
Response to Robert Batt

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Regardless of whether this is to musicologists' and music critics' liking, many of their claims about the structure of musical works (and its effect on listeners) are *empirically verifiable*. The purpose of experiments in Konečni (1984) and Gotlieb and Konečni (1985) was not to ridicule music theory or justify a personal preference (like Batt, I actually prefer the *Goldberg Variations* on the harpsichord and with a Baroque interpretation), but to introduce an objective (if seemingly pedestrian) approach to a field sometimes suspect of hyperbole, bombast, and censorial judgment based on "authority" as opposed to empirically demonstrated facts. (See also Gotlieb & Konečni, 1984, and Konečni, 1986a, 1986b.)

Some amount of polemics between musicology and experimental psychology may well benefit both by reducing complacency. It is refreshing, for example, to read of a musicologist's attempt to design his own experiment. I hope Batt will go beyond the easy predictability of "thought experiments" and actually carry one out along the lines suggested in his paper.¹ When he does, he may well be surprised and instructed by the results. The empirical paper by Cook (1987, in this issue of *Music Perception*) on the weak effects of tonal closure illustrates this well.

The major points of contention are only to be expected. The issue of the ideal type of subjects—listeners to use in experiments of this kind was discussed at length in Konečni (1984)—specifically regarding the conceptual (dis)advantages of using highly sophisticated listeners. When Batt interviews his ideal audience of "consumers of art music," he will probably discover that 95% of them had attended college (that is, are fundamentally similar in musical taste and lifestyle to our undergraduate experimental

1. The experiment would use three subject groups: (a) nonstudent, non-musician consumers of "art music"; (b) music students; and (c) non-music students. The experimental materials would be the original and systematically modified versions of the first movement of Mozart's *G minor Symphony*, K. 550, and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. The dependent measures would include evaluative rating scales and a semi-structured interview inquiring about the reasons for liking or not liking the performance, the perceived musical structure, etc.

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subjects; our subjects are, or will be, Batt's "consumers"; one rarely *begins* to like Bach at age 42). And when Batt says that using undergraduate subjects is wrong (even though he presumably thinks of them as members—albeit young—of a reasonably well-educated elite) "because musicians do not have to cater to the whims of any public" (p. 213), I hope—to put the bottom line directly if crudely—that he does not expect these students' and their parents' taxes to pay for esoteric "art music" fads sometimes supported by cliques and art bureaucracies.²

For someone so protective of "artistic freedom" and artists' right to resist public pressure, Batt's apparent intolerance of the piano and/or Romantic interpretations is odd. Highly respected musicologists (cited in Gotlieb & Konečni, 1985, pp. 89–90) have praised such interpretations (paradoxically often also on the grounds of artistic freedom); Batt should have been pleased that musically uneducated 20-year-old students actually *liked* a Baroque piece, however performed (in fact, they rather liked all of the eight harpsichord/piano Classical/Romantic recordings used in Gotlieb & Konečni, 1985).

The quote from Pousseur (1966) that Batt (p. 211) provides approvingly is a good example of a certain type of musicological thought that our experiments critically addressed, so I will repeat it here:

. . . each variation remains closed and self-sufficient within itself, thanks to a clear, perfectly balanced cyclical movement whose function is to centralize the over-all (*sic*) flow of events and to subordinate it to the preestablished tonal order. (pp. 97–98)

But Batt should note, even without reading beyond our Abstract (Gotlieb & Konečni, 1985, p. 87), that in "Study 3, *specific triplets* of variations were played to subjects in *their original order and in a random sequence* . . . no differences were found in subjects' appreciation for the original versus the modified versions" (italics added).

Batt says (p. 211): "there may in fact be some variation works, possibly including the *Goldberg Variations*, in which it may be nearly impossible to find reasons for preferring the composed order of variations to other order-

2. In an earlier paper (Konečni, 1984, p. 90) that Batt cites, I wrote: ". . . Images arise of the artist in a desperate search for the essence of the human condition, portraying the heights and abysses found in all of us, yet finding nothing contradictory in claiming at the same time that the artist is painting or composing 'for himself and three other people he respects.' Also images of the artist who thinks of his total creative freedom as an inalienable right—even if it is at the public expense. Perhaps, these are exaggerations, but the argument that many great artists were 'misunderstood' by their contemporaries and starved (and that we should correct this in our own time) is a poor one. It conveniently neglects the real possibility that for each starving misunderstood genius there must have been hundreds of starving misunderstood mediocrities who *should* have been misunderstood. Time and the marketplace sifted the wheat from the chaff . . ."

ings.” This is a major concession, an *empirically* forced distancing from musicologists with a penchant for the fatalistic and architectural metaphors, the tenor of which is to exalt the “inevitable” and “inexorable” structure of the *Goldberg Variations* (cited in Gotlieb & Konečni, pp. 90, 95–96). So, empirical studies can help discipline musicological thought and, especially, language. After all, Batt (p. 210) does graciously admit that musicological claims are sometimes vague and insufficiently substantiated—a heroic effort of understatement, though.

Citing my research on rock 'n' roll and bringing up the reasons for or against my contention (Konečni, 1982; 1984) that musicologists should pay more attention to it are irrelevancies in the context of our *Goldberg Variations* experiments. My noncondescending treatment of rock 'n' roll presents a populist (or “baserate” in psychological jargon) argument suggesting that it is at least remotely possible that, for example, the *Beggar's Banquet* by the “Rolling Stones” may be regarded as a “classic” 200 years from now. Our *Goldberg Variations* studies and those of the Beethoven sonatas and string quartets (Konečni, 1984, Study 4), on the other hand, simply put the claims by well-established musicologists and music scholars to empirical test.

Batt has the quaint notion that music performance occurs in a vacuum—regarding audiences, the financing of music and musicians, and contemporary influences. all that aside, the key point of this debate is: Can a hitherto armchair-speculation field be cajoled into taking a serious *empirical* look at itself?

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