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Lisa Giombini, *Musical Ontology: A Guide for the Perplexed*

Milano/Udine, Mimesis International, 2017.

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- 1 Musical ontology is one of most lively areas of research within analytic philosophy of music. It is an established academic branch in several regions of the English-speaking world, most notably Great Britain and the United States, and has gained increasing attention in continental Europe too over the past twenty years.¹ In 2017, a dense volume entitled *Musical Ontology: A Guide for the Perplexed* has been devoted to the survey of the broad ontological debate on music by Mimesis International – a publishing house launched in 2013 by the same organisation behind Mimesis Edizioni (1987) and Éditions Mimésis (1999). In the first page of the preface, the author Lisa Giombini affirms that “the number of papers, books and essays that have recently been dedicated to the topic of art and musical ontology is so vast that starting to grapple with it means entering into a jungle” (p. 13). A preliminary overview of this topic evokes, indeed, a wealth of fascinating questions: What is the proper methodology for investigating musical ontology? What is the relationship amongst musical ontology, aesthetics, artistic practice, and more “fundamental” metaphysics? What role, if any, should the concept of artwork play in musical ontology? What role does historical and contextual conditions surrounding the composition and reception of musical works play in its ontological individuation? “Trying to get a grip on the debate seems like trying to find one’s bearings without a compass”, states Giombini. Thus, she continues, “writing a clear and precise guide to help hapless readers find their way could be useful work to be done” (p. 13).

- 2 Preceded by a foreword written by her mentor Alessandro Bertinetto, Associate Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Turin, Giombini's two-part *Guide* on musical ontology is ensued from the first half of her voluminous doctoral thesis, completed in 2015 and carried out jointly at the University of Lorraine and at the University of Roma Tre. The Introduction highlights a list of criteria that should be taken into account by every satisfactory ontological proposal concerning musical works (their repeatability², audibility³ and productibility⁴). The first part of the *Guide*, then, is a sort of concise manual discussing and evaluating the fundamental positions of the analytical debate related to musical ontology. The reading of this first part, entitled "What is musical ontology?", might result somewhat unexciting for the expert, but it is extremely useful and even enthralling for the neophyte. As shown by two schemas at pages 50-51, the major approaches within fundamental ontology – i.e. realism and anti-realism – are also valid for musical ontology, considered as a "regional ontology" applied to musical entities. Nevertheless, despite certain eliminativist and anti-realist theories according to which "the world does not contain any musical work" (such as those of Ross Cameron),⁵ it would seem, at least intuitively, that "philosophers committed to musical ontology must inevitably admit that works of music exist" (p. 47), i.e. they should embrace a realist stance. Hence, explaining the relationship between the singular essence of musical works and their concrete existence in different spatial and temporal events come to constitute "one of the biggest challenges to the ontology of music" (p. 48).
- 3 Giombini divides realist ontologists into two main groups: the nominalists, on the one hand, and the platonists, on the other.⁶ Nominalists identify musical works as "concrete objects, arguing that they should be considered as sets of concrete particulars: i.e., scores and performances" (p. 30). In contrast with the classification made by Andrew Kania in 2013⁷, Giombini includes nominalists among realist ontologists. According to her view, they in fact postulate a form of epistemic realism: nominalism admits the mind-independent existence of musical works as mere particulars but does not accept their existence qua abstract things. Different contemporary theories on musical works can be interpreted as "nominalist". Class nominalism, which was famously upheld by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art* (1976), reduces the musical work to the class formed by the set of compliant performances of one score. According to mereological nominalism, on the other hand, works can be reduced to fusions or sets of concrete objects. Therefore, a musical work *x* can be construed as the composition of its concrete instantiations or "parts". From this perspective, instantiations include not only performances but also copies of the score, recordings, mental events, etc. Giombini introduces a further and seemingly hair-splitting distinction within contemporary mereological nominalism: perdurantism (proposed by Ben Caplan and Carl Matheson⁸) and endurantism (Chris Tillman⁹).
- 4 Though committed to ontological economy, musical nominalism turns out to be problematic for a number of reasons (the most evident is that artworks survive their concrete manifestations). The majority of analytical theorists, in fact, prefers a form of platonism concerning musical works, intended as abstract objects. Furthermore, Giombini observes that a prominent ontological proposal, the type/token theory, has gained particular credit in the platonist camp because it elegantly explains the dual nature of musical works: "the main idea is that musical works are types of sound-structures whose performances (i.e. interpretations, recordings, playings) are tokens of

that type” (p. 94). Hard platonists, on the one hand, believe that musical works are eternal entities “discovered” by the composers. Giombini contends that “the main advocates of this theory” – i.e. Peter Kivy and Julian Dodd¹⁰ – “find it reasonable to say that musical works, such as scores and sound-events (performances), like platonic forms or universals, are instances of abstract, eternal, immutable, causally and perceptually isolated entities” (p. 97). Soft platonism, on the other hand, also maintains that musical objects are abstract objects, that is, they exist apart from their performances and scores. However, they are not conceived as eternal: they come to exist over time as a result of human activity. Jerrold Levinson, one of the most famous proponents of this view, intends to safeguard the composer’s creativity and the impact of social and cultural contexts. He maintains that “musical works [...] does *not* exist prior to the composer’s compositional activity [...] and must be such that composers composing in different musico-historical contexts who determine identical sound structure invariably compose distinct musical works”.¹¹ Levinson defines the musical work as an impure indicated type, viz. a historically conditioned (impure) structure resulting from the interaction between a pure structure and a concrete individual human (indication).

- 5 In the second part of the volume, Giombini moves “from first-order to second-order debate”, i.e. “from ontology to meta-ontology” (p. 15). She rightly asserts that “as a hybrid field of studies overlapping abstract metaphysics and art theory, ontology of music has to cope with the relationship between the two – not always a bed of roses – not to mention criticism from both” (p. 141). She identifies and discusses four versions of ontological dismissivism: eliminativism, aestheticism, historicism and semanticism¹². Eliminativists, as mentioned before, defends the alleged purity of abstract metaphysics and put forward the idea that artefacts, musical works included, do not exist. Aestheticists, such as Aaron Ridley, claim that ontology has no place in the field of art and music. Any attempt to specify the “content” of a given work “*in advance* of evaluative judgements about particular performances of it, or independently of such judgements, must be futile and self-defeating”.¹³ Historicism – a reductive label used by Giombini to indicate thinkers as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu and Lydia Goehr¹⁴ – asserts that musical works are primarily cultural, sociological and historical entities that cannot be described ontologically and reified as if they were uncorrupted and isolated objects. Finally, contemporary semanticists, such as Amie Thomasson, clinch the problem once and for all by reducing metaphysical disputes to semantic and verbal misunderstandings.
- 6 In the last two chapters of her *Guide*, Giombini challenges the dichotomy between realism and anti-realism, making a plea for a pluralist and inclusive approach in relation to the plethora of existing musical phenomena (which, without doubt, cannot be reduce to the hackneyed concept of artwork). In conclusion, she upholds what she calls an “historical ontology”. Since “there is no ‘monolithic’ category that can account for artistic phenomena as a whole” and “artistic practice is the subject-matter of art ontology” (p. 348), musical ontology should be mainly descriptive, taking historical and contextual considerations into account. The volume suffers from some typos, but Giombini’s thorough analysis proves to be both valiant and engaging in showing the usefulness and inevitability of ontological and meta-ontological enquiries on music. If we were to decide to disassociate ourselves from ontology, “instead of relieving

ourselves of the burden of metaphysics”, we would “unknowingly be committing to a naïve metaphysical conception” (p. 351).

NOTES

1. See, for instance, ARBO Alessandro and RUTA Marcello (eds), *Ontologies musicales : Perspectives et débats*, Paris, Hermann, 2014. In 2015, I published a review of this volume: PALAZZETTI Nicolò, “Alessandro Arbo and Marcello Ruta (eds), *Ontologies musicales : Perspectives et débats*”, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 46, n° 1, 2015, p. 190-193.
2. “The fact that musical works are repeatable and thus resistant to rigid identification” (p. 32).
3. “All ontologies of musical works take into account the fact that musical works are audible through performances. When we listen to a performance of a musical work, we do not just listen to the *performance* of the work, we also listen to the *work itself*” (p. 32). Italics in original.
4. The term “productibility” is mine. In her Introduction, Giombini simply affirms: “The third and last challenge to the ontology of music concerns [...] the *production* of musical works. How do musical works come into existence?” (p. 32). Italics in original.
5. CAMERON Ross, “There are No Things That are Musical Works”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 48, n° 3, 2008, p. 295-314.
6. Giombini dedicates also some pages to Benedetto Croce’s idealism, which attributes a mental nature to musical works: an “intermediate approach” that “can hardly be ascribed either to realism or to anti-realism” (p. 50).
7. KANIA Andrew, “Platonism and Nominalism in Contemporary Musical Ontology”, MAG UIDHIR Christy (ed.), *Art and Abstract Objects*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 197-219.
8. CAPLAN Ben and MATHESON Carl, “Defending Musical Perdurantism”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 46, n° 1, 2006, p. 59-69.
9. TILLMAN Chris, “Musical Materialism”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 51, n° 1, 2006, p. 13-29.
10. KIVY Peter, “Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defence”, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, n° 19, 1983, p. 109-129; DODD Julian, “Musical Works as Eternal Types”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 40, n° 4, 2000, p. 424-440.
11. LEVINSON Jerrold, “What a Musical Work is”, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77, n° 1, 1980, p. 5-28: 9 and 14. Italics in original.
12. See the schema at page 150.
13. RIDLEY Aaron, “Against Musical Ontology”, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 100, n° 4, 2003, p. 203-220: 213. Italics in original.
14. In 2016, Giombini co-translated Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992) in Italian. See GOEHR Lydia, *Il museo immaginario delle opere musicali: saggio di filosofia della musica*, ed. by Lisa Giombini and Vincenzo Santarcangelo, Milano/Udine, Mimesi, 2016.

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