

Why is there no workable philosophy of music?

Why, exactly, do we find Beethoven's last quartets so moving and powerful? What are the mental and neurological processes which produce those spine-tingling reactions to Wagner's *Ring*? No answer to these questions. It is significant but not surprising that Charles Darwin, in investigating the evolution of humanity, had almost nothing to say about music, and Freud, in explaining our psyche, even less. The most remarkable thing about musical sounds is the abyss that separates them from verbal sounds, an abyss bridged not by understanding but by antagonism. There is no generally agreed philosophy of music. Well, you may say, there is no consensual philosophy of anything. Maybe; but we can philosophise easily about painting (*vide* Ruskin or Pater, *passim*) and to plunge into a philosophy of literature we only have to read a page or two of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* to get started. But music being, at its best and purest, abstract does not, perversely enough, lend itself to philosophical abstraction, because of the verbal barrier.

Discussing this point, Oliver Wendell Holmes, the doctor-pundit, laid down in *Elsie Venner* (1861), the best of his 'medicated novels' combining biology and fiction: 'By music we reach those special states of consciousness which, by being without form, cannot be shaped by the mosaics of the vocabulary.' But that does not get us very far. All the attempts to describe the ability of music to move us (so much more powerfully than painting) begin and usually end in negatives. I have looked through the 20 volumes of my copy of *Grove's Dictionary of Music* without finding any entry on musical philosophy or kindred topics. The big *Oxford English Dictionary* has over five dense columns on music but its head-definition is feeble: 'That one of the fine arts which is concerned with the combination of sounds with a view to beauty and form and expression of emotion.' Actually Gower in 1390 did rather better. 'The Science of Musique,' he wrote, 'that techeth upon Armonie A man to make melodie' – an analysis that at least gives food for thought.

Music can be described only by metaphor even in its elementals. Take 'pitch', for example. The big new *Grove* definition is hopeless: 'The peculiar quality of a sound (e.g., an individual musical note) that fixes its position in the scale.'

The old five-volume *Grove* does much better, bringing in the concept of 'the scale of acuteness and gravity', its position being determined by 'the number of double vibrations per second which produces that sound'. The terms 'high' and 'low' are metaphors, even more so than acuteness and gravity. To be accurate, it says, we should define pitch by vibration-number. The need to use metaphors all the time in describing music, and their limitations and deceptions, explains why the philosophy of music has been so slow to develop and remains unsatisfactory. Edward Hanslick – the great 19th-century German music critic who was the first to try to set down a systematic philosophy of music – denied the expressionist view that music (like painting) is a language of the emotions, but when he put forward an alternative argument it was strangled in metaphor: a translation by G. Payzant, published by the University of Indianapolis in 1986 as *On the Beautiful in Music*, is available.

The opposite point of view – that music is a, indeed the, language of the emotions – was put half a century ago by Deryck Cooke in *The Language of Music* (1959), in which he uses musical phrases, tonalities and chordal progressions as translations of particular emotional states. Which composers would agree with that approach? Wagner certainly, for his leitmotif system is the kind of interpretive glossary Cooke wrote about. And it is no wonder that Hanslick was fundamentally opposed to everything Wagner tried to do. But Beethoven would have been hostile, for though he was quite capable of writing emotional programme music, as in his *Pastoral Symphony*, at his most serious, as in Opus 131 and Opus 133, he moves strictly in the realm of an abstraction so absolute that words are helpless to describe it. It is interesting that Stravinsky, another who was capable of writing to programme, and whose *Rite of Spring* is musical visualisation as well as emotional expression, denied that music was the designation of anything whatever.

These points, and other theories, have been much discussed recently, and you can follow the arguments in such periodicals as the *Musical Times* and *Music and Letters*. Last year Jennifer Robinson put the emotional case in *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art* (OUP). Aaron Ridley, in *The*

Philosophy of Music (Edinburgh 2004), is closer to Stravinsky, in so far as I understand him. And a scientific approach by Steven Mithen, who is not primarily a musicologist or a philosopher, is provided by *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* (Weidenfield 2005). This too puts the emotional case, since he provides a contrasting definition of language, a 'communication system specialising in the transmission of information', and music, 'a communication system specialising in the expression of emotion'.

I hate the purely emotional explanation because it makes, for instance, some of the best of Bach meaningless. On the other hand, if you discount it you are driven, as Hanslick was, to a dynamic approach, in which music gets (abstractly) better and better, just as between the 13th and 16th centuries painting became closer and closer to perfect representation, and then was forced to take refuge in the emotionalism of mannerism and the baroque. Hanslick dismissed virtually all music before the 17th century as barbarous, and said he would rather see all Palestrina's work destroyed than one major piece by Mendelssohn. He also asserted that all the concertos and sonatas of Bach were unquestionably less valuable than the quartets of Schumann and Brahms. Once you begin to make relative evaluations of first-class musical works you run into the central problem of musical philosophy: the inability to find words to convey meritorious meaning.

It might be helpful if physiologists would devote more attention to the parts of the brain which deal with musical sounds (as opposed to purely verbal ones). I learn from Mithen that brain damage need not impair musical consciousness. I believe that those suffering from Alzheimer's who are unable any longer to read or even to speak can still, apparently, enjoy music. Someone who was once very close to me but who is now what used to be called senile can still, I know, appreciate art. I paint her pictures of birds which she will hold in her hands, and peruse again and again for hours with evident pleasure. Her hearing is still acute. She once sang with the Oxford Bach Choir. Music is still getting through to her, I think, though she cannot confirm this. Attempts to devise musical philosophy have hitherto begun with the music and progressed to human beings. Perhaps we should reverse the process and start with the brain. Does it matter anyway? Can a true philosophy of music actually increase our enjoyment of a Beethoven quartet? No. But it might help me, for instance, either to get the point of Schoenberg, or conscientiously to drop him for good as worthless.

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