CHAPTER 38

MEANING AND SCEPTICISM

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Introduction

I here revisit the classic question:

> (Expression) *Does* absolute music—music unaccompanied by text or programme—*express* or *represent* anything extra-musical?[1]

By "absolute music" I mean purely instrumental music in the Western tradition, prominent examples of which include Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto in G major, J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, or the string quartets of Béla Bartók. These pieces not only lack texts; they also lack programmes, or expressively suggestive titles, such as *La Mer*. By "extra-musical" I mean such things as human emotions, for instance, anger, or gestures expressive thereof; physical objects like a mountain, or a building. These things, in not being music, are "extra-musical."[2]

All kinds of extra-musical things have been said to be expressed or represented by music: the sea, the wind, a sunken cathedral; but also, sadness, yearning, joy; gratitude, puzzlement; immensity, heroic action, fate, the sacred. I shall concentrate mostly on human emotions and human gestures in my examples. And, therefore, on *expression* rather than *representation*. I will call those who answer "yes" to my question "Expressivists" and those who answer "no," "Sceptics."

Notice also that my question is: *Does* absolute music express something extra-musical? And not: *Must* it do so?

Nick Zangwill (2004, 29), a contemporary Sceptic concerning music's expressive capacity, says: "it is not essential to music to *possess* emotion, *arouse* emotion, *express*

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emotion, or *represent* emotion. Music, in itself, has nothing to do with emotion." We can agree with Zangwill that it is not *essential* to anything we properly regard as absolute music that it expresses something extra-musical. Bach's *Art of Fugue* is an abstract work that, for the most part, neither expresses nor represents anything in the sense intended here (on which more below). The question is whether some absolute music *does* express emotion or other mental states. Of course, Zangwill intends to deny this claim as well, and not just the essentialist claim.

Someone may have the following thought: All music is *situated* in a particular historical context: it was composed at a specific point in time, under particular social conditions, and it will reflect aspects of those conditions of its production whether it likes it or not. In that sense, could not all music be said to express something? I agree that all music is historically and culturally situated. However, reflecting the conditions of music's production is not expression in the sense that is in question here. The question is whether music expresses things in the way in which humans express their inner states when they talk, behave, or wear a particular expression on their face.

Eduard Hanslick

One of the most important and influential originators of scepticism about extra-musical meaning was the great nineteenth-century music critic, Eduard Hanslick. In his wonderfully clearly written *On the Beautiful in Music* (*Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*), first published in 1854 and still in print today after numerous editions, Hanslick argued that when someone performs a passage of music, they produce tones that stand in audible relations to one another, but those tones do not express or represent anything. Extra-musical states of mind, such as emotions, are no part of their content. (Hence the title of his second chapter: "The Representation of Feeling is not the Content of Music.") The object of musical perception is, as he put it, "tönend bewegte Formen" (sonorous forms in motion[3]) and those do not present us with such extra-musical meanings as emotions or thoughts. If they are put together in the right way, they will result in an object of beauty, but they can aspire to no more than that. Hanslick's answer, then, to the question with which we started this essay was a resounding "No!"

When Hanslick discussed this question of extra-musical meaning, he was writing in a particular historical setting in which it had become a commonplace, at least in certain prominent circles, to make quite extravagant claims about music's ability to express not only complex emotions, but also complex philosophical thoughts; and not just to express them, but also to demonstrate their truth. In the hands of great masters like Beethoven, Wagner, and Liszt, it was said, music could aspire not merely to producing beautiful sounds, but to expressing *truths* of a sort that may not be available in any merely discursive idiom. Certain deep truths about the world were thought to be ineffable and the only way to access them was through music and the other arts.

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Arthur Schopenhauer, who was a powerful influence on Wagner and many other musicians, thought that only music could give you access to the *Ding an sich*, reality as it is in itself:

> Music is thus by no means like the other arts, the copy of the Ideas, but the *copy of the will itself*, . . . This is why the effect of music is much more powerful and penetrating than that of the other arts, for they speak only of shadows, but it speaks of the thing itself. (Schopenhauer 1969, 257)

In his essay on Beethoven, which was partly meant as a rebuttal to Hanslick's book, Wagner (1896) denigrated mere beauty as an aesthetic goal and argued that the highest aspiration for music was to acquaint us with the "musically sublime."[4] In the words of Günter Zöller, for Wagner the musically sublime "originates with the nightmarish realization of the nullity of all individual existence and [moves] from there to the articulation of the sinister vision of the world so disclosed by musical means" (Zöller 2013, 651).

This artistic/intellectual movement, which has come to be called (see Gardner 2007) "philosophical aestheticism," continues to the present day, its greatest contemporary exponent being the late Roger Scruton. Speaking of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, Scruton says this: "The *Ring* cycle was to symbolize and reveal the deep spiritual truths that were once the property of religion but which art alone, [Wagner] believed, can now communicate" (Scruton 2016, 55). Scruton makes it clear that he thinks that Wagner not only aimed at philosophical aestheticism, but that he succeeded. Writing of Act 1, scene 1 of *Die Walküre*, he says of Siegmund and Sieglinde:

> Drawing on a new theme, that of the Volsungs' sorrow . . . the music weaves a web of love and distress around them; the audience, observing this, is entirely on their side. So necessary and right has Wagner made this love that the subsequent revelation that they are brother and sister will matter not a jot. *If there is such a thing as an aesthetic refutation of a moral belief, this is it*. (Scruton 2016, 76; my italics)

But this type of philosophical aestheticism is way overblown. Act 1, scene 1 of *Die Walküre* may indeed provoke a laudable sympathy in us and lead us to a moral insight that we did not previously have. But it is absurd to think that it could have established it on its own, without any ratification from reason. As Plato, Tolstoy, and Mann have pointed out, whether what the music is leading us to think *is* a valid insight, rather than a misleading moral perception, is something that must be settled by our capacity for moral thought, not by art itself. Music can stir us to falsehood just as easily as it can stir us to truth, as the Ring cycle itself shows, when Wagner makes the music thrill us to the hatred that Siegfried feels for Mime. At the end of the day, then, whether music is pointing us towards truth or falsehood is to be settled by reason, not by art.

Against the backdrop of these sorts of extravagant claims about music's power not merely to express, but even to prove, deep philosophical truths, Hanslick's book represented a sobering backlash. As Richard Taruskin points out: "It is difficult today

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to appreciate the polemical force of [Hanslick's] title; but at the time, for a German critic to insist on beauty looked to many like virtual treason" (Taruskin 2005, 441). In a way, Taruskin understates the radicalness of Hanslick's thesis. For Hanslick didn't just insist on beauty as *a* legitimate aesthetic goal for music to have among others; he insisted that it was the *sole* legitimate aesthetic goal that music could have. And that was a truly radical idea. It is one thing to refuse to denigrate beauty as an aesthetic goal in the production of musical art; it's quite another to elevate it to the sole legitimate aim of musical art. How could we account for the value we attach to much Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, or Schoenberg if beauty were our *sole* conception of the aesthetic value of music?

Forget demonstrating deep philosophical truths, says Hanslick. Music can't even express them, let alone demonstrate them. Indeed, it can't even express, represent, or be about anything other than itself. Maybe partly because he was reacting against such an extreme position, Hanslick's scepticism became, and remains, hugely influential, especially among musicologists and composers (on Hanslick's influence, see Bonds 2014). I suspect it played a role in the rise of the kind of academic, mathematically-driven composition characteristic of, say, the work of Milton Babbitt, who famously wrote an article entitled—though the title was supplied by the editors of the magazine in which it appeared—"Who Cares if You Listen?" (Babbitt 1958).

We can see evidence of Hanslick's influence in the remarks that Leonard Bernstein makes at the very beginning of his Young People's Concert series:

> Music is never about anything. Music just is. Music is notes, beautiful notes and sounds put together in such a way that we get pleasure out of listening to them, and that's all there is to it.…It's a funny thing about this meaning business—in music, anyway. When you say "What does it mean?," what you're really saying is "What is it trying to tell me?," or "What ideas does it make me have?" Just like words; when you hear words, you get ideas from them. If I say to you "Ow, I burned my finger!," then immediately you get an idea from what I said or some ideas. You get the idea that I burned my finger, that it hurts, that I might not be able to play the piano any more, or that I have a loud ugly voice when I scream, lots of different ideas like that. That's words. But if I play notes, some notes on the piano, like this…the notes don't tell you any ideas; these notes aren't about burning your finger, or sputniks, or lampshades, or rockets, or anything.
>
> Well, what ARE they about? They're about music. For instance, take this piece by Chopin [Nocturne in F sharp Major, Op. 15 No. 2]. Beautiful, isn't it? But what's it about? Nothing. Or take this Beethoven Sonata [No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 "Waldstein"]. Or take some piece of boogie-woogie. It's not about anything either. None of them are about anything, but they're all enjoyable to listen to. Why should they be enjoyable to listen to? I don't know; it's a part of human nature to like to listen to music. (Bernstein 1958)

And here is Igor Stravinsky in his autobiography:[5]

> I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, or psychological mood, a phenomenon

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> of nature, etc. . . . *Expression* has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence. (Stravinsky 1998, 53)

Among philosophers of music, especially of the analytic variety (of whom there aren't many), Hanslick's scepticism has tended to be less popular, with several prominent philosophers of music attempting to refute Hanslickian scepticism by presenting positive theories of musical expressiveness (see Davies 1994; Budd 1995; Scruton 1997; Robinson 2005; Levinson 2006), although even among philosophers, there are several notable proponents of Hanslick's point of view, including Kivy (2001) and Zangwill (2004).

A hundred and fifty years after Hanslick first opened up the question, the debate still rages. But why does it matter? Why should we *care* whether music can or cannot express extra-musical meanings in the way in which a face, action, or utterance might? Why should we care whether it is Hanslick or Wagner[6] that's right about music's expressive capacity?

Meaning, Emotion, and Value

Even those of us who are not in the market for overblown claims of philosophical aestheticism can give three types of reason for the importance of the question. I will list them briefly and then discuss them at greater length.

1. (**Phenomenology**) *Hearing* music *as* expressing emotions seems to be a hugely important part of the ordinary phenomenology of listening. If the Sceptics are right, this phenomenology would be totally illusory.
2. (**Arousal**) We don't just *perceive* music as expressing emotions; we are *moved to emotion* by the content of a piece of music. Music *arouses* emotion in us.
3. (**Value**) We regard music's aesthetic *value* as bound up with its ability to express things.

Let me elaborate on each of these reasons.

First, *Phenomenology*. Competent listeners report that they hear music as expressing various extra-musical meanings, most especially emotions. For example, most say that they hear the *Tristan* Prelude as expressing yearning. Scruton says that he hears the opening bars of the Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto as expressing a "tranquil gratitude" (Scruton 1997, 141). Many hear the second movement of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony as sombre and anguished. The opening bars of the slow movement of Mozart's Thirty-Ninth Symphony are said to express a serene state of mind. And so on. (Some prefer to talk of hearing the yearning or the sombreness *in* the music. I won't worry about the difference between these locutions for present purposes.)

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It's important for my purposes that we not confuse the thesis of Phenomenology with Expressivism. Hanslick himself was very careful with the distinction. He did not deny that people often hear music as expressing emotion. That's a thesis about musical *perception*. What he denied is that the music was expressing the emotion. That's a thesis about music's *expressive capacity*. Many writers have written as though Hanslick is refuted once we observe that we do hear things as expressed in music. But that's to misconceive his point.

Another relevant aspect of the phenomenology of listening to music is that we hear some music as *fitting* some situations better than others. This can assume many different forms depending on whether the context is that of opera, song, or film. Music can seem to amplify the message of the words being spoken or sung. Music seems to be able to comment on a scene, as a Greek chorus does; it can produce a particular mood or signal danger. And so on. But whichever one of these things it is doing, it's not easy to see how music could do it without having an expressive capacity of its own that it brings to bear. So, it is clear that the phenomenology of music perception often involves *hearing it as* expressing meanings. However, unless music *does* express these things which we say we hear in it, these perceptions of ours would have to be deemed illusory—our perception of music would involve a systematic error. And I suppose it would be nice if this were not so.

Second, *Arousal*. Many listeners claim that we are moved to emotion by the *content* of music, and that our being so moved is *appropriate*. This, too, is not something Hanslick denied, although he is sometimes read as having done so.

It's worth pausing a second on this word "moved." It has at least two importantly different meanings. In the first, it denotes a specific distinctive emotion that is not identical to the garden variety emotions, such as being sad, angry, or resentful. Rather, one is just *moved*. It is a very interesting question, one that has only recently been receiving some attention, what this distinctive emotion of being moved is, and when and why it occurs. If I were to venture a hypothesis now, it would be that we are often moved by some experience of the *sublime*, in something like Kant's sense. We are moved when we experience something whose possibility our mind can't quite fully comprehend, but which is vividly being presented to us in a direct experience.

Experiences in which we are moved in this distinctive sense are often experiences of a positive nature—the impossible poignancy of the string playing in a particular performance of the Good Friday music in *Parsifal,* for example. But they needn't be. We can be moved by experiences that are disturbing, even terrifying: the unspeakable ferocity of a hurricane viewed from the safety of a dwelling, the incomprehensible vastness of the universe as seen by the early astronauts staring out of their portholes in space, the massive coordinated intensity of certain political rallies. I think it is undeniable that we are often moved in the distinctive sense by our experience of music. This may, but need not, have anything to do with music's ability to *express*, since it may, but need not, have anything to do with music's *content*.

The phenomenon that is somewhat more puzzling, but which many listeners report as well, is that they are moved to specific garden variety emotions by the content of a piece of music. One feels sombre after a powerful performance of the slow movement of

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the "Eroica", or exhilarated by a Rossini overture brought off with subtlety and panache. The emphasis on the fact that we are moved by the *content* is important in that it is meant to exclude two alternative possible scenarios: one where we are moved by the *circumstances* in which the music is played, for example, at a memorial for the victims of a tragedy; and one where we are moved by an emotional *association* that we might have between a piece of music and a memory, what has been labelled the "that's our song" phenomenon.

If we agree that we are often appropriately moved to real emotions by the *content* of a piece of music, it would seem as if that can only be if the music is *telling* us things. If the perceptual object of musical experience were purely formal, and does not present us with such extra-musical meanings as emotions or thoughts, we might get a *causal explanation* of how particular tones, in particular combinations, tend to arouse particular emotions in us, in much the way in which we might get a causal explanation of how drinking wine can cause us to get intoxicated. But what we would not get is any explanation of why it would be *appropriate* for us to be moved by the content of a piece of music.

If we are to vindicate the range of emotional responses that we have to absolute music we need to be able to see absolute music as *telling us things*, in much the way in which we see characters in opera or drama as telling us things. In short, we need to be able to assimilate the problem of absolute music to the problem of "feeling for fictions." That is not to deny that there is a genuine problem of explaining the appropriateness of our feeling for fictions. But everyone is agreed that there must be a solution to that problem. As Peter Kivy says:

> The question I am raising is how we are emotionally aroused by what the nineteenth century called absolute music . . . It is important to remember this because when the resources of language are added to the musical work, the terms of the argument are radically changed. I have no quarrel, for example, with someone who says that when he attends a performance of *La Traviata,* he experiences real and intense sorrow over the death of Violetta, . . . This is not to say that there is no philosophical problem in just how real emotions of sorrow and love can be aroused by the fates of fictional characters . . . But the presence of language, with all its potential for conveying concepts, and the presence of fully delineated characters such as Violetta and Alfredo . . . provide materials for arousal of the garden-variety emotions far exceeding anything that can reasonably be postulated in absolute music. And that is why absolute music poses a problem far beyond that of opera, oratorio, song and programme music to those who wish to claim that it arouses the garden-variety emotions, . . . (Kivy 2001, 101–102)

It makes sense to be moved by opera, Kivy tells us, because characters in opera can tell us sad things. The problem for absolute music, he says, is that, lacking language, title, or text, it can't tell us anything; a fortiori, it can't tell us anything sad, happy, or whatever. Hence, it cannot make sense to be moved by absolute music. Most people are inclined to flip this reasoning around: since it so obviously does make sense to respond to music with emotion, there must be a sense in which music *is* capable of telling us things, the question being *how*.

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Third, *Value*. Let us grant, for the moment, that Hanslick was right about musical content, that all that music really presents us with is sonorous forms in motion and does not present us with such extra-musical meanings as emotions or thoughts. Once you've accepted this sort of formalist account of musical *content*, a certain formalist conception of musical *value* seems to follow. For what kinds of valuable experience can you get from purely formal properties?

Hanslick thought that the most you could get is *beauty*. Admittedly, beauty is no small thing; and music has produced us with examples of beauty that are both extraordinary and extraordinarily varied. However, Hanslick clearly *underestimated* the extent to which music could aspire to a large number of *other* aesthetic values, beyond beauty, that are consistent with his formalist conception of musical content. It is consistent with formalism, for example, that one might see value in exploring new *sonorities*, as in the music of Pierre Boulez and Helmut Lachenmann; or in experimenting with *rhythm*, as in the music of Steve Reich; or with scale or texture, as in the music of Anton Webern; or with complexity, rhythm, texture, and sonority, as in the music of György Ligeti. And so forth.

But even if we expand in this way the range of aesthetic values that a purely formal conception of musical content could aspire to, one might still sympathize with Wagner's claim that music can not only aspire to more, but has actually delivered more. For can we really explain the value we place on the late quartets of Beethoven, or on the symphonies of Mahler, solely in terms of qualities such as these? Perhaps some proponents of philosophical aestheticism went too far in the extravagant claims they made about what music could aspire to teach us. But a mere commitment to Expressivism is a much more moderate view, and does seem to underlie these three important aspects—Phenomenology, Arousal, and Value—of our relation to music. Should we say, then, that Hanslick *overreacted* to Wagnerian extravagance, leaving us with a conception of musical content that is too impoverished to make sense of how it appears to us, how it affects us, and of why we value it? Or is Hanslick's view ultimately correct? And, if it is, what should we do with the way we normally conceive of musical experience?

Can We Refute Hanslickian Scepticism?

Given all the reasons that we intuitively seem to have for believing in at least a modest version of Expressivism, what drives some theorists to deny it? One major source for scepticism derives simply from the theoretical difficulty in explaining, in a satisfying way, how music could be expressive. There are several issues here.

To begin with, humans can express emotions because they *have* emotions to express. But music is not an agent. So, what does it mean to say that music expresses emotions? It won't do to say that the music is expressing the emotions of either the composer (presumably when he wrote it) or the performer (presumably at the time of performance) because there need be no correlation at all between what the music expresses and what either of those individuals were feeling, at those times or any others.

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There are two interesting responses to this worry. The first is that certain pieces of music can be heard to contain a *persona* (sometimes more than one, as we shall see), a bare subject, and the emotion that is heard is the emotion of this imagined persona.[7] The second response is that we should think of expression in music not in the *transitive* sense—where expression is expression of something—but in the *intransitive* sense in which a face can sometimes wear an expression, even if the expression that it wears is not reflective of its underlying emotion. Think of the way in which a St Bernard can look sad, even though it is not sad. It wears a sad expression, but this does not express an underlying mental state. Whichever one of these lines we take—and one may be appropriate in one context and the other in another—there is a deep theoretical puzzle about how mere sounds or tones could express *anything*, whether in the transitive or intransitive senses.

Well (one might say), spoken language is also just sounds, in some sense. How does it manage to express so much, and why couldn't music do it in the same way? But there are two crucial disanalogies between language and music. First, language has a *vocabulary*—words with stable and repeatable significance. Second, it has a *compositional structure*—a set of rules that determine the meaning of a complex phrase or sentence on the basis of the meaning of its parts and of how they are put together. It is because language has these structural features that speakers competent in a language are able to understand a potential infinity of sentences of that language on a finite basis. If I were to say to you "Beethoven inscribed his symphonies on watermelon rinds" you would know what I meant, even though it is unlikely that you had ever come across that sentence before, because you know what the parts mean and what putting them together in this way results in.

Although some theorists—for example, Deryck Cooke (1989) in *The Language of Music*—have attempted to argue that music is analogous to language in these respects, that effort is widely seen as a failure. For music does not have a vocabulary or a compositional semantics.

Furthermore, the relation between word and meaning in language is *conventional*. Exactly how that relation gets set up is a complex business studied by philosophers of language, linguists, and others. But the relation between musical elements and what they mean is, for the most part, not founded on convention. There are, of course, some such conventional associations—a short and lively sounding of trumpets (a fanfare) to announce something important. A march-like rhythm with, well, a march or a procession. And so on. But these are the rare cases. In general, to the extent to which music is able to express things, it has to be through some sort of *natural* relation to that which it expresses. What sort of natural relation could this be?

There have been many attempts to answer this question of which probably the most promising and influential has been the *Resemblance* theory, a view that has been very ably developed by Malcolm Budd (1995) and Stephen Davies (1994), among others. We may state it roughly like this:

> A passage P is expressive, in context, of emotion E just in case P sounds the way a person would *sound* who was expressing E vocally; or sounds the way a person would *look* who was expressing E gesturally, etc.

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This kind of account leans, of course, on the idea that persons have characteristic ways of expressing their inner states. For example, there are typical—and typically natural—ways that sad people look, typical ways that they sound, and so forth. Thus, the reason the persona imagined in the music is said to be expressing something sad is that the music sounds the way a person would sound, (or the way a person would look), if that person were expressing real sadness. I used to think that some version of the Resemblance theory could be made to work. I am now convinced, though, that it collapses into another view, what Jerrold Levinson (2006) has called the Ready-Hearability view.

Let's go back to one of our examples of the attribution of expression, say, Scruton's view that the opening bars of the Beethoven G major Concerto express a tranquil gratitude. Does this resemble the typical way in which someone expresses a tranquil gratitude? How does someone do that? She might softly say "thank you" while slightly lowering her head. In what way do these opening bars resemble that? We might imagine the gratitude expressed gesturally rather than aurally, hands clasped in prayer mode, head bowed slightly. But then we'd have to make sense of the *cross-modal* comparisons that are called for: how does a sound resemble a look? In any case, how do the opening bars of the Beethoven G major sound the way a pair of hands in prayer mode look? Finally, even if we do think that there is *some* sense in which there is a resemblance between the passage and a tranquil gratitude, won't we have to concede that the passage equally resembles many other states of mind, or even non-mental states, that have nothing to do with gratitude?

It's a commonplace of philosophy, one Nelson Goodman was particularly fond of, that everything resembles everything else to some degree. But as Levinson (2006) has persuasively argued, the degree of resemblance required for passage P to express emotion E cannot be specified in terms of some fixable degree of resemblance between the two. It can only be specified as whatever resemblance is sufficient to induce appropriate listeners to hear the music as expressing E. This has led Levinson to say that the best we can do by way of providing a theory of expression is something along the following lines:

> (**Expression as Ready-Hearability**) P is expressive of E iff P, in context, is readily heard, by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E.

I think that something along these lines probably *is* the best we can do by way of a theory of musical expressiveness, though it leaves many other issues about how musical expressiveness works unaddressed. Issues such as what is it for a listener to be experienced in the genre, or what is it for such a listener to readily hear P as expressing E. But let's ignore these for now.

The problem for the Expressivist is that, in whatever way we resolve those questions, we will run smack into a very simple observation of Hanslick's that makes it difficult to see how we could attribute some objective, determinate set of expressive properties to a passage of music. The observation is that, even as we might all agree that a particular passage of music is in a *particular emotional neighbourhood*, there is simply too much *subjective variability* in what competent listeners, experienced in the genre, will hear the music to express. Here is how Hanslick put it:

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> One person will say "love." Possibly. Another thinks "yearning." Perhaps. A third feels "piety." Nobody can refute any of them. And so it goes. Can we call it the representation of a specific feeling when nobody knows what feeling was actually represented? Concerning the beauty of the pieces of music, probably everyone will agree. Yet concerning the content of music, everyone differs. To represent, however, is to produce a clear and distinct content, to put before our eyes. How, then, can we designate something as what an art represents, when the very dubious and ambiguous elements of that art themselves are perpetually subject to debate? (Hanslick 1986, 14)

There is a tendency in the contemporary aesthetics literature to hold that there is something fundamentally wrong with being preoccupied with the question of which expressive attributions are *true* of a given passage of music. Scruton's argument to that effect goes something like this:

1. When I hear music, I am not hearing mere sound. Even when sound is understood not merely as a physical phenomenon—vibrations in the air—but as a "secondary object," a mental object that exists only when it is heard, it is not the intentional object of musical perception. ("Intentional" here does not mean something having to do with someone's intention: it means the thing that is the object of one's perception, that which is being perceived.)
2. The intentional object of musical perception is rather *tone*, where tone is characterized by such variables as pitch, rhythm, harmony, and melody.
3. As applied to sound, however, these concepts are *metaphorical*. Therefore, to describe music "we must have recourse to metaphor, not because music resides in an analogy with other things, but because the metaphor describes exactly *what* we hear, when we hear sounds as music." (Scruton 1997, 96)
4. The use of any metaphor cannot ultimately be explained.

According to Scruton, then, even the purely formal musical properties that Hanslick puts forward as the only thing that is real in musical perception cannot be thought of as literally true of anything. Hanslick emphasizes motion, for example—sonorous forms in motion. However, says Scruton, there is nothing, either out there or in one's own mind, that *moves* in the way that a melody does. A melody is *heard* as moving up or down, or as passed from one instrument to another, but these perceptions themselves are all *illusory*. The concept of a melody is itself not true of anything real. Sound sequences are heard as melodies, but there is nothing either in the outside world, or the inner world, that is a melody.

According to Scruton, then, even at the most basic level of the description of musical experience allowed by Hanslick, we need to have recourse to *metaphor*. Metaphor is what we hear when we hear music. So, there is no point in making invidious comparisons between expressive attributions and the attribution of purely formal properties: they are both at best metaphorical. We may as well employ whatever metaphors shed light on what we are hearing. And so, of course, music is expressive. It has expressive properties in exactly the same way in which it has formal properties, namely, metaphorically.

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This is an interesting argument. But even if it were sound, which I don't believe it is, it would not entail that there would no longer be a distinction between those descriptions of a passage of music that are undoubtedly "correct" and those that aren't. Just because *every* description, including the most formalist ones, we might give of a passage of music, is literally false in some philosophical sense, doesn't mean that some of them are not more *fitting* than others. Even if we are in the realm of metaphor, some metaphors are more *apt* than others. Relatedly, there might be a great deal less subjective variability in judgements about the aptness of certain metaphors (the formal ones) than there is in the application of others.

That Hanslick is clearly right about the great subjective variability of expressive characterizations of a given piece, as compared to its formal characterization, is shown by the fact that professional musicians may be in nearly total agreement on the latter while giving expressively highly divergent interpretations of it. Yet professional musicians are competent listeners, experienced in the genre, if anyone is.

Compare music to language in this regard. In language, too, we need to decide what belongs to the meaning of a sentence or word, and what is simply auxiliary information about it. And the way we think about that issue is not very far from where we have ended up with the Ready-Hearability view. In the philosophy of language, too, the notion of the meaning of a phrase is essentially tied to what a person competent with the language of which the phrase is a part would be expected to *understand* on hearing that thing.

For example, to use a dated philosophical chestnut: What belongs to the meaning of the English word "bachelor"? Well, anyone who understands the meaning of that word must know that bachelors are male unmarried persons of a marriageable age. If you fail to know any of those three things, you fail to understand the meaning of "bachelor." However, do you need in addition to know what the median income of bachelors is in order to understand the meaning of the word? No. Do you need to know that bachelors tend to have a certain sort of lifestyle? No. Do you need to know that there are more bachelors now in their forties than there used to be? No. Useful as it may be to know these further facts, they are not, strictly speaking, part of grasping the concept of a bachelor.[8] (For further discussion see Quine 1951; Boghossian 1996.) They are auxiliary information. So, the way the attribution of meaning works in language is that the meaning of something is that minimum which you have to grasp if you are to be credited with *understanding* it.

Now, as it turns out, for most words in a natural language, we have fairly firm intuitions about what is and is not needed for someone to understand that word. So, we can say determinately enough what is part of the meaning of the word and what is merely auxiliary information about it. Hanslick's acute point was that we don't have similarly firm intuitions about what you have to take a passage of music to express, if you are to be said to understand it. That's the point of the famous passage I quoted above.

Why there should be such a big difference in interpretative determinacy between natural language and music is a deep question that there is not space to go into here. Some of the reasons, having to do with language having units of meaning (words), and a compositional semantics, I have already alluded to above. Connectedly, language is used for

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the communication of information, so there has to be pretty widespread agreement about the conventions that establish its meanings, if it is to fulfil that function. Needless to say, music is not used for that purpose. But whatever the source of the difference, what is undoubtedly true is that we do have much firmer intuitions about the meanings of natural language sentences than we have about the meanings of passages of music, even when what is at question are very abstract and unspecific expressive attributions.

The Beethoven G Major Concerto and the Orpheus Legend

Let me illustrate the points I've been making with one of the pieces of the Classical-Romantic repertory that most vividly calls for expressive interpretation, the Andante con moto movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major. Almost since its inception this movement has been thought by some not only to be suffused with expression, but indeed to contain a detailed musical narrative of Orpheus's confrontation with the Furies as dramatized in C. W. Gluck's 1762 opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (see, for example, Jander 1985 and Cone 1985; for a comprehensive account of the movement, see Jander 2009).

When Orpheus seeks to enter the Underworld to retrieve his beloved Euridice, he is confronted by the Furies (the strings of the orchestra) who deny him entry with strident expressions of "No, No, No!" Orpheus (the piano) *responds* by trying to charm them with beautiful playing on his lyre, which here becomes a soothing, seductive passage suffused, inevitably, with his melancholy. Orchestra is not assuaged. It returns with yet another loud and strident refusal. Piano counters with yet another soothing, charming response. Through repeated such exchanges, along with a passage in which Piano's own emotions flare up (somewhat inexplicably on this reading), Piano succeeds in mollifying Orchestra. They end in hushed agreement and Orpheus is let through.

Consider a performance of this piece that, I believe, comes closest to rendering in musical terms the outlines of this narrative and expressive description: a February 2010 concert played by Mitsuko Uchida, accompanied by the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Simon Rattle.[9] The first thing to say about this is that *even* if we were to discover, contrary to the available evidence, that Beethoven really *had* intended his movement to represent this detailed Orpheus story in his music, it would *still* be incorrect to say that the *specifics* of the Orpheus legend are expressed in the music. It might enhance, or possibly even detract from, one's experience of the piece to know that detailed story. But the detailed story can't be said to be part of the *content* of the music.

Why is that, you might ask? Surely, if Beethoven had *intended* the music to represent Orpheus's encounter with the Furies, why wouldn't that be part of the content of the music? It can't be part of the *content* of the music because no competent listener, experienced in the genre, could be expected to know that it was about *Orpheus* and the *Furies*

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just by understanding the music. The musical materials do not contain names, nor the ability to refer to a particular narrative as background, nor to any other aspects of the specifics of the Orpheus legend.

If we apply the Ready-Hearability constraint, as I think we should, what could we say remains from the fulsome description I gave above? In a sense, virtually every aspect of that description becomes controversial. In Uchida's hands, the impression that there is an interplay here between two distinct *personas*, one represented by unison strings, and the other by the piano, is very vivid. But that there are personas involved expressing themselves is nowhere as vivid in other fine performances of this movement, for example in the one by Walter Gieseking, accompanied by Karl Böhm's Saxon State Orchestra in 1939.[10]

Although it might be said that all concertos feature some sort of interplay between the solo instrument and the orchestra, it is not in any way automatic for each of those forces to assume a definite *reidentifiable* personality at each point in the movement, as they do in Uchida's performance. The suggestion that there are distinct reidentifiable personas here has a formal basis. As Joseph Kerman (1992) points out in his famous essay on this concerto, in the Classical-Romantic concerto repertory, most of the encounters between solo instrument and the orchestra deploy the *same* musical material, not utterly different material as here, emphasizing the difference between them. Even so, the reading is not forced.

Kerman also argues that these two personas are clearly engaged in some sort of *dialogue*. When Piano enters, it is *responding* to Orchestra: it is not just doing something of its own, unaware of the presence of Orchestra or of what it has just said. This phenomenology, of one musical persona *responding* to what another has just said, is a very important aspect of much classical music; but its presence is not guaranteed simply because one instrument plays after another. In Beethoven's Cello and Piano Sonata No. 2 in G minor, for example, the two instruments are initially portrayed as not having much awareness of one another, their utterances heard as quasi-independent musings; gradually, the interplay between them develops into something more of a dialogue.

Even if we thought that two personas, and some sort of dialogue between them, are non-negotiable elements of any proper understanding of this movement, the other elements would certainly count as controversial by the standards of ready hearability. For one thing, Bohm's orchestra is just not that strident or angry; it's actually somewhat lyrical and laid-back. One thinks of a bunch of sailors lazily singing a ditty in unison. It doesn't need mollifying or soothing. Of course, if you listen to any performance of this movement with the Orpheus legend in mind, it will be easy to project its elements on to the performance, even when they are not there, just as you can suddenly recognize the note of cigar box in a wine when someone so describes it to you. But projection it will be.

We should thus distinguish between two kinds of indeterminacy. The first is that it can be *indeterminate* which determinate emotion is being expressed. The other is that it can be determinate which emotion is being expressed, but that that emotion is *itself* indeterminate. I believe that both kinds of indeterminacy are at work in music.

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Where Have We Ended Up?

Who, then, is right in this endless debate?

I want to say: Neither and Both.

If we think of the ability to express meaning in a way that is even minimally disciplined, I'm afraid we have to agree with Hanslick that there are *very few* determinately correct ascriptions of determinate meaning to passages of music. The music may constrain us to a particular emotional neighbourhood—we can't hear the opening bars of the Beethoven G major as a raucous carnival—but it doesn't present us with the determinate expression of a determinate emotion—tranquil gratitude—to which we can imagine no admissible alternatives. To the extent to which there is meaning expressed in music it is often in this way doubly indeterminate. And to the extent to which that is true, Expressivism is unable to ground the three theses it was called upon to support: Phenomenology, Arousal, and Value.

On the other hand, the Formalists are wrong in thinking that we can relate to music in a way that is purely formal, merely appreciating in it the types of aesthetic value—beauty, sonority, rhythm, and the others we listed above—that can be grounded in purely formal properties. We cannot explain the value we attach to many pieces of music without alluding to the emotions and other meanings that we hear them as expressing, however illusory we may sometimes feel those perceptions are.

This ineluctable meaning-seeking on our part may be especially strong in our experience of music, but it is probably grounded in some much more general feature of the human mind. As Roger Caldwell (2016) points out, "when Lewis Carroll tells us that ''Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe' ("Jabberwocky," 1871), we cannot help but think that toves are some kind of (probably unpleasant) animal and that "gyre" and "gimble" describe their movements." Our minds assign meaning, even where we *know* that none exists.

How, then, are we to navigate between the Scylla of draconian Formalism and the Charybdis of an unconstrained Expressivism? The answer is that we have already done so in the case of *poetry*, especially modernist poetry. When we read the first stanza of T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (1930)

> Because I do not hope to turn again
> Because I do not hope
> Because I do not hope to turn
> Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
> I no longer strive to strive towards such things
> (Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
> Why should I mourn
> The vanished power of the usual reign?

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we are not, of course, at a complete loss as to what thoughts and emotions are being expressed. We know we are in the neighbourhood of despair and of loss. But we would scoff at the idea that there is a uniquely correct interpretation of what is being said. The poem invites us to assign it a meaning, and as we do so, one such meaning may seem to us, at any given moment, to make most sense of the work, to unlock its most powerful message, to do fullest justice to its rhythm and rhyme. However, it would be folly to think that no other interpretation could be correct or that any paraphrase of its meaning could substitute for the poem itself. Just so in the case of music, the formal properties may place us in a certain expressive neighbourhood, but in and of themselves they are largely incapable of determinately expressing determinate thoughts or emotions. Rather, we project determinate meanings onto them, in part because we are ineluctably predisposed to do so.

But what then happens to the three theses—Phenomenology, Arousal, and Value—on which I said a positive answer to the issue about Expression depended? In response, I am suggesting that we should endorse the following theses instead:

1. (**Phenomenology***) Hearing music as expressing emotions *is* a hugely important part of the ordinary phenomenology of listening, although it is, to a significant extent, illusory.
2. (**Arousal***) When we respond to music with real or quasi-real emotion, we are responding in part to imagined content; but this is no more inappropriate than it would be to respond emotionally to the imagined tragedy of Hamlet.
3. (**Value***) We should regard music's value as bound up not with its ability to express meaning, but with its undeniable ability to *elicit* meaning from us, allowing us to imaginatively acquaint ourselves with situations and feelings in a first-personal mode that we are unlikely to be able to access in any other way.

Shifting our conception to this way of thinking about music will not, I believe, detract from the importance we attach to it; and it may also have the salutary effect of liberating us from the oppressive thought that, in order to properly understand a piece of music, we must strive to unlock the one true expressive meaning that it contains.

Notes

1. For useful feedback I am grateful to the audience at the Conference on "Music and Essence" that was held in Vilnius, Lithuania in August 2016 and especially to its organizers, Ruta Staneviciute, Rima Povilioniene, and Nick Zangwill; to the Workshop on "Music and Meaning" that was held in Venice in October 2019, and especially to Ophelia Deroy, Christopher Peacocke, Barry Smith, and Andrew Huddlestone; and to Kirill Gerstein and participants in a session of his webinar series "Kirill Gerstein Invties," on May 13, 2020. For helpful comments on an earlier version I am also grateful to Tomás McAuley, Kit Fine, Jerrold Levinson, and an anonymous referee for Oxford University Press. Special thanks to William Fitzgerald for hugely enjoyable and illuminating conversations on music and the arts over many years.

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2. Richard Taruskin, at the conference in Vilnius at which an early version of this essay was presented, was much exercised by my use of the phrase "extra-musical meaning." He protested that we don't talk about "extra-painterly meaning", even when we are talking about paintings that depict things, so how could it be appropriate to talk about "extra-musical meaning"? However, in the case of painting, the phrase analogous to "extra-musical" would be not "extra-*painterly*," which refers to something beyond the *creator* of the work, but rather "extra-*paintly*," which refers to something beyond the medium of the work. And, of course, we do think that figurative paintings have extra-paintly meanings, since they depict things like houses, rivers, or fruit, that are not paint. (Thanks to Thomas Adès for this incisive observation.)
3. Often translated as "tonally moving forms," though see Bonds 2014, 147–148 for more on this notoriously difficult phrase.
4. Wagner's essay on Beethoven was written after Hanslick's book, but the views about music he is giving voice to in it were very much around before Hanslick. For an illuminating account of discourse about music in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Taruskin 2005, 411–442.
5. These are, of course, official pronouncements, declarations of one's official "philosophy of music." It's quite another question whether these musicians behaved in ways that conformed to their official views. If you look at a tape of Bernstein's rehearsals of the Mahler Symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic, you might be surprised that he made the remarks I quoted above.
6. The animus between these two was ferocious and it is widely assumed that the character of Sixtus Beckmesser, the pedantic and conservative defender of musical tradition, whose original name in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* was to be Veit Hanslich, is a parody of Hanslick.
7. The concept of a musical persona was, as far as I know, first introduced by Cone (1974) to capture the difference between the lyrical self of a song and the composer. The notion is extended in Levinson (2006) to purely instrumental music.
8. Is the Pope a bachelor? Well, he is male and unmarried; but some people balk at calling the Pope a bachelor. This is probably a matter of connotation rather than meaning; but it could be cited as an example of the way in which the boundary between meaning and connotation can be blurry.
9. A video of the performance in question (from a concert given on February 20, 2010) can be accessed on the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall (https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/295#). If this is inaccessible, the Youtube video (of a different performance) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3Pq0Q86Bbw may be used as a substitute.
10. The recording can be accessed on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AfCW2-3NxA.

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