Music Theory’s Therapeutic Imperative and the Tyranny of the Normal

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Human Biodiversity Neurodiversity
Human Biodiversity Neurodiversity

NORMAL
HEALTHY
ABLE-BODIED

ABNORMAL
UNHEALTHY
DISABLED
Disability

- Sensory impairment
- Mobility impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Psychiatric disability
- Disfiguring bodily condition
- Etc. Etc.
Disability

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Disability

- Sensory impairment
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- Disfiguring bodily condition
- Etc. Etc.
Disability

• Concrete, physical, real
• An imaginative creation
• A cultural formation
• Historically contingent
Disability

- Concrete, physical, real
- An imaginative creation
- A cultural formation
- Historically contingent
- Culturally stigmatized bodily difference
Medical Model of Disability

Pathology, deficit, abnormality within a body/mind
Medical Model of Disability

Requiring medical intervention to remediate, cure, normalize
Medical Model of Disability

Marked as abnormal with respect to prevailing norm
Minority Model of Disability

61 million adults in the United States live with a disability

26% of adults in the United States have some type of disability

(1 in 4)

Percentage of adults with functional disability types:

- Mobility: 13.7%
- Cognition: 10.8%
- Independent Living: 6.8%
- Hearing: 5.9%
- Vision: 4.6%
- Self-care: 3.7%

The percentage of people living with disabilities is highest in the South.
Minority Model of Disability
Minority Model of Disability

"Neurodiversity is the idea that certain conditions, including Autism, are natural variations of the human genome, and are not defects that need to be fixed." - Autistic Hoya

MADPRIDE
THE RIGHT TO BE FREE, THE RIGHT TO BE ME
Minority Model of Disability
The Ability/Disability System

System of sorting bodies/minds that enmeshes us all
The Ability/Disability System

System of sorting bodies/minds that enmeshes us all

Irrespective of bodily condition
The Ability/Disability System

System of sorting bodies/minds that enmeshes us all

Irrespective of bodily condition

Intertwined with race, gender, sexuality
The Ability/Disability System

- System of sorting bodies/minds that enmeshes us all
- Irrespective of bodily condition
- Intertwined with race, gender, sexuality
- A fundamental aspect of being human
### The Ability/Disability System

- **System of sorting bodies/minds that enmeshes us all**
- Irrespective of bodily condition
- Intertwined with race, gender, sexuality
- A fundamental aspect of being human
- Affects everything we do
Music Theory as a Normalizing Discourse

Aligned with the medical model of disability
Music theorist as medical professional

Musical work as sick patient

Music Theory as a Normalizing Discourse
Music theorist as medical professional

Music Theory as a Normalizing Discourse

Musical work as sick patient

Suffering from
• Formal deformations
• Chromatic notes
• Dissonant notes
• Tonal problems
• Non-sets
• Non-syntactic events
Music theorist as medical professional

Musical work as sick patient

Music Theory as a Normalizing Discourse

The cure we offer
- Rationalization
- Assimilation to norm
- Normalization
• Therapeutic imperative
• Tyranny of the normal
• Aligned with the medical model of disability
Normalizing
Music Theory
“The abnormal is understood in terms of the normal.” (Rothstein 1990)
“The linear progression begins, lives its own existence in the passing tones, ceases when it has reached its goal—all as organic as life itself.”

Schenker
Disability Overcome (abnormal normalized)

Normalizing Music Theory

Schenker
“Every succession of tones produces unrest, conflict, problems....Every musical form can be considered as an attempt to treat this unrest either by halting or limiting it, or by solving the problem.”
“A state of unrest or imbalance grows throughout the piece. The method by which balance is restored seems to me the real idea of the composition.”
Initial state of balance and rest.

Tonal problem intrudes. Imbalance and unrest.

Balance and rest restored. Problem solved.

Disability Overcome
(problem solved)

Normalizing
Music Theory

Schoenberg
Normalizing Music Theory

Form Studies
Disability Overcome (tonic reasserted)

Normalizing Music Theory

Form Studies

Exposition
One central mission: laying out the strategy for the eventual attainment of the ESC: a structure of promise.

Development

Recapitulation
S, as agent, carries out the central generic task of the sonata—securing the ESC: a structure of accomplishment.
Sets:
• Legitimate constructive units
• Normative standard

Nonsets:
• Fortuitous groupings, without structural significance
• Anomalies requiring recuperation
• Potential threat to the health of the musical body
Forte’s analysis in “Sets and Nonsets in Schoenberg’s Atonal Music” (1972)

Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, No. 21

Bewegt ($\frac{d}{4} = \text{ca 60}$)

E-major triad is a non-set

6-Z44 (012569) is a set
The diagnosis and normalization of musical abnormalities
The diagnosis and normalization of musical abnormalities

The therapeutic imperative

The tyranny of the normal
The diagnosis and normalization of musical abnormalities

The therapeutic imperative

The tyranny of the normal

To analyze is to normalize
Disablist Music Theory
Disablist Music Theory

Without norms or normalization of abnormal elements
Disablist Music Theory

Without norms or normalization of abnormal elements

Resistance to the tyranny of the normal (and the medical model of disability)
Disablist Music Theory

Without norms or normalization of abnormal elements

Resistance to the tyranny of the normal (and the medical model of disability)

No overcoming
No solving problems
Anti-therapeutic
Disablist Music Theory

Disabled body at the center
Disablist Music Theory

Disabled body at the center

Crips music by reveling in the ensuing commotion
Disablist Music Theory

Disabled body at the center

_Crips_ music by reveling in the ensuing commotion

Shatters healthy wholeness
Disablist Music Theory

“To embrace the supposedly flawed body of disability is to critique normalizing, phallic fantasies of wholeness, unity, coherence, and completeness.” (Garland-Thomson)
Disablist Music Theory

Resonates with prominent trends in our field
Disablist Music Theory

Resonates with prominent trends in our field

Recent post-modernist music theory
Engagement with feminist and queer theory
Disablist Music Theory

Resonates with prominent trends in our field

Recent post-modernist music theory
Engagement with feminist and queer theory

Engagement with disability studies
Disablist Music Theory

Resonates with prominent trends in our field

Recent post-modernist music theory
Engagement with feminist and queer theory
Engagement with disability studies

Subversive counter-traditions add layers of complexity and diversity
Disablist Music Theory in Practice
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

Disabled body at the center (without normalization)
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

Representing “Idiocy”
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Medical Schemes

- Fools. Simpletons (Howe 1848)
- Cretinism. Imbecility (Seguin 1886)
- Feeblemindedness (early 20th century)
- Mental retardation (mid-20th century)
- Intellectual disability (current)
RACIALIZED

Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Medical Schemes

RACIALIZED


- “Their intelligence does not come up to that possessed by primitive social man” (Tredgold 1914)
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Medical Schemes

PSEUDO-SCIENCE

Not legitimate medical categories
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Medical Schemes

PSEUDO-SCIENCE

Not legitimate medical categories

Cultural construction
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Literary Representation

The Holy Fool

• Intellectual deficiency compensated by deeper wisdom
The Holy Fool

Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Literary Representation

- Intellectual deficiency compensated by deeper wisdom
- Authentic and sincere
- Uncivilized and primitive
- Prelinguistic and prerational
- Natural and animal-like
- Childlike and innocent
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Holy Fool
Thomson, Four Saints in Three Acts, Vision of a Holy Ghost

Un poco meno mosso \( \mathfrak{J} = 66 \)

St. Ignatius

Pigeons on the grass a-las.

Short long-er grass short long-er long-er

Tenors

Basses

Pigeons on the grass a-las.

\textit{simile}

short-er yel-low grass. Pigeons large... pigeons on the short-er long-er yel-low grass a-las... pigeons on the grass.
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Holy Fool
Thomson, Four Saints in Three Acts, Vision of a Holy Ghost

Un poco meno mosso \( \text{\textit{i} = 68} \)

St. Ignatius

Pigeons on the grass a-las.

Tenors

Pigeons on the grass a-las.

Basses

\textit{signe}

Short-longer grass short-longer grass a-las.

Shorter yellow grass. Pigeons large. Pigeons on the shorter longer yellow grass a-las. Pigeons on the grass.

melody only

G-major scale

short fragments repeat

almost entirely stepwise
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Holy Fool
Thomson, Four Saints in Three Acts, Vision of a Holy Ghost
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Holy Fool
Thomson, Four Saints in Three Acts, Vision of a Holy Ghost
Thomson/Stein, Four Saints in Three Acts
Original Production with All-Black Cast (1934)
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy” and Race

An all-Black cast
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy” and Race

An all-Black cast

African-Americans as Holy Fools
An all-Black cast

African-Americans as Holy Fools

“Whites could never in the world have sung that opera. The very essence of the work demands primal ignorance and native awkwardness of which only the Negroes are capable” (Thomson)
"Idiocy" and Race
An all-Black cast
African-Americans as Holy Fools

"Whites could never in the world have sung that opera. The very essence of the work demands primal ignorance and native awkwardness of which only the Negroes are capable."
(Thomson)

Disablist Music Theory in Practice

"Idiocy"
Disablist Music Theory in Practice
Representing “Idiocy”

Stigmatizing stereotype
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

Representing “Idiocy”

Stigmatizing stereotype

Artistic resource for musical modernism
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

Representing “Idiocy”

Stigmatizing stereotype

Artistic resource for musical modernism

Disability aesthetics

Idiocy as a new form of beauty
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

Representing “Idiocy”

Stigmatizing stereotype

Artistic resource for musical modernism

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Representing “Idiocy”

The Eugenic Idiot
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Literary Representation

The Eugenic Idiot

• The “menace of the feebleminded”
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Literary Representation

The Eugenic Idiot

- The “menace of the feebleminded”
- Fear that idiocy would harm society (degeneration)
Disablist Music Theory in Practice

“Idiocy”: Literary Representation

The Eugenic Idiot

- The “menace of the feebleminded”
- Fear that idiocy would harm society (degeneration)
- An aura of menace and (sexual) violence
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Eugenic Idiot
Stravinsky, *Rite of Spring*, Sacrificial Dance
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Eugenic Idiot
Stravinsky, *Rite of Spring*, Sacrificial Dance

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**The chord**
- Stack of fifths: G → D → A → E
- Middle fifth filled in: G → D → F → A → E
- Diatonic pentachord: D → E → F → G → A

**The three-note melody**
- Stack of semitones: Bb → B → C
- Within whole tone: Bb → C
Musical Representation of Idiocy as Eugenic Idiot
Stravinsky, *Rite of Spring*, Sacrificial Dance

The chord
Stack of fifths: \( G \rightarrow D \rightarrow A \rightarrow E \)
Middle fifth filled in: \( G \rightarrow D \rightarrow F \rightarrow A \rightarrow E \)
Diatonic pentachord: \( D \rightarrow E \rightarrow F \rightarrow G \rightarrow A \)

The three-note melody
Stack of semitones: \( Bb \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \)
Within whole tone: \( Bb \rightarrow C \)
Stravinsky, *Rite of Spring*, Sacrificial Dance
Nijinsky Choreography (recreated by Hodson)
Stigmatizing stereotype
Medical pathologization

Artistic resource for musical modernism
Exoticized, racialized Others
Intellectually deficient, subhuman
Disability aesthetics, new sources of musical meaning
“Disability matters everywhere in history; there are no histories in which a disability analysis would be out of place and many that are diminished by its absence.”
“Disability matters everywhere in history; there are no histories in which a disability analysis would be out of place and many that are diminished by its absence.”

Can we similarly locate disability in canonical works of instrumental music?
Disablist Music Theory

Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Neighbor notes
Dissonant non-harmonic tones
Normalized within tonic harmony
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Three-note harmony [B, D, E]
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Three-note harmony [B, D, E] repeated and rearranged
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Three-note harmony [B, D, E] repeated and rearranged

Inversion of three-note harmony around E (rather than vi7)
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

[B, D, E] linearized as \((-5, +3)\)

[B, D, E]  [B, D, E]  [B, D, E]

Three-note harmony [B, D, E]
repeated and rearranged
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

RI

RI

RI

E–B–D as middle link in RI-chain

[B, D, E]
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

RI

B\textsuperscript{3} \rightarrow D \rightarrow A

RI

E \rightarrow B \rightarrow D

as middle link
in RI-chain

RI

C\# \rightarrow E \rightarrow B

RI

C\# \rightarrow G\# \rightarrow B

RI

G\# \rightarrow B \rightarrow F\#

RI

B \rightarrow F\# \rightarrow A

RI

F\# \rightarrow A \rightarrow E

E–B–D

as final link
in RI-chain
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Tonnetz for 025

Melody

Bass

chord 1

chord 2
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331, III ("alla Turca")
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331, III ("alla Turca")

Tonnetz for 025

\[
\text{Tonnetz for 025}
\]
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Non-normalizing
Mozart, Piano Sonata, K. 331

Non-normalizing

Partial
Local
Contextual
Anachronistic
Disablist Music Theory
and Music Theory

Disabled body at the center

Without norms or normalization of abnormal elements
Disablist Music Theory
and Music Theory

Counter-tradition

Roots in feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies

Diverse range of post-modern music theory
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

Is it really music theory?
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

A more traditional definition of music theory:

- Systematic analysis of the music itself
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

A more traditional definition of music theory:

- Systematic analysis of the music itself
- Musical relationships in musical terms
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

A more traditional definition of music theory:

• Systematic analysis of the music itself
• Musical relationships in musical terms
• No culture, no society, no biography
• No race, no gender, no sexuality
• No bodies
Disablist Music Theory
and Music Theory

Disablist music theory
is music theory
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

Disablist music theory is music theory

Work concerned with race, gender, and sexuality is music theory
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

The body in the music
Disablist Music Theory
and Music Theory

The body in the music

Bodies are racialized, gendered, or disabled
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

The body in music analysis
Disablist Music Theory
and Music Theory

The body in music analysis

Embodied music analysis in the field of
music theory
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

NOT supplanting traditional, normalizing theory
Disablist Music Theory and Music Theory

NOT supplanting traditional, normalizing theory

An enlarged sense of music theory
Biodiversity & Neurodiversity
Biodiversity & Neurodiversity

• Of musical works and events
Biodiversity & Neurodiversity

• Of musical works and events
• Of ways of thinking about musical works and events
Biodiversity & Neurodiversity

• Of musical works and events
• Of ways of thinking about musical works and events
• Beyond the tyranny of the normal
Music Theory’s Therapeutic Imperative and the Tyranny of the Normal

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