

***Between couch and piano: Psychoanalysis, music, art, and neuroscience***

by **Gilbert J. Rose**

Hove: Brunner-Routledge. 2004. 189 p. Reviewed by

Alexander Stein, 80, 5th Ave, Suite 901, New York, NY 10011, USA — [psykhe@att.net](mailto:psykhe@att.net)

Writings about the arts from a psychoanalytic perspective have appeared since the inception of psychoanalysis itself. With many of Freud's early writings, and through the weekly discussions held between 1901 and 1906 of the so-called Wednesday Society—forerunner to the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society—a door opened out of the consulting room and into the artist's studio. Countless psychoanalysts, as well as many non-clinicians schooled in psychoanalytic theory, followed, proposing that psychoanalytic conceptualizations of mental life could uniquely and profitably illuminate the artist and his creative productions. Although Freud pointedly eschewed music in favour of exploring the visual and literary arts, another of the Wednesday Society's founding members was musicologist Max Graf (known also as the father of the boy in Freud's *Little Hans* case). In Graf's essay on Wagner and the *Flying Dutchman* (1911) we have the first distinctly psychoanalytic inquiry into music and musical creativity.

Despite that auspicious beginning, relatively few psychoanalytic studies of music (and even fewer of significant merit or sophistication) were produced in the following half-century as compared to works focused on other forms of artistic expression (Sterba, 1965; Noy, 1966, 1967). Kris's (1952) groundbreaking work signalled the emergence of more sophisticated applications of Freudian ideas in the realms of art and creativity. The second half of the 20th century marked a continued shifting away from the historically dominant 'regressive id' model and its affiliated trend of correlating pathology and creativity. Reflective of the favoured theoretic modality of the times, writings from the mid-1950s and beyond moved toward ego-psychologically oriented formulations—conflict-free, adaptive, and less neurotically or psychotically influential factors—about the effects of music on the listener or the psychic organization of the composer. A change in the climate of psychoanalytic theorizing coupled with works about music authored by writers equally knowledgeable about music and psychoanalysis gave rise to a new generation of analysts in which emphasis could be placed on the music itself, not only the mind of the composer or listener. This allowed the extra-psychological data of the music—with its unique and specific forms of notation, form, grammar and syntactical structure—to be understood (or at least addressed) both on its own terms, and as aurally representational of mental functioning.

Still, music has remained less represented in the psychoanalytic literature than any other art (save perhaps for dance). As to this, Nass assesses that

...one of the basic reasons why so little work has been done in music and psychoanalysis and why most of the work that has been done has not followed the basic methodology of a modern ego-psychology approach [is that] [s]tyle and formalistic issues have not been stressed, and most of the work has focused on issues of content. (1989, p. 165)

Rose entered this fractious dialogue in 1963 with a consideration of the role of the body ego in creative imagination and artistic production. He has never looked

back; his output since is a veritable compendium of writings demonstrating a robust curiosity about the psychosomatic origins of art and creativity.

This book represents a summary to date of Rose's 40-year exploration of creativity, while also extending and clarifying his trilogy on psychoanalysis and non-verbal aesthetic form (Rose, 1980, 1996a, 1996b). It affords a prime opportunity then to trace the reworkings, thoughtful recapitulations, and evolutionary advances in Rose's theorizing about the form, content, and psychodynamic nature of aesthetics and the creative process, with more specific emphasis here on music than in his previous books. It is in this sense as much a glimpse into the creative processes, associations, and musings of its author, a seasoned and erudite psychoanalytic thinker, as it is a scholarly work investigating the quartet of interrelated topics set out in the book's title.

Rose delineates his exploration into nine chapters, with the last being a response, entitled 'A psychoanalyst listens to a musician listening to himself composing,' to the lucid, informative, and highly recommended Foreword by eminent music theorist and composer Jonathan D. Kramer, entitled 'A musician listens to a psychoanalyst listening to music.' This structure is itself a creative allusion to the ideas represented by a couch (Rose, the psychoanalyst whose life is deeply influenced by music) and a piano (Kramer, the mindful composer), and to the conversation between them.

By my reading, the word 'between' in the main title most aptly captures the spirit and conceptual focus of Rose's work. So much of what he strives to convey about the psychoanalytic process and about music occurs in the space which is not specifically one or the other—Winnicott's (1953) intermediate transitional area. Nor, importantly, is this 'between' a static area; it is dynamic and kinetic. Implicit is the idea—linked with Rose's central notion of the 'tension and release' intrinsic, in his view, to all art—of a shuttling back and forth. To inhabit Rose's perspective is not to be situated between couch and piano, but to travel between them.

Rose's ideas are deeply considered, and many usefully illuminate complex concepts relating to art, creativity, the natural world, and psychoanalytic understandings of the doings of the mind. His finest contributions, in my view, come in the chapters dealing with music and time, and music and affect regulation. His explication of the aesthetic and psychoanalytic applications of the Greek concepts of *kairos*—denoting the experience of ebb and flow of episodic time along a continuum—and *chronos*—referring to clock-time, the measurable time of succession—are particularly clarifying. He anchors this to a brief account of the near-universal appeal of Beethoven's so-called *Moonlight* sonata (No. 14, Op. 27, No. 2, C# minor), a programmatic title applied by a poet some 30 years following its composition. Set in the context of his ideas about the subjective perceptions and conceptions about time, Rose persuasively argues that

... the structure [of the music] is devoid of any referential meaning to things outside itself. It has nothing to do with either moonlight or other scenes from nature, let alone abstract concepts such as courage or longing. Rather, the accumulation of three-note wave after similar wave combines near-constancy with minute differences, and this gradual intensification of focused attentions is associated with mounting feeling. (p. 97)

This is followed by a lucid distillation of certain of Langer's (1942, 1953, 1957) conceptualizations of the 'meaning' of music, founded in her semiotic distinction between discursive and presentational symbols. From this, Rose proposes (accurately, in my view) that 'music is a representation of the emotional quality of subjective, lived time made audible—an auditory apparition of felt-time' (p. 97). He extends that discussion to assess the salient influences of culture and environment on aesthetic trends and perceptions, the development of tonal systems in the West and in aboriginal cultures, and then offers a comparative examination of jazz and 20th century classical idioms (particularly Schoenberg's 12 tone system). Notwithstanding the wide range and informational density of this chapter, it is, I think, the centrepiece of the book.

This said, in areas both minor and major, I do not always agree with Rose. For example, where he greatly values a formulation, as I understand it, in which all art is composed of mechanisms which catalyze experiences of tension and release, I conceive much of art as creating (or evoking) tension but without any necessary obligation for its release (Stein, 1999, 2004a, 2004b). This is to say that there is an inherent and inescapable incomprehensibility to primary-process mentation. The work of art—be it aural, visual, textual, abstract, representational, or as the case may be—strives toward comprehensibility (which might of itself have a tension-reducing effect) by way of a temporary transposition into a secondary-process form, but may ultimately succeed (as art) by circumventing secondary elaboration. In this, the structural and semantic properties of any particular aesthetic medium may cohere not in the release of tension but precisely in its opposite: by defying expectation, denying gratification, frustrating desire, upsetting equilibrium, amplifying anxiety, provoking discomfort, reflecting ugliness, disarray, chaos, or discord, unleashing wide-ranging dormant (or latent) reminiscences and associations, or catalyzing contradictory, overdetermined, or poly-affective responses.

Further, in scholarly works no less than in art, form, style, and voice—the manner of expression—occupy a crucial place in the overall aesthetic alongside aspects of content such as depth of research, breadth of knowledge, or originality of thought.

It can fairly be said that the use of language and the communicative expression of ideas in a scholarly or academic book are inextricably tied to the ideas themselves. This differs, for example, from poetry or allusive referential literary writing (or many other forms of art), which employ symbolic displacement or metaphoric replacement, and where opacity or distortion of meaning may be intentional, if not essential. Additionally, of course, language and its usage are crucial and special in a psychoanalytic context.

Rose writes in a conversational jargon-free prose, positively allowing his ideas to be accessible to a wider audience. He also favours short, staccato sentence fragments. Often using single words. Separated. By periods. These seem designed to serve variable purposes, among them as terse transitional bridges linking disparate ideas, presenting highly condensed kernels of thought, or simply as a narrative conceit. To my subvocalizing inner ear, this reads—*sounds*—abrupt and jarringly unmusical. More significantly, it interfered with my understanding. Paradoxically, given how spare the wording and simple the sentence structure, I nonetheless frequently found

myself having to read and then reread sentences (or paragraphs) trying to grasp Rose's intention. He also frequently poses questions in ways that seem not to invite readers to pause and ponder potential responses or implications for themselves, but rather as a convention for providing his explanatory answer. There is a didactic quality to this nature of narrative which may be reassuringly professorial to some, particularly as supported by Rose's extensive research. For me, these modes of dialogic engagement are confounding, and ultimately run counter to Rose's own view of experiences with art in which 'with fresh affect and clarified perception, we glimpse the richness within and without, and learn not answers, but awe' (p. 162).

Are these in the aggregate fundamental problems in the book or merely minor—and perhaps ultimately just idiosyncratic—criticisms of one reader? Perhaps both. Still, Rose has delivered a work filled with his passionate interests, scholarship, and distinct voice. In art as in psychoanalysis, these always deserve attention.

### References

- Graf M (1911). *Richard Wagner im fliegenden Holländer. Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie kunstslerischen Schaffens* [Richard Wagner in the flying Dutchman. A contribution to the psychology of artistic creativity]. Vienna: Franz Deuticke. 46 p. [*Schriften zur angewandten Seelenkunde* [Applied psychology reports], Vol 9.]
- Kris E (1952). *Psychoanalytic explorations in art*. New York, NY: International UP. 358 p.
- Langer SK (1942). *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite and art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. 313 p.
- Langer SK (1953). *Feeling and form: A theory of art*. New York, NY: Scribner. 431 p.
- Langer SK (1957). *Problems of art: Ten philosophical lectures*. New York, NY: Scribner. 184 p.
- Nass ML (1989). From transformed scream, through mourning, to the building of psychic structure. *Ann Psychoanal* 17:159–81.
- Noy P (1966). The psychodynamics of music, part 1. *J Music Ther* 3:126–34.
- Noy P (1967). The psychodynamics of music, parts 2–5. *J Music Ther* 4:7–23, 45–51, 81–94, 117–125.
- Rose GJ (1963). Body ego and creative imagination. *J Am Psychoanal Assoc* 11:775–89.
- Rose GJ (1980). *The power of form: A psychoanalytic approach to aesthetic form*. New York, NY: International UP. 234 p.
- Rose GJ (1996a). *Necessary illusion: Art as witness*. Madison, CT: International UP. 148 p.
- Rose GJ (1996b). *Trauma and mastery in life and art: Expanded with an original docudrama*, 2nd edition. Madison, CT: International UP. 279 p.
- Stein A (1999). Well-tempered bagatelles—A meditation on listening in psychoanalysis and music. *Am Imago* 56:387–416.
- Stein A (2004a). Music and trauma in Polanski's *The pianist* [Film essay]. *Int J Psychoanal* 85:755–65.
- Stein A (2004b). Music, mourning and consolation. *J Am Psychoanal Assoc* 52:783–811.
- Sterba RF (1965). Psychoanalysis and music. *Am Imago* 22:96–111.
- Winnicott DW (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: A study of the first not-me possession. *Int J Psychoanal* 34:89–97.