Kiyoko Magome, *The Influence of Music on American Literature Since 1890: A History of Aesthetic Counterpoint*

Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. vii + 282 pp.

Reviewed by HATOOKA Keita, Meiji University

Musical terminology is full of eloquent metaphors for literary criticism. Not only Michael Bakhtin's key musico-literary concept "polyphony," but even "fugue," which is an example of the forms of music compositions that Kiyoko Magome prefers to collectively call "counterpoint," could help to explain the continuity between realist/naturalist, modernist, and postmodernist literary schemes in American literature. "[C]ounterpoint has fascinated artists and intellectuals as an ideal discursive structure of both art and society," Magome points out, "and also as the most reliable mediator of the 'irreconcilable tension' between them" (31). It seems reasonable enough that Magome chooses here not "polyphony" but "counterpoint" as the critical device in her highly motivated "musico-literary, socio-aesthetic" studies, *The Influence of Music on American Literature Since 1890: A History of Aesthetic Counterpoint*, particularly since "counterpoint" has to be understood as a creative means used by composers/writers/critics in order to develop a stylistic concept "polyphony," as she refers to a music dictionary so as not to set former against latter, but to show their contiguity (n247).

Magome starts with the history of "aesthetic counterpoint" by focusing on the extreme popularity of Wagnerian music dramas in America of the 1890s. One might feel a bit of confusion about this beginning, since Wagnerian music drama is so synthetic that those who chant the praises of "counterpoint" or the "irreconcilable tension" between art and society, like Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno whose philosophical stance Magome's study is partly based on here, felt the need not simply to praise it but also to express caution about its "power to change the audience from a group of individuals into a mass" (21). However, what Magome tries to forcefully demonstrate early in her book is not that American citizens did not accept Wagner's "dilettantish" (21) idea subconsciously, but that, especially to the women of the time, his "innovative, synthetic art, which *exceeded* conventional limitations in many respects" (37, italic mine), led them to become awakened, not only sexually, but also aesthetically in order to face up to their own counterselves. This process of "awakenings," in the context of American literature, might be regarded as a trigger for a contrapuntal perspective of the world.

In *The Influence of Music*, Magome intends not to date the decline of the popularity of Wagnerian music dramas and the rise of the necessity of counterpoint, but to chronicle the "contrapuntal history of American musico-literary socio-aesthetic discourse since 1890" by focusing on each work of the American creative writers from Henry James to Richard Powers, which to some extent or another intertwines the three musico-cultural "threads" there—counterpoint, Wagnerian music dramas, and player piano. Of course, this project

requires a musicological commitment to frame American literature since 1890 through musical terminology, which is not necessarily familiar to readers. Accordingly, she argues for the intertwinement of these three threads in each novel, basically setting two representative critics in the 20th century, Adorno and Edward Said, as the intellectual mediators of the musico-literary, socio-cultural discipline. The model of her studies is what Said calls "secular criticism": "what critics should do through their aesthetic experiences, such as listening to music and reading literature, is not just indulge in emotional, metaphysical pleasure but explore and describe the experiences carefully as 'worldly' and 'circumstantial.' He [Said] calls this process 'secular criticism'" (13-14).

In Chapter 2, Magome deals with five canonical novelist—Henry James, Mark Twain, Harold Frederic, Kate Chopin, and Willa Cather—, going from the general to the particular. Her analysis of how Cather's "The Garden Lodge" (1905) demonstrated the author's awareness of Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) should be noted in the context of the transition of the musico-literary discourse in American literature from Wagnerian harmony to counterpoint:

> Caroline plays on the piano "the first act of the [Wagner's] *Walkÿre*, the last of his [Raymond's] rôle they had practiced together" [...] Caroline, unlike Edna, plays the piano herself and participates actively in her own "awakening" process. [...] Caroline doesn't need the garden lodge, the symbol of her secret yearning for Raymond and her repressed counterself, any more because it has been internalized appropriately in her through her cathartic "awakening" experience on the previous night. (61-63)

Magome argues here that Caroline's internalization of her own repressed counterself through Wagnerian music, which Cather succeeded to write because of her "reading Chopin's *The Awakening* critically" (63), had evolved into Cather's new literary technique of counterpoint, which would be exercised in her 1925 novel *The Professor's House*. "[A]s in 'The Garden Lodge,'" says Magome, "the protagonist [Professor Godfrey St. Peter] discovered his long-repressed counterself and has to start dealing with the relationship between the 'twin' boys in him. This is the new contrapuntal relationship St. Peter may or may not be able to create in the new house" (72). Whether its protagonists are male or female, once they start to recognize their counterselves and dare to embrace the splitting of identity, it seemed to be worth applying the adjective "contrapuntal," which means "of or in counterpoint," to the inner condition achieved in each of them.

Writing those internalized conflicts not as a start toward a final unification but as a state of tension, as Magome repeatedly stresses, seems to certainly count for a great deal by confirming Adorno's philosophical idea of "negative dialectics," which also influenced Said to promote contrapuntal reading/writing/criticism (12-13). Although often academic papers that use literary texts to assess the validity of philosophical insights tend to miss the point and become lofty abstractions far removed from the context in which those texts were

written or read, Magome's focus on another counterpoint, the "twelve-tone method," gives real substance to her reading of such modernist texts as Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (written in California) and Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. The "twelve-tone method" is an experimental technique of composition invented by Arnold Schönberg. Owing to his logical account of this method, Schönberg is often regarded as just as much a theorist as a composer. Not only pointing out the direct influence of this modernist theoretical way of composition on Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, but also providing readers with a significant episode from his private association with Schönberg and Adorno in the late of 1940s California, Magome appropriately argues that the epochal concept of counterpoint shared among the contemporary intellectuals forced into exile from Europe to America because of the rise of the Nazis, might have helped Mann envision what seems to be called the possibility of democracy in New World (94).

As for Magome's basic approach in this musico-literary and socio-aesthetic study of comparative literature, it begins by first backing up the importance of the music concepts that appeared in the novels by extracting the writers' personal music experiences from within and without their respective novels ("during these two years [1940 and 1941], she [Carson McCullers] was greatly influenced by her relationships with talented European and American composers and created her musico-literary narratives by utilizing three different types of counterpoint"(95)). Secondly it views the authors' fictional works as semi-autobiographic ones directly or indirectly connected with the socio-cultural matrix; and thirdly it utilizes both impressive and insignificant lines from the other novels' characters who are assumed to be her/his contemporaries in order to demonstrate how these different types of authors are subject to the same musico-literary concept, that is, counterpoint ("[McCullers] used 'fugue' in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940 and 'canon' in 'Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland' in 1941. Interestingly, these two types of counterpoint are what Leverkühn, the representative modernist composer in Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, focused on when he began to study music seriously"(95)). Finally, through these comparative reading, Magome encourages her readers to imagine as if target writers were listening to the same music and craving a contrapuntal perspective for their creative worlds ("The representative modernist composer [in Mann's *Doktor Faustus*] doesn't enjoy 'the study of harmony' at all but finds '*counterpoint*,' especially "*canon* and *fugue*," 'enchant[ing],' 'creative,' and 'invent[ive],' and the same contrapuntal music attracted McCullers, a representative American musico-literary writer of the modernist period" (95)).

In Magome's parallel reading of Mann and McCullers, perhaps, it might not be so easy for general readers to figure out why such a classical music concept as "fugue" could be identified as an example of a modernist way of composition like Schönberg's "twelve-tone method." Though she does refer to the "fugue" in a much broader context from the Baroque period to modern/postmodern, what should be the most essential here is an explanation of how intricately Schönberg incorporated Bach's fugue in his "twelve-tone method." In his article "Schoenberg [sic] and Bach," Rudolf Stephen explains the mixed

feeling of this composer/inventor/theorist to the German composer/organist: "Schoenberg begins [his essay on Bach] by recalling his earlier claim that Bach was the first twelve-tone composer. He says that this was obviously a joke. But was it a joke[?]" (Stephen 137). And in "Schoenberg as Theorist," Severine Neff claims that while Schönberg perceived the contrapuntal combination of Bach's *The Art of Fugue* as miraculous, he did not think every fugue was a comfort to his theory, but what he needed for his counterpoint was fugue whose origin seemed to derive not from the Latin *fuga*, "to flee" as usual, but from the Germany etymology, *fügen*, "to bind together" or "to structure" (Neff 79).

Actually, the meaning and interpretation of the concept "fugue" itself has changed over successive periods. In Chapter 4 and 5, dealing with postmodernist texts, Magome points out that "fugue" tends to be used by writers as a music-psychological concept: "*controlled fugue* therapy" in Philip K. Dick's *We Can Build You*; John Barth's discussion of the term "fugue" at the beginning of *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*; and "Fugue" which "in psychiatry [...] means a state of flight from reality" (201) in Jerzy Kosinski's *Pinball*. In the case of Kosinski, the interpretation of the term "fugue" seems to go back to the Latin origin as well as fit into the postmodern situation psychoanalytically referred to as a schizophrenic one. Nevertheless, when Magome repeatedly claims that American writers who, along with we the readers, indulge in such a contrapuntal way of thinking, ultimately long for a democratic, multicultural utopia, one might criticize her for being optimistic:

> [...] I think that "fugue" as a musical term also reveals the writers' and probably many other contemporary people's desire for a contrapuntal world, or peaceful coexistence of unique, independent people and active, flexible interactions among them. Among these writers' works, [Daniel] Mason's *The Piano Turner* most dramatically shows the contrapuntal structure in fugue as the discursive image of an *ideal, democratic world we hope for* by contrasting it with the novel's colonial discourse of domination and exclusion. (232, underline mine)

Of course, it is not enough even for Magome to designate the world, which American modern/postmodern writers try to depict by means of counterpoint, with the adjectives *ideal* and *democratic*. As for such an ideal image of the contrapuntal world, she already argues with another music-literary concept "quartets" in Chapter 3 that Eliot's and Nabokov's experimental works to juxtapose four different fragments seem to succeed in evoking spatial images in the readers, and that this spatiality makes them "sense both the reality of the painfully fragmented condition and the possibility of re-unification far more vividly" (125).

To begin with, as an interpretative work on counterpoint points out, there is not really a practical difference between harmony and counterpoint but rather a pedagogical or theoretical distinction between them. "Almost all music is to some degree contrapuntal," said Thomas Benjamin in his *The Craft of Tonal Counterpoint*:

> The distinction usually made between harmony (the chordal or vertical aspect) and counterpoint (the linear aspect, the ways in which independent voices interrelate) is a pedagogical convention not supported by actual musical practice. In most polyphonic music, one can say only that there are both horizontal and vertical controls present (as well as many other kinds of controlling elements). Thus, we will concern ourselves in this book [*The Craft of Tonal Counterpoint*] with both chord and line, and with how they influence each other. (Benjamin xix)

Actually, what Magome seems to succeed in chronicling all in her book is how these binary notions (counterpoint/harmony or fragmentation/unification) have influenced each other through American writers' fictional works and been conceptualized in the history of American modern and postmodern musico-literary discourses. At this point, Magome's third key concept "player piano" plays an important role in explaining how the industrialization and mass commercialization of music culture in the 20th century, in which there was a creative tension between harmony and counterpoint, has urged writers to more secularly criticize their musico-literary world by themselves.

A player piano does an automated musical performance by means of a rotating perforated roll signaling the notes to be played. Accordingly, a player piano symbolizes the de-humanization of music culture by highlighting a cybernetic relationship between human and machine. While there are those who feel the automation of the musical instrument might have narrowed the range of its expression of feeling, some American writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and William Gaddis, who self-consciously live in the "age of mechanical reproduction," have suggested that the idea of cybernetics inspired by the appearance of the automated musical device as well as Norbert Wiener's studies provides a practical way of depicting their contemporary world. Magome argues that Gaddis's repeated use of the sound of "hammering" in *The Recognition* might reveal "the system of contemporary American capitalism and the unique, cybernetic role of the symbolic player piano in American history" (135), mainly because the repeat of "hammering" seems to be a faint but effective interaction between the player piano and the Wagnerian directorial technique of "leitmotif," which was one of the greatest contributions to the industrialization and mass commercialization of Wagnerian music drama at the end of 19th century America.

Although Magome surveys a large enough number of postmodern novels from Vonnegut's *Player Piano* through Greg Bear's science-fiction and Richard Powers' *Gold Bug Variations* whose imagination "regards the player piano as a symbol of an elaborate mechanism and relates it to similar coding systems in other disciplinary fields [...] such as [...] music, genetics, cybernetics and computer science" (214), if Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* were also to be listed there, it might provide much more depth to her analysis of the interdisciplinary mixture evident in the postmodernists' imagination. This is not just because Pynchon, who also creates an amazing fusion of cybernetics and Wagnerian musical dramaturgy, remains one of the greatest contributors to the musico-literary, socio-aesthetic

discourse after World War II. Rather it is primarily because Pynchon has demonstrated a strong commitment to the so-called "two cultures," which P.C. Snow primarily argued by referring to the split of our educational and intellectual lives between the humanities and the sciences. Thus, the inclusion of Pynchon could well play an indispensable role in reviewing how musico-literary discourse meets scientific expertise including cybernetics, biogenetics, and computer science in the postmodernists' texts.

Nevertheless, even if they just happened to share the same cognomen, Magome's choice of two Goulds, Glen Gould the pianist and Stephen Jay Gould the paleontologist, offers the readers another way of understanding the two cultures in the late of the 20th century. What Magome calls "musico-genetic narratives" becomes easily accepted by not only literary critics but also the general readers of postmodern novels, partly because these narratives are supported by the great popularity of Glen Gould's contrapuntal performance and the popular conception of the double-helix structure of DNA caused by much-read scientific bestsellers. Though it may have been more effective if Magome had referred to Richard Dawkins rather than Stephen Gould in this context, because of her persuasive argument on Richard Powers' *Gold Bug Variations*, the last chapter of her book becomes the most thrilling one, where Magome's criticism allows us to witness the moment in which the influence of music from Bach's *The Goldberg Variations* through Glen Gould's playing of the fugue becomes visualized as the double-helix structure of DNA, that is, as the biogenetic image of counterpoint.

This is how Kiyoko Magome "secularly" reads and criticizes the American musico-literary discourse since 1890 in *The Influence of Music*. Her attempts to analyze the socio-aesthetical matrix not only by following the way of cultural studies but also by honestly applying musical methodology provides today's literary studies with a forward-looking critical perspective that will also encourage future creative writers in producing their own musico-literary discourse.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Thomas. *The Craft of Tonal Counterpoint*. New York: Routledge, 2003
Frisch, Walter, ed. *Schoenberg and his World*. West Sussex: Princeton UP, 1999.
Neff, Severine. "Schoenberg and Theorist: Three forms of Presentation." Frisch 55-84.
Stephen, Rudolf. "Schoenberg and Bach." Trans. Walter Frisch. Frisch 126-40.