo de Assis (Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2018), 135–52

Dimitris Exarchos
University of Ioannina, Greece
d-exarchos@uoi.gr

"Music Discomposed" and its companion, "A Matter of Meaning It," both published in the late 1960s, are Stanley Cavell's (1926–2018) only essays exclusively on contemporary music. Despite their small number, the influence of these essays is extraordinary. Half a century later, musicologists continue to take up the wide-ranging issues associated with Cavell's "discomposed" music. Cavell here elaborates on ideas he had been working since 1960 for a symposium titled "Composition, Improvisation, Chance" at the University of California, Berkeley. Taking this title as his cue, Cavell elaborates on these concepts and how they interrelate. Although the essay poses questions such as "What does it mean to compose?" it does not focus on providing clear definitions. By not directly confronting the ontology of the musical work, Cavell seems to be interested not so much in what composition, improvisation, or chance are, but rather in how their interrelation is conceived and perceived. The former essay was originally read at the 1965 Sixth Annual Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy (Oberlin College), while both essays were published in its proceedings in 1967[1] and in 1969 in the collection *Must We Mean What We Say?* ("A Matter of Meaning It" is Cavell's response to comments by Monroe Beardsley and Joseph Margolis during the colloquium.[2])

The collection *Virtual Works—Actual Things: Essays in Music Ontology*, edited by Paulo de Assis, includes six chapters by a range of music aesthecians, musicologists, and performers. Goehr's contribution here carries special weight, given the wide-ranging influence of her book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*.[3] Her essay in this volume takes up a challenge set by Cavell: How to respond to the dangers of "fraudulence" or "trust" that "are essential to the very experience of art"[4] Goehr reads Cavell

1 W.H. Capitan and D.D. Merrill, eds, *Art, Mind, and Religion: Proceedings of the 1965 Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967).

2 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 180–237.

3 Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

4 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 188–89.

"through the dark glasses of Adorno," an "enigmatic mirror," in her own words (136). She points out a similar strategy in how both thinkers approach contemporary music: a strategy of "displacement of the subject matter" from contemporary composition to the philosophical subject (136).

Regarding Cavell, this displacement is indexed by a deliberate "underdescription" of the term fraudulence, in line with what Goehr describes as the "atmosphere of the 1960s," referring to a widespread "incomprehension" or "failure […] of philosophical terms, […] too analytic or […] too outdated to accommodate what was actually being produced as art" (139). Thus, the possibility of the loss of meaning forced the urgent question that Cavell's collection of essays poses: "Must we mean? Yes we must—but how and on what terms?" (136). Such incomprehension links directly to the possibility of fraudulence, which refers not to individual artists, but to a full-scale crisis of modernist art (or even of all art, as unveiled by modernism): "the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art"[5] (what Cavell calls the "burden of modernism").[6]

According to Goehr, such deliberate tactics are shared by Adorno, and she goes on to review his usage of terms analogous to "discompose," such as "disintegration," "dissolution," "disavowal, degradation, and disassociation" (141). These are examined against a background of classic Adornian themes, such as the fetishism of soundbites, the spatialization of musical time, and the decomposing of the unity of the subject. Goehr does not develop this final point much further, although it does seem to echo Cavell's thesis of the tension produced by the possibility of fraudulence in art. Further fleshing out of this tension in Goehr's essay would have certainly been welcome, as it would have helped to bring into focus the resistance to a false totality or "false identity of subject and object" (Adorno, as quoted in Goehr, 143). As it is, this point is left to echo in the reader's mind, as Goehr moves on to trace antiquated usages of the term "decomposition."

The subsequent section, on ancient and antiquated uses of the term "decomposition," seems less related to an Adornian reading, as promised by the preceding discussion. In the preamble of the section, a Wittgensteinean link is brought into focus, deemed to allow Cavell to "capture the sense of persons having lost their way in a musical form of life" (143). This, in turn, further echoes the deferred Adornian line of thought: How can the unfamiliar [discomposed?] remain so in a useful way, avoiding "safety zones of comfortable comprehension"? (143). Taking her cue from Cavell, Goehr considers the issue within the scope of the past two hundred years, exploring the historical usage of terms such as "discompose," "disconcert," and related antonyms, "consonant, accordant, and consistent." This time frame also fits Goehr's own earlier argument: "If the discipline of aesthetics went back two hundred years, so, as I have argued elsewhere, did the disciplinary regulation of the musical work-concept and hence of the strongest idea that there has ever been of a music 'composed'" (144). She finally makes a point by singling out Ralph Waldo Emerson's take on the aforementioned concepts. Having praised the true thinker's self-reliance and nonconformism, Emerson stood against "foolish consistency" (147). Consistency, taken here as a pedantic internal coherence from beginning to end, is not a trait of the great minds: "To

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 187.

be great is to be misunderstood" (Emerson, as quoted in Goehr, 147). This point brings the section to a close and echoes the aforementioned Adornian over-note (but with no explicit reference).

Cavell makes up for his avoidance of music ontology by focusing on the ethical dimension of art. He examines this along the axis of intentionality, or a certain courage (or willingness and capacity) that motivates composition, improvisation, and chance. Goehr takes up this topic in the central section of her essay, "Intentionality and Purposiveness." She links intentionality more to improvisation and chance, and less to composition. For Cavell, improvisation is more than just the unwritten or unplanned element of music-making; rather, it is a form of spontaneous resourcefulness, a medium that can only be shared with an audience against a background of shared convention. Chance refers to the taking of risks by the artist, extending an invitation to the audience to partake in risks that are worth taking (or so the artist believes). Goehr's analysis of Cavell through Adorno's "dark glasses" is located precisely in this ethical moment of tension in the arts: "there is no sense of improvisation where the intention is missing or claimed no more to count in overly controlled procedures of making music" (148). In a circular gesture, Goehr then links Emerson's stance against (foolish) consistency to Cavell's focus on the ethical dimension of art-making. Owing to such ethical demand, improvisation and chance can contribute to coherence and consistency, beyond or in addition to composition. Such consistency enables the creation of "objects composed" (which further provides a potential link to Goehr's music ontology):

> To compose or to create is ethically to commit oneself as one does in any action when one puts one's values on display, when one embodies or enacts one's values. When commitments and choices work out from beginning to end, we have assumed responsibility for them; we speak of them as consistent or coherent. And when we do not, we speak of a loss of coherence (148).

Such a loss would be caused by ignoring the ethical demand of art-making; it is also what has led one to feeling discomposed about the current state of contemporary music. Goehr here makes the point, albeit not entirely explicitly, that in Cavell the loss of convention can be made up for by an ethical commitment to art: "People devote their lives, sometimes sacrifice them, to producing [art] objects […] and we do not think they are mad for doing so".[7] Goehr chooses to conclude this penultimate section of her essay by focusing on this loss of convention, bringing together Cavell and Adorno (and Wittgenstein and Schoenberg): "We need to know the problem to know what counts as a solution" and "what counts as a mistake" (149). It would be useful here to see a more fully fledged exploration of the importance assigned by Cavell to the ethical commitment in art.

In her essay's final section, "A Dis-discomposed Music?", Goehr locates a possible "cure" in Cavell's mysterious title: "One way out at least for music seemed to be to detach itself from the state of having become discomposed" (150). She links such detachment to taste: "Cavell wrote of modern taste being defeated not by new commandments of taste or by re-disciplining taste, but by allowing music or art to de-discipline taste—and hence our entire response structure" (150). Goehr's interpretation of Cavell's point foregrounds a certain utopianism. However, this is not entirely obvious in Cavell's argumentation. Cavell links

7 Ibid., 198.

taste to the special way that we treat objects of art. Specifically, he argues that a trait of modern art is that there are only two options to responding to the dangers of fraudulence: either by giving up explanation ("it's a matter of taste," "he is mad"), or by wondering whether we missed something. This eventually leads to the idea of intention: a work of art, for Cavell, does "not express some particular intention (as statements do), nor achieve particular goals (the way new technological skill and moral action do), but, one may say, celebrates the fact that men can intend their lives at all."[8] This relates to the ethical motive of modern art: "taste must be defeated;"[9] but Cavell immediately goes on to say that, contrary to what it might seem, this is not a break with tradition: "the unheard of appearance of the modern in art is an effort not to break, but to keep faith with tradition."[10] Or, as he said elsewhere: "modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art."[11]

Goehr finally moves on to a more Adornian point: she sees in Cavell a turn towards "what in music and art could not be defeated: namely, its power to resist its social discipline" (150). A "dis-discomposed" music is shown to have been deemed radical in the 1960s, allowed for by the era's extreme conditions of revolutionary art-making. I wonder if including a discussion of Adorno's celebrated 1961 essay "Vers une musique informelle" would have been relevant here. Goehr's stance comes across as a latter-day reassessment of utopia, of a philosophical subject too comfortable in its listening to "tonal and atonal music anew" (150). If utopianism refers to a future, as-yet-unheard-of music, then, I would argue, Cavell's take on modern art and its tradition (e.g. improvisation not only in modern music but also in Beethoven or Bach), must refer to more than a "dis-discomposed" musical utopia. At the end of her article, Goehr edits in a final a posteriori clarification in brackets: what should be dis-discomposed is not really the music, but, she admits, the philosophical subject. One could thus suppose that question mark in this section's title ("A Dis-discomposed Music?") should qualify not "discomposed," but "music."

Following Goehr's essay, three responses add to the debate in various, perhaps uneven, ways. I will refer to these briefly. Kathy Kiloh, admitting to her "inability to hear what Goehr means" (155), attempts to clarify the term "dis-discomposed," to explain why Cavell's "cure" is conservative, and to flesh out the conversation with Adorno. Kiloh's response seems to reinterpret Goehr's point of Cavell's utopianism, now in terms of a heroic individualism: "Cavell proposes that what is needed are strong individuals […] who are capable of saying what they mean, even if this means that they may not be understood" (157). In Kiloh's view, this is problematic: "To assert one's autonomy is useless if this exercise of so-called autonomy leaves the system it rails against intact. And while this most certainly does not appear to be Cavell's intention, his reliance upon antiquated aesthetic forms and concepts ultimately reinforces the system as a whole" (157). However, there is no textual evidence that Cavell called for a regression to antiquated forms. His critique of modern music's form (conceived as its medium),[12] as I pointed earlier, echoes Adorno's call for a *musique informelle*.

8 Ibid., 197.

9 Ibid., 206.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 189.

12 Ibid., 221.

Cavell focused on modern music, while at the same time attempting to theorise on the artistic experience more generally (through the prism afforded by modernism) avoiding claims to a cure of "discomposed" music: "the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art. If anything in this paper should count as a thesis, that is my thesis."[13]

Like Goehr, Kiloh uses the terms "tonal" and "atonal" in the conventional way. Such terms have a loaded history, starting with the latter as a pejorative term for the expressionist period of the Second Viennese School (1908–22 or so), before neoclassical forms started to attract a renewed interest (as in Schoenberg's music from the early 1920s). A generic use of these binary terms quite frequently divides music in terms of "accessibility" [by whom?], to which Kiloh seems to subscribe. Our present-day use of "tonal" is now an obsolete musicological term that is hardly helpful. Cavell questions this, in his essay "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" (1965): "Is such music as is called 'atonal' […] really without tonality?"[14] Making a form-of-life Wittgensteinean argument, Cavell suggests that the experience of such music might render questions of this kind irrelevant.[15]

Jake McNulty makes an interesting and insightful distinction between the music of "total organisation" and the "atonal" music that, for Cavell, "both breaks with and preserves tradition […] in the interest of preserving the possibility of communication between artist and audience" (161). Examples of the former kind would be Stockhausen or Krenek (Cavell's "nihilism") and of the latter, we can assume, Schoenberg and others. A further point of interest here, one that I believe brings much clarity to the discussion, is pertinent to Goehr's take on Cavell's improvisation and his nuanced "historicisation" of the term, beyond the aforementioned ethical aspects: McNulty notes that "it seemed, at points, as if [Goehr's] essay implied that Cavell celebrates improvisation and even looks to it as a 'saving power' to redeem us from the disorientations of modernism; although that's partly right, Cavell also appears to maintain that improvisation is no longer a possibility in modern music and may never be again" (161). I would single out McNulty's response as an excellent contribution of concise and clear points on Cavell's thinking, although the author does not engage with Adorno here.

The final response by volume editor Paulo de Assis is very different. He initially attempts to locate a "secret path" from Cavell, via Goehr, to his indented topic for the volume, that is, "a revisitation of musical ontological questions twenty-five years after the publication of [Goehr's] book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*" (163). His response focuses more on Cavell than Goehr. De Assis approaches Cavell's essay through the prism of a regulative music-ontological concept, that of "the work" and its "interpretations." Cavell is thus made out to dismiss "under- and over-composed" works "altogether as not being music, as being the result of the fraudulent and nihilistic tendencies of his day" (164). Once again, my aforementioned points on Cavell's explicit thesis, vis-à-vis Adorno's *musique informelle*, would be relevant here.

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13 Ibid., 188–89.

14 Ibid., 82.

15 Ibid., 84.

Considering Cavell's passing in June 2018, de Assis's choice to target Cavell's essay comes across as an ironic memorial (although one cannot accuse the author of knowingly doing so): "The gregarious, conservative, and reactionary perspective of Cavell's text cannot be overlooked, and I am not totally convinced that 'Music Discomposed' deserves the respectful attention we are giving to it" (165). However, de Assis's response focuses on Cavell's essay, bypassing both Goehr's text and the debate raised by the preceding two responses (of which it is double the length). He sets out his argument in three stages: critiquing Cavell's choice to reference Krenek, invoking the historical defeat of "Music Discomposed," and unearthing the problematic presence of Schopenhauer in Cavell's approach. These three points are developed in three sections, followed by another in which the author lists three aditional "very problematic" topics for future consideration. Thus, excluding reference to Goehr in the introductory and concluding sections, all five central sections constitute a fierce critique of Cavell. I will not take up de Assis's points here. Suffice to say that it would be hard to do so in relation to Goehr's article, with which the former does not seem to engage constructively. De Assis's text is dismissive of Cavell and radically different from Goehr's; so much so that I doubt one could possibly engage with both texts in comparable ways.

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About the Author

Dimitris Exarchos is a theorist and musicologist specializing in contemporary Western art music. He has published in books and journals on the subjects of composition, theory, and analysis of twentieth-century music. His research concerns issues of temporality, notation, and materialism at the intersections between philosophy, aesthetics, analysis, and composition. His analytical practice includes computational and mathematical approaches. He has been a research fellow at the Contemporary Music Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London, and at the State Institute for Music Research, Berlin. He is currently Assistant Professor at the Department of Music, University of Ioannina, Greece.