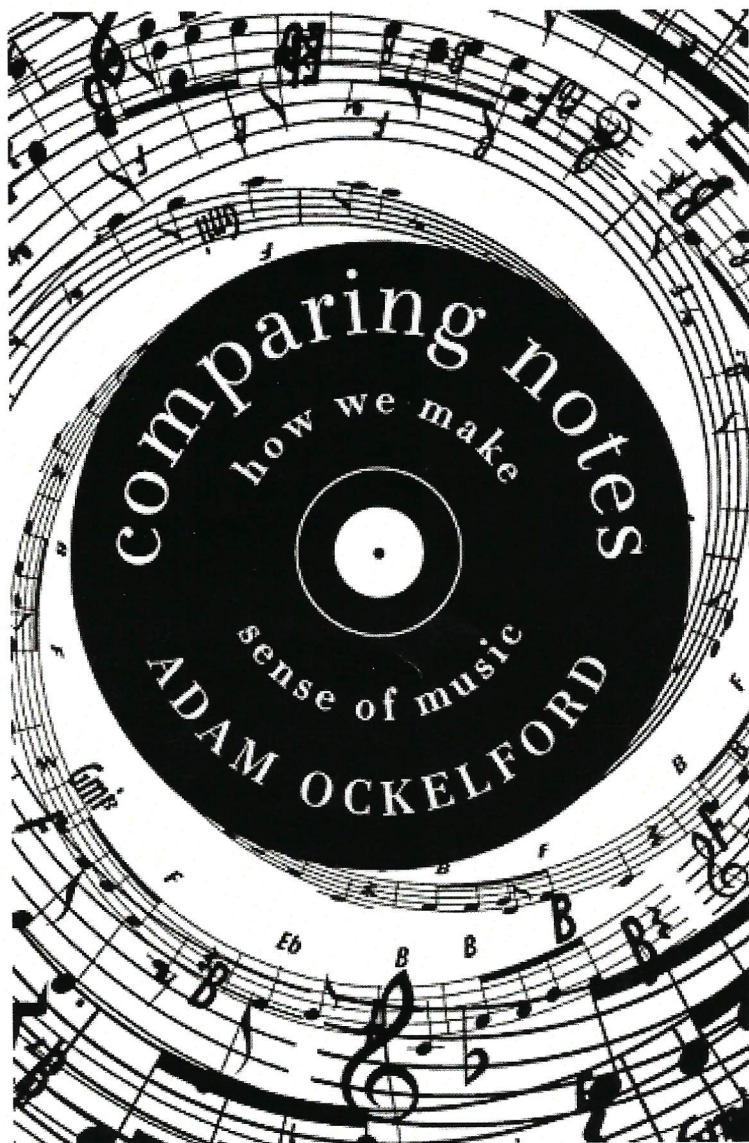


# COMPARING NOTES: HOW WE MAKE SENSE OF MUSIC

by Adam Ockelford [Pegasus Books, 2019]

by Judith Shatin



Adam Ockelford, Professor of Music at Roehampton University and Director of the Applied Music Research Center, has written a well-informed and wide-ranging book: *Comparing Notes, How We Make Sense of Music*. He both summarizes previous attempts to grapple with this problem and develops his own theory. He

musical savants were able to internalize music and reproduce it on their instruments, easily transposing it, and sometimes recombining passages from different compositions in fascinating ways. They could do this without having had the benefit of

draws on additional music-theoretic concepts, psychology of music, and research in child psychology in the process. Despite some issues, I strongly recommend it.

Inspired by his work with blind, autistic and learning-challenged children who also have unusual musical abilities, Ockelford set out to understand how 'neurotypical' people, who have no special training, understand music. By the term 'music' he refers to tonal music broadly construed. He noticed that mu-

sical savants were able to internalize music and reproduce it on their instruments, easily transposing it, and sometimes recombining passages from different compositions in fascinating ways. They could do this without having had the benefit of traditional instruction. Clearly, a musical understanding was at work beyond simple memorization. He posits that the absolute pitch (AP) that many of them displayed, coupled with their intense early and ongoing focus on sound, helped them develop skills that few can attain even after years of training. He contends that the musical qualities that enable these abilities to develop are those that allow untrained people to understand and make sense of music.

As he develops his theory, he offers an overview of past efforts to understand the perception of musical structure. To mention a few, he includes an introduction to the hierarchical theories of Schenker, of Lerdahl and Jackendoff, as well as Bernstein's efforts to link musical structures to Chomsky's syntactic ones. He also discusses multiple additional approaches aimed at elucidating how we understand music, including those based on expectation (Leonard Meyer, David Huron), as well as Schoenberg's pedagogical emphasis on the importance of repetition and variation.

All of these thinkers, and Ockelford himself, are profoundly influenced by Gestalt grouping principles. His aim differs from those he cites, however, in his effort to sort out how we perceive music from moment-to-moment, going beyond the notion of expectations thwarted and met, or the fact of repetition and variation. He looks beyond these to examine how—without formal training—we make sense of music as it unfolds. To do so, he

proposes a 'zygonic conjecture,' which details not only the role of repetition and what he surmises is a sense of derivation between successive notes, but also the perception of intentionality that in turn gives rise to a network of relationships that allows us to make sense of musical structure.

He uses the term 'zygonic' to denote the relationship between two notes that are mentally perceived to have a connection forged by repetition and intentionality, and lays out multiple connective strata that build on these basic connections. Further, he links these to the pitch framework and rhythmic grid structure that we learn implicitly within our culture of origin. He offers many supporting examples, which he analyzes with subtlety, ranging from simple melodies, such as *Frère Jacques*, to popular songs, such as *You Are My Sunshine*, to examples drawn from Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and Schubert's *Die Winterreise*. His lucid expositions make a strong case for his argument, drawing upon his rich music-theoretic understanding.

However, while one might like to believe that the general listener, with no particular experience, can perceive and enjoy a complex piece such as a Brahms symphony, this seems true only for those who have built up their understanding through many listening experiences to this type of music. Indeed, the combination of the pop-industrial complex, the cost-cutting that has gutted the core of arts education and the prevalent anti-elitist cultural attitudes have led to a dramatic shift in the range of music that many people understand, or at any rate wish to experience. So, it is by no means clear that the 'cognitive space' shared by composers, performers and listeners is as large, or as historically and culturally unconstrained, as he contends. No longer can we accept the idea that classical music of the common practice period lies in

the mainstream of our current culture.

I found myself wishing that Ockelford had limited his discussion to the issues suggested by his title, and to the characteristics of music that he contends are required for untrained people to understand music. Multiple problems arise in his discussion of atonal music, especially due to the lumping together of an excessively broad swath of music. Furthermore, he has a negative attitude towards this music, reflected in his question whether 'atonal music' will ever attract broader, 'non-specialist' audiences (p. 287). Even classical music itself may be said to attract a 'specialist' audience. Beyond this, his discussion of atonal music is vague. The perceptibility of pattern varies hugely in the music that we might so label. Messiaen's music, for example, may not be tonal, but it has many clear narrative characteristics.

Further, the criterion that Ockelford uses to determine perceptibility of atonal music is the ability of a savant to remember and perform music s/he is exposed to. One of his gifted students, who could easily reproduce reams of tonal pieces, had great trouble with a short piece by Schoenberg, *Op. 11, No. 1*, even after repeated exposure. Ockelford seems to suggest that remembering a piece and being able to reproduce it verbatim represents an understanding of it. Even given this criterion, there are pianists who have memorized *Op. 11*. There are multiple levels of understanding, and the criterion of rote memorization is not sufficient.

I also wish Ockelford had not perpetuated the canard that Babbitt titled his 1958 article 'Who Cares if You Listen.' This unfortunate title was added by an editor at *High Fidelity*. It is true that Babbitt thought that there is progress in music analogous to that in science. This led to the idea of music created by specialists for specialists. And yet, to think of Babbitt's ideas as being limited to this point

of view is a caricature. As a student of Babbitt's, I know that his goal was to provide a richness of music for those listeners willing to plumb its depths.

Ockelford might have made a stronger distinction between tastes and habits on the one hand, and our perceptual capabilities on the other. A great deal of music is beyond immediate comprehension. However, this is not limited to music. Multiple arts show that audiences desire to transcend the limitations of taste and habit, and that comprehension does not have immutable limits. Some want to read authors with clear narrative structure, such as Austen or Hemingway. But then there are those who are excited by writing that is more overtly complex, even convoluted, such as that of Beckett, James Joyce, Don DeLillo, or Zadie Smith. This is an important distinction, and it is in this context that Schoenberg may have meant, despite the pejorative aspect of the quote cited by Ockelford, "if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art" (p. 289). I would recast this statement, to say, 'no art is for all; but we can all experience art that moves us.'

Ockelford would have served his ideas better if he had focused more exclusively on the strong case he makes for the sonic characteristics that enable the untrained listener to make sense of tonal music, rather than disparaging music that lies outside this category. His own musical training shines through in ways that illuminate his theory, and indeed enables those who can hear his examples to say 'aha' to many of his keen observations and conclusions.