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In Defence of Higher-Order Musical Ontology: A Reply to Lee B. Brown

Andrew Kania

In a recent article in this journal, Lee B. Brown criticizes one central kind of project in higher-order musical ontology—the project of offering an ontological theory of a particular musical tradition. I defend this kind of project by replying to Brown’s critique, arguing that musical practices are not untheorizably messy, and that a suitably subtle descriptivist ontology of a given practice can be valuable both theoretically and practically.

Musical ontologists study the kinds of musical things there are—works, performances, recordings, and so on—and the relationships that hold between them. I have argued that there is a useful distinction to be drawn between two projects in this field. ‘Fundamental’ musical ontology is the study of the basic metaphysical categories into which musical entities fall. (This project usually takes works and performances of Western classical music, more or less broadly construed, and more or less explicitly, as its target.) ‘Higher-order’ musical ontology asks questions that can be answered independently of a fundamental musical-ontological theory, such as what conditions must be met in order for a performance to be of a given work.¹

In a recent article in this journal, Lee B. Brown criticizes one central kind of project in higher-order musical ontology—the project of offering an ontological theory of a particular musical tradition.² So, for instance, Theodore Gracyk has argued that the work of art in rock music is a recording to be played back, rather than a song to be performed; Stephen Davies has argued that the same is true of the classical electronic tradition; I have argued that there are no works of art in jazz, only performances.³ Brown characterizes such projects as attempts to answer the question ‘What is the work of art in X?’, where X is some particular musical tradition. He argues that, if we are descriptivists about musical ontology (and he seems to agree we should be), that is, if we think the main evidence to which ontological theories of music are beholden is musical practices, then there is no reason to think this question has an

1 Andrew Kania, ‘New Waves in Musical Ontology’ in K. Stock and K. Thomson-Jones (eds), *New Waves in Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 20–40. ‘Higher-order musical ontology’ is quite a mouthful, but acronymizing the phrase seems like a bad idea.

2 Lee B. Brown, ‘Do Higher-Order Music Ontologies Rest on a Mistake?’ *BJA*, 51 (2011), 169–184. All page references are to this piece unless otherwise noted.

3 Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 25–34; Andrew Kania, ‘All Play and No Work: An Ontology of Jazz’, *JAC*, 69 (2011), 391–403.

answer.⁴ For, first, there is no reason to think, *a priori*, that any musical tradition should have a single, central concept of *the* work of art in that tradition. And, second, when we look, *a posteriori*, at any actual musical tradition (and the critical practice surrounding it), we see a messy diversity of people producing, appreciating, and critically discussing such things as songs, recordings, performances, and so on, in various ways, rather than the uniform practices a clean ontology would predict. Thus, the work of higher-order musical ontologists has been misguided. Ironically, given that their aim was to treat different musical traditions on their own terms, they have forced those very traditions into Procrustean ontological beds.⁵

I will attempt here to defend higher-order musical ontology from Brown's arguments. Of course, my comments will reflect my own conception of the best goals and methods of higher-order musical ontology, about which there may be some disagreement. I will also use examples that reflect my particular views about various musical traditions. But my principal aim is to defend the field in general, not my particular views.

I agree with Brown that higher-order musical ontologists should not be guided unreflectively by the question 'What is *the* work of art in [a given musical tradition]?' At the very least the question should be amended to 'What is *the* work of art in [a given musical tradition], *if any?*'⁶ Brown is clearly aware that higher-order musical ontologists make this qualification, because one of his targets is my view that in 'standard form' jazz there are no works, only performances (175–179). What this suggests is that Brown thinks it is problematic to go into musical ontology expecting to find any ontological structure at all that could be captured in a useful theory. For instance, he argues that James Young and Carl Matheson's proposed ontology of jazz, which suggests jazz is fairly similar to classical music (ontologically), fits far more of jazz practice than my own view, but that it is similarly Procrustean in that there are many examples in and aspects of jazz practice that it does not fit (176–179).

Here is one vague, quasi-transcendental argument against the untheorizably messy nature of musical practices. Musical practices are sociocultural practices. This means that they rely on (often implicit) understandings shared by the participants in the practice. For instance, if there were not widespread agreement that novels ought to be read (rather than used as kindling) from the first page to that last (rather than in a random order), that they ought not to be taken as factual accounts, and so on, it is unlikely that people would spend so much time and effort producing such things with such uses in mind. Already in this brief sketch we can see the beginnings of an ontology of the novel. We have some evidence for

4 For more on descriptivism in the ontology of art, see David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 16–24, and 'The Primacy of Practice in the Ontology of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009): 159–71; and Andrew Kania, 'The Methodology of Musical Ontology: Descriptivism and its Implications', *BJA* 48 (2008): 426–44.

5 Brown's criticism is thus distinct from Lydia Goehr's in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, rev. edn (Oxford: OUP, 2007). Goehr's point is that philosophers and musicians alike tend (or tended) to think of all music in ontological terms specific to (post-)Romantic Western classical music.

6 See, for example, 'All Play and No Work', 402–3, n. 55, where I criticize James O. Young and Carl Matheson, along with Garry Hagberg, for assuming there must be an answer to the first question.

the fact that novels are linguistic structures, rather than concrete objects, because they are to be read rather than burned. However, experimental literary practices might be raised as counterexamples to any such ontology. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), for instance, cannot be properly understood or appreciated without taking centrally into account its physical manifestation as a book with parts of its pages cut out. But there are two obvious replies to such counterexamples, if they are aimed at showing that literary practices are untheorizably messy. First, to the extent that the work does not fit one's ontology of the novel, one can deny it is literature. Unsurprisingly, much of the press that surrounded the book's release was concerned with its correct categorization. Second, in order to understand the book properly, one must not only take into account aspects of it that one usually ignores when appreciating a novel, one must also take into account *the fact that these features are non-standard*. That is, understanding tradition-defying works requires understanding the tradition, where that consists of standard practices. To return to musical ontology, the existence of jam bands, indeed the tradition of jam bands, might be considered a counterexample to an ontology of rock according to which recordings are the works of art in rock. But if one can tell a plausible historical story according to which this tradition is a reaction against the recording-centric nature of rock in general, one need not give up the general claim that the work of art in rock music is the recording. One might still make such a claim and offer a distinct ontology of the sub-tradition of jam bands that is more like, say, the ontology of jazz.⁷

Anyway, suppose we grant that there is no single, unqualified answer to 'What is *the* work of art in [a given musical tradition]?' It does not follow that there is no useful, best, perhaps qualified answer to that question. One thing that has to be resolved early on in any such enquiry is what concept of 'work of art' one is working with. I have followed others in taking it to refer, at least, to the kinds of things that are a primary focus of critical attention in a given tradition.⁸ Brown does not take issue with this conception; what he takes issue with is the idea that when we look at, say, the practice of rock music, we discover that there is some primary focus of critical attention.

One argument he gives is that since such concepts as *the work of art in rock music* 'simply play no role in musical discourse, they constitute nothing to be either descriptivist or revisionary about. We know them only as inventions of the philosophers who conjure with them' (181). This seems to me a misunderstanding of descriptivist methodology. A descriptivist about properties, for instance, need not show that the concept of a trope is used in ordinary discourse about ordinary objects. She need only show that such a concept plays a role in the best theory of ordinary objects formulated under descriptivist constraints.

A second argument Brown gives is that when we look at rock practice, what we find is a range of different practices, and no settled primary focus in any of them (173–175, 178–179). I do not deny that we find a range of different practices within rock or jazz. In my own work, I

7 I do not mean to suggest that I have such a plausible historical story to hand; I am merely attempting to defend the *kinds of moves* higher-order musical ontologists can make.

8 See, for example, Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 18, and Davies, *Art as Performance*, 50 *et passim*. I have also suggested that works of art are best conceived of as persisting objects ('All Play and No Work', 397–399), but I ignore that for now.

have tried to limit the scope of the ontological theories I have offered of both rock and jazz to dominant sub-traditions within the broader traditions. I do deny, however, that we find no (relatively) settled ontological structure (i.e. network of relations between pieces of music, performances, and recordings) within such sub-traditions.⁹ I have followed Theodore Gracyk, for instance, in arguing that the primary focus of critical attention in rock is the recording or track, rather than the song.¹⁰ Brown argues that even if we could get a very precise measure of critical attention, this would not warrant such a conclusion:

Suppose it could be shown that rock tracks get roughly seventy per cent of the critical attention devoted to rock music, with only thirty per cent devoted to songs. Not even this unbalanced mix would warrant the strange conclusion that the rock work is a track, not a song. (173)

Now, if the split were fifty–fifty, this would certainly be a strange conclusion. But, even in such an evenly split case, if we have not made the mistake of assuming that there must be a *single* primary focus of critical attention in a given tradition, then the correct conclusion to draw would surely be that there are *two* primary foci of critical attention in the given tradition.¹¹ When the split is seventy–thirty, it does not seem so strange to characterize the first kind of thing, which is, after all, receiving over twice as much attention as the second, as the *primary* (though not sole) focus of critical attention. But this may be an uncharitable response. Perhaps Brown’s point is that even if tracks are the primary focus of critical attention in this case, songs are still the focus of *significant* critical attention, as opposed to, say, the haircuts of the musicians, which, although not without a share of critical attention, even attention that relates them to the music, would not count as significant in the same sense.¹² If this

9 One puzzling aspect of Brown’s essay is that he ends by praising Stephen Davies’s attempts to provide more fine-grained ontological theories of sub-traditions of Western classical music, after having criticized others’ attempts to do the same for sub-traditions of rock and jazz. He even says that it ‘is too bad . . . that Davies did not extend his willingness to diversify ontologically into the spheres of popular music that he addresses’ (184).

10 Brown misconstrues a few things I say as arguments against the workhood of rock songs: (i) that they are ‘manifested’, (ii) that they are thin, and (iii) that they are not *for* anything in particular. The thinness of rock songs does play a role in a kind of subsidiary argument—it seems unlikely that such thin items would be the primary focus of critical attention, with much richer items (namely, tracks) to hand—but this is not the central argument, and the other two are beside the point.

11 I have suggested just such a conclusion with respect to classical works and performances (‘All Play and No Work’, 397–9).

12 Brown gives Tim Riley’s book *Tell Me Why: A Beatles Commentary* (New York: Knopf, 1988) as an example from a critical ‘literature [that] is full of studies of songs by the likes of Bob Dylan and Neil Young as songwriters no less than of songs by the Gershwins or Cole Porter’ (173). But it is clear from Riley’s introduction, and throughout his analyses, that he is discussing the Beatles’s *recordings*, not their songs considered as stand-alone pieces that could be interpreted in a range of performances. This is implicit in his critical analyses, when he discusses such elements of ‘Lady Madonna’ as ‘McCartney’s overt Presley imitation . . . a sassy Fats Domino piano figure gussied up with a natty horn section and flapper falsetto harmonies . . . [and t]he groove [that] dances all over the contradiction’ (247–248). But it is also explicit in Riley’s introduction, where he says that the Beatles ‘saw themselves first and foremost [one might as well say *primarily*] as recording artists, and their records still demonstrate all that pop can be’ (9). It is no argument against the Gracykian view that Riley also discusses, as I would say, thin songs manifested by these tracks.

is the point, I grant it, but I do not see that it is damning to higher-order musical ontology. It seems more like a helpful contribution to the enterprise.¹³

If we grant that songs are a secondary, but significant, focus of critical attention in rock music, should we then call them works of art? Obviously, to some extent this is a merely verbal issue, but I also think we should choose our terms with care.¹⁴ Anyway, I take it Brown would not be happy if higher-order musical ontologists carried on doing exactly what they have been doing, but replaced the term ‘work of art’ with ‘schmork of art’. I thus ignore this issue as a red herring.

Brown thinks that if we give up on the idea that there must be a single primary focus of critical attention in a given tradition, then higher-order musical ontology is a waste of time (179–181). I do not see how this follows. But rather than diagnose the problem with the inference, I will instead point out what I take to be the central purposes of higher-order musical ontology. First, there is pure curiosity about a musical tradition one is interested in. Brown acknowledges this as a possible motivation, though he thinks the difficulty of getting the ontological theory right will outweigh the satisfaction of understanding (179–180). This seems a rather personal matter, but I should also point out that ‘understanding’ here need not mean a purely intellectual exercise in taxonomy. One of the experiences that set me on the path to being an ontologist of music was learning as an undergraduate about Gracyk’s ontology of rock. Having had a rather sheltered musical upbringing, I had some sympathy with formalist arguments for the superiority of classical music over rock. Discovering that I might well have been listening to *the wrong thing* when appreciating rock music (a work performance rather than a constructed track) effected a kind of Copernican revolution in my experience of the music. Such an experience would arguably be valuable even if the theory underpinning it were wrong (an idea I take succour from when having doubts about my own ontology of jazz); its value is undeniable if the theory is correct.

Second, answering ontological questions about a tradition can contribute to settling other kinds of debates within the tradition, such as debates over normative issues. It is difficult to give clear examples of this—rarely does either kind of debate seem to get settled definitively. But there does often seem to be progress in normative debates, and sometimes it comes about by being informed by ontological discussions. For instance, Brown claims that ‘the formerly heated controversy about “historical” or “original instrument” performances in European concert music . . . may have come close to being resolved, not by the efforts of higher-order ontologists, but by means of adjustments within practice’ (182). But these adjustments did not come about spontaneously; the controversy was a philosophical

13 To move from considering primary to considering significant foci of critical attention need not be to step on to a slippery slope. There are many objects of critical attention in rock, for instance, other than tracks and songs—hooks, melodies, lyrics, ways of miking drums, etc.—but these can easily be distinguished in terms of their significance from tracks and songs. For one thing, their significance clearly derives (primarily!) from the contributions they make to tracks and songs.

14 See my ‘All Play and No Work’, 397–400, for some consideration of constraints on the use of ‘musical work’ as a theoretical term.

debate, carried out not only in musical performances, but in conversations between musicians and audiences, in programme booklets, and in the popular, musical, and academic presses. Professional philosophers contributed to this debate—or tried to, at least. They doubtless did not receive as much attention as they would have liked, but this does not show that they *ought* not to have received more attention.¹⁵ They were doubtless correct to point out problems with many of the arguments employed by others. This is not surprising—philosophers are trained to be sensitive to the kinds of conceptual distinctions (including ontological distinctions) that play a role in such debates.

Of course musical ontologists cannot and should not attempt to settle, all by themselves, debates such as that within jazz about whether the practice should be more compositional or improvisatory. Neither can or should Wynton Marsalis—one of Brown’s examples of a jazz theorist-practitioner. But obviously we should not (and cannot) exclude Wynton Marsalis from the conversation—he has very useful things to say about it. I would defend ontologists’ contributions in a similar way. Ontologists have tools for thinking about these questions that most other people (including most musicians) do not. Why not offer them as tools for interested parties’ use?¹⁶

I end with an analogy. Does it make sense to ask what the work of art is, in the sense of the primary focus of critical attention, in the artistic practice we call ‘film’ or ‘cinema’? It seems to me that it does, and that the answer is: the work of art in cinema is the film. There are certainly other kinds of objects in that practice that have artistic properties, and are studied more or less in their own right, e.g. screenplays. We thus might want to call screenplays works of art in some sense, though not in the sense outlined here. It may be that the evidence is clearer in the case of film than in rock or jazz. To put it in Brown’s tongue-in-cheek terms, in the critical literature on film there is probably more like a 99–1 split (if that) between work devoted to films and screenplays. But that is not a difference *in principle* between film and rock or jazz. I conclude that it at least makes sense to engage in higher-order musical ontology. I have suggested, further, that such engagement can be not only interesting, but also helpful to those invested in musical practice.¹⁷

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15 That they received *some* attention is clear from perusing the references in musicological and music-critical writings on the subject. For a recent example, see Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer’s History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

16 To be fair, Brown does say that ‘there is no reason to dogmatize . . . about the matter’ of whether higher-order ontologists can contribute to debates within musical practice, though he is sceptical of the kind of ‘optimistic’ view I have defended here (181).

17 Thanks to Julie Post, Barry Weyburn, and, especially, Lee B. Brown for helpful discussion of these issues.