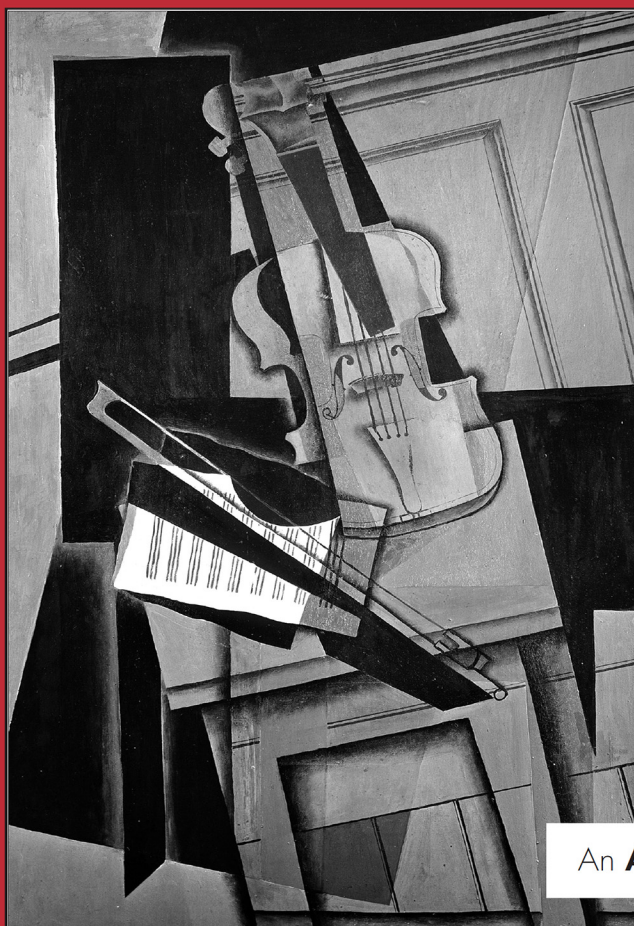


Understanding Music

The Nature and Limits of Musical Cognition

HANS HEINRICH EGGBRECHT

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD EVANS



ROUTLEDGE

An **Ashgate** Book

UNDERSTANDING MUSIC



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The Nature and Limits of Musical Cognition

HANS HEINRICH EGGBRECHT

translated by

RICHARD EVANS
Independent Scholar, UK

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Note on Translator

Richard Evans read musicology at Exeter and studied the piano in Frankfurt am Main in Germany, where he lived for many years, before completing a doctorate at Bristol. He has previously translated articles for the journal *Music Analysis*.



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Translator's Preface

As one of the major figures of German musicology during the second half of the twentieth century, Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht should need no introduction. Yet his wide-ranging and voluminous output, required reading in his home country, is largely unknown in the English-speaking world, as hardly any of it has been translated.¹ While this is perhaps understandable (at least in bare economic terms), it is also unfortunate. The present translation of one of Eggebrecht's most accessible – and fascinating – works may thus go some way towards filling a gap, the existence of which many musicologists have been unaware.

A biographical chronicle can serve as a useful orientation, though Eggebrecht himself was of the opinion that for him it conceals as much as it reveals. The immediately relevant facts are these: born in Dresden in 1919, Eggebrecht studied music, philosophy and German in Weimar and Berlin, held a professorship in Freiburg from 1961 until his retirement in 1987 and produced his first publications on music in the late 1940s, with a more or less unbroken stream of work appearing in print until his death in 1999, and with two significant works-in-progress published posthumously. His bibliography, running to some 390 separate entries on the Freiburg University website, contains major work devoted to individual composers (including Schütz, Bach and Mahler), reception theory (Beethoven), the editing of major reference works (some of it in collaboration with Carl Dahlhaus), a compendious single authored music history of over 800 pages and innumerable essays on all manner of topics relating to music, be they historical, terminological, aesthetic, analytical or pedagogic. Many of these have been collected and republished in book form.²

What, beyond this, do we need to know about the man? Eggebrecht himself has provided us with an intriguing self-portrait in which he attempts to answer just this question (and it is a question he regards as central both to his aesthetics

¹ One other book has been translated into English: *J. S. Bach's The Art of Fugue*, translated by Jeffrey L. Prater (Iowa State University Press, 1993).

² An outline biography and detailed bibliography are available at www.uni-freiburg.de/referate/29a+b/eggebrecht_02.htm. I would single out three collections of essays from the many sources which contain important work on topics occurring in *Understanding Music*. They are *Musikalisches Denken: Aufsätze zur Theorie und Ästhetik der Musik* (Wilhelmshaven, 1977); *Sinn und Gehalt: Aufsätze zur musikalischen Analyse* (Wilhelmshaven, 1979); and *Unterweisung Musik: Aufsätze zur Musikpädagogik* (Wilhelmshaven, 1998).

of musical understanding and his approach to the writing of history).³ In it he specifies two formative influences, both of which predate his musicological studies: his evangelical protestant upbringing and his experience of war. Eggebrecht describes how he came to value well organized rhetoric delivered with energy and commitment through observing the example of his father, a gifted clergyman and preacher; and he characterizes his experience of active service in the German army in the language we associate with existentialism. The daily confrontation with the naked facts of existence forced him, he says, to put aside the trivial, to reject the superfluous and to look inwards for the resource to face adversity: in a word, to become self-reliant.

It is impossible to imagine the effects of such an experience on Eggebrecht's academic work. (His self-portrait does not detail his war experiences in the way that, say, Stockhausen does so vividly.) But it is obvious how an aesthetics which privileges musical autonomy and values its separateness from the real world might seem all the more attractive to someone who by his mid-twenties had spent as much time as a soldier as most masters graduates today have spent in full-time study. What makes his theory of understanding remarkable is how this aesthetics of autonomy, typical of that mid century high modernist mindset associated with cultural elitism, is itself historicized and located within a history of the concept of understanding. The resulting theory acquires a wider remit with significant implications for other branches of musicology.

While *Understanding Music* reads like a highly structured through-composed book, much of its material is assembled from earlier publications.⁴ The seams in this patchwork may be well hidden, but they also testify to a lifetime's interest in this central topic in musical aesthetics: an enthusiasm for communicating musical insights clearly led Eggebrecht to ponder how these insights came into being. Embedded in the main argument are essays on ontology (suggesting an acquaintance with the work of Roman Ingarden), aesthetic identification (whose indebtedness to Schopenhauer is acknowledged) and, in the intermezzo on John Cage, Eggebrecht's exemplary attempt to historicize the concept of understanding through locating its boundaries. The theme of analysis makes a number of appearances, as do pedagogy and music history, particularly in the extended discussions of modernism and the crisis in understanding it provokes. Eggebrecht does not, however, engage with music from outside the western tradition, nor does he aim for any kind of rapprochement with neighbouring theories of understanding (such as musical

³ This essay, entitled 'Wer bin ich?', and from which the details that follow derive, is contained in *Musik im Abendland: Prozesse und Stationen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1991), pp. 741-47.

⁴ See the opening words of Eggebrecht's preface. Footnote 2 above gives some examples.

semiotics). His review of the literature does not extend beyond key reference points provided by Kant, Hegel, Hanslick, Schopenhauer and Adorno, and does not include a detailed genealogy of understanding. This is a free-standing essay which embraces the first person singular and addresses music lovers as individuals, not as privileged members of an academic community. To return to the question about identity posed above: the importance of the individual subject for Eggebrecht is that it constitutes an ultimate locus of historical understanding (and he makes a parallel point in his discussion of the ontology of the musical work here). Because history is written by individual subjects – just as music is experienced by them – it helps to know something about who these subjects are, though in his self-portrait he expresses his scepticism about how far this knowledge can extend. There is a tension here between the role of subjectivity and Eggebrecht's claims for music's aesthetic autonomy. The key terms in the discussion will turn out to be *sense* and *meaning*, to which I return briefly below.

This position is typical of Eggebrecht's 'late' work, notably *Musik im Abendland*, which strikes a similarly intimate, subjective stance and is equally unashamed of its selectivity. Interestingly, this enhanced, prominent subjectivity chimes in with the 'new' musicologies emerging in the final decade of the last century.

There are, I think, two main issues confronting the translator of this book. The first concerns tone. Although Eggebrecht largely avoids the register of academic formality, much of the discussion is necessarily of a technical nature. On the whole the style is straightforwardly exegetical: there are none of the tortuous dialectical switchbacks we find in Dahlhaus, nor is there an implied homology of style and argument as in Adorno. The problem is that the natural stylistic range of German – favouring long sentences, complex clause structures and high levels of redundancy – is rather different from English, where concision and elegance rule. So in aiming for an approachable, intelligible read – of the kind Eggebrecht achieves in German – I have from time to time found it necessary to divide the most unwieldy sentences and cut out repetition at the phrase level. Nor have I shied away from the occasional colloquialism. An essay on understanding should practise what it preaches.⁵

The second difficulty arises in translating Eggebrecht's raft of technical terms and here the author has assisted us by adopting and defining his terminology independently of outside sources as he proceeds. I have already referred to the distinction drawn between *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (meaning) as of signal

⁵ Despite some misgivings I have followed Eggebrecht in using masculine pronouns throughout for gender-neutral positions. I have also made a couple of minor presentational changes, of which I would mention the title of *Intermezzo I*, originally (and I think inadequately) titled 'Interpretation'; and I have upgraded 'The Limits of Cognitive Understanding' from subheading to chapter status.

importance. One could ruminate at length on the different translations of these terms which have been put forward since Gottlob Frege published his famous paper on the topic over a hundred years ago, but this would be unhelpful and in the circumstances irrelevant as Eggebrecht is ever mindful of the need for terminological autonomy. German also offers generative powers of word derivation (*Sinn, sinnlich, sinnvoll, Sinngefüge, Sinnlosigkeit, sinnstiftend* and so on) which English with its heterogeneous vocabulary cannot hope to emulate. My solution has been to record the most significant terms in a separate glossary and, of course, to have been as consistent in translating them as possible. The fact remains that the translator has to make a judgement as to whether two terms have been employed interchangeably, as free variants, or where any difference they might express is residual or immaterial to the argument at hand (as I take to be the case with, for example, *Form/Formung* and *Gehalt/Inhalt*). I can only hope the result creates clarity and avoids confusion.

The relationship between understanding and its object lies at the heart of Eggebrecht's theory. Shorn of all nuance, it claims that understanding is dependent on the sense embodied in the musical object – whereby the sense is the music's form – and that the potential for understanding increases in tandem with the presence of musical sense. (Within the theory musical meaning is in turn attached to and dependent upon sense.) There is a balance to be struck between the key concepts of understanding on one side of the equation and sense on the other. Too rigorous a definition of understanding – using, for example, the tools of analytical philosophy – is likely to leave us empty handed, and will call into question the very notion that understanding really has a place in the realm of music, while the idea that music's understandability is entirely dependent on our perceiving a self-defining musical structure denies any possible distinction between what is being presented and what it might represent.⁶ Eggebrecht's concept of understanding does offer us an account of meaning and representation. It is also to a significant extent 'psychological' – in that it accepts the intuition that it is appropriate to speak of understanding in relation to music just as we do when speaking of understanding behaviour, novels or pictures – rather than merely analytical (the understanding of something (x) as, or in terms of, (y)), finding a role for unconscious processes and distinguishing between what cannot be understood but merely sensed (for example timbre) and conscious cognition. The notion of a genre of understanding

⁶ See the editor's introductory comments in Alexander Becker and Matthias Vogel eds, *Musikalischer Sinn: Beiträge zu einer Philosophie der Musik*, (Frankfurt/Main, 2007), pp. 7-22; also Carl Dahlhaus, *Klassische und Romantische Musikästhetik* (Laaber, 1988), pp. 318-20.

which occurs beyond consciousness (Eggebrecht's 'aesthetic understanding') is entirely compatible with current research about how the mind works.⁷

The question of compatibility and indeed of the wider relevance of this theory is important and it brings us back to the point I made at the opening of this preface about the (un)availability of Eggebrecht's work to English speakers. There is no doubt that this essay on musical understanding will be of interest to those English and American philosophers of music who have created such a significant body of work on this subject in the last few decades. For a variety of reasons this Anglo-American tradition has not always been especially sympathetic to continental philosophy in general (and the work of Adorno in particular).⁸ However, Eggebrecht's theorizing is not driven (or indeed to any significant extent coloured) by an ideology derived from Marx, nor is it dependent on an explicitly Hegelian dialectic. The many points of contact between Eggebrecht and his English speaking peers (which there is no space to investigate here) will, I think, be all the more evident as a result.⁹ Where he does differ from them is in being first and foremost a music historian rather than a philosopher, and we can therefore expect his writing to be marked by a heightened historical awareness and sensitivity. In any case, there is a perceptible convergence of interest between two traditions and a potential enrichment of both. This, in short, is what this translation hopes to contribute towards.

⁷ See for example Stephan Koelsch and Tom Fritz, 'Musik verstehen – Eine neurowissenschaftliche Perspektive', in Becker and Vogel eds, pp. 237-264.

⁸ Becker and Vogel also comment on this (p. 20).

⁹ Those interested in pursuing these connections might start with Roger Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, 1997) especially chapters 2 and 8; Peter Kivy's *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca, 1990) chapter 6; Jerrold Levinson's essay entitled 'Musical Literacy', in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca, 1996) pp. 27-41; and Stephen Davies, whose essay 'Musicalisches Verstehen' in Becker and Vogel eds, pp. 25-79 contains a very extensive bibliography.