
This monograph offers both information and reading pleasure to a broad array of potential readers as it explores the interconnections among—in that order—time, human beings, and music. Burrows presents his wide-ranging knowledge with a light touch and enough engaging quirkiness to charm readers who may not share either his enthusiasm for biological systems theory or his investment in an evolutionary view of human endeavors. The end result combines philosophy and science, hard facts and humor, blending patiently close scrutiny of details (of music and of human behavior) with observations of cosmic-universal scope.

Burrows’ main thrust may be summed up in the following theses:

- Everything starts with movement; the purpose of life is to “keep going.”
- All action proceeds from disequilibrium, and represents the impulse to establish a (necessarily temporary) equilibrium.
- All life is a combination of “going and stabilizing.”
- Music models the way we manage time—and ultimately, our lives.

Burrows injects a substantial, but undaunting dose of music *theory*—on sound, pitch, phrasing, and rhythm—into what even without this careful and often microscopic attention to ‘technical’ details would not be a standard treatise in the *aesthetics* of music, given the investment of the text in “exploring connections with, besides music theory, the study of time, cognitive science, neurobiology, psychology, ethnography and ethnomusicology, even cosmology” (vii).

Three main sections—“The Embodied Now,” “From Now to Time,” and “Music and the Warm Body” are preceded, after an introduction, by a “Prelude” that focuses on a single tone, and this prelude forms the basis for much of what Burrows subsequently unfolds. Both the text and the tone start with an expectation: “A cellist sits down to play. I make room in my mind for a tone, a smooth, unitary presence that I will derive from what the cellist is about to do—the silence preceding the tone is already brimming over with its absence” (xi). The F sharp that the cellist plays “defines a unique shared interface between all of the past and all of the future”: it inserts and defines a now within the “featureless, unlocalized level of presence” that “forms no part of time” and is “all potential for happening” (xi).

The description goes on to include acoustics, psychoacoustics, and details on the role of the cellist and the listener, arriving at an emphasis on how
we “build continuity out of flux” in a manner that is also “responsible for the coherence of [our] own presence as a living being” (xv). Music, for Burrows, has a distinct bearing on this ability of ours: “Whether on the level of making a tone out of vibrations, or on the level of making a piece of music, a single sustained presence, out of a flow of tones and silences, music models the way we make ourselves up as we go along out of the discontinuities of feeding and breathing, sleeping and waking, of brain-cell firings and the heartbeat, all adding up to the macro-pulsation that is a life” (xv).

Part I is largely organized around the dynamic of flux and stability, discussed not in the abstract, but with steady attention paid to the embodiment of the human brain and cognition as well as of the now. Living bodies, Burrows asserts, are in “chronic disequilibrium” as “the small ‘here’ of an organism confronts a very much larger ‘there’”: “The present situation is a collapse waiting to happen, and nows are acts directed at shoring up the system and preventing it from tipping into dissolution” (7). Burrows here very much presents one’s surroundings as a system of “affordances” that both call for and permit specific actions. (The term “affordances” makes an occasional appearance in the book, e.g., p. 12, p. 66, albeit without explicit reference to James J. Gibson, who coined it as part of his model of “ecological” perception.) Burrows develops this broader view of the now as “balancing point [..] between going and stabilizing” (10–11), beginning with the way that dichotomy plays out in the initial scene with the cellist, and then proceeds to find analogous dualities: in both speech and writing but also in the Kantian Anschauungsformen a priori of time and space, in painting and sculpture, in the very organization of our brain (12–15). Indeed he offers plenty of parallel pairs to bear out his assertion that humans are “formatted for twoness” (viii): change and continuity, freedom and constraint, chaos and order, being and becoming, flow and arrest, centrifugal and centripetal force (12, 33, 71, passim). (Readers well versed—or interested—in psychoanalytic thought might add to Burrows’ findings Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”) Burrows’ keen sense of oppositions and binaries—as well as the complementarity and often dialectical dynamic between the two poles or terms—is evident throughout, expressed often in surprising images: “Shovel rubble into a wheelbarrow and give it a shake, and particles settle into an arrangement that reconciles their shapes with the pull of gravity. Living is a dynamical version of this scenario, with the ‘settling into an arrangement’ component an ongoing process” (14). More than occasionally, in fact, descriptions have a Zeno-like quality, such as when Burrows defines the role of individual notes in a piece of music in terms of