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Music

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Music and art

It is unsurprising that there are chapters on literature, painting and music in this volume – if they're not arts, nothing is. It is almost as predictable that there are chapters devoted to topics such as depiction and metaphor. The issues raised by depiction and metaphor are central to the artistic use of pictures and language, yet these topics do not pertain exclusively to art (there are lots of pictures that are not artworks, such as maps, diagrams and holiday snaps; people use metaphors in all sorts of contexts). Should it be surprising that there is no such counterpart chapter for music? In short, can there be music that is not art?

Most philosophers who have discussed music seem to have assumed that all music is artistic; at least they have ignored nonartistic music. For instance, Jerrold Levinson argues that music is "sounds temporally organized by a person for the purpose of enriching or intensifying experience through active engagement (e.g. listening, dancing, performing) with the sounds regarded primarily, or in significant measure, as sounds" (1990a: 273). This is an "aesthetic" definition of music insofar as it requires the musician to aim at eliciting a certain kind of heightened experience in the audience. If you think, however, that a lullaby sung to put a baby to sleep is an example of music, then it is a counterexample to this definition, since the singer intends precisely the opposite of active engagement on the baby's part. Levinson considers the example of muzak, claiming that his definition rightly excludes it (1990a: 274). But it seems plausible that muzak is music – albeit *bad* music – and thus that a definition that allows for nonartistic music, such as lullabies and muzak, would be preferable to one that doesn't.

Roger Scruton suggests that what makes a sound music is that it "exists within a musical 'field of force'" (1997: 17). For instance, when you knock your wine glass against another during a toast, the sound it emits will have a certain *frequency*, perhaps a frequency that corresponds to one of the keys on a piano. But the sound does not thereby have a *pitch* (e.g. middle C) because it is not heard as such. So if a glass further down the table emits the frequency corresponding to a G, you will not wait for the harmonic tension to be resolved by the appearance of another C, as you would if you were listening to a bass line. By putting it this way, Scruton makes being music a subjective matter – if you *do* hear the sounds of these wine glasses as

introducing harmonic tension, they are thereby musical notes. When we turn to central examples of music, however, this subjectivism has unfortunate consequences. If you do not hear the sounds produced by a musical group from an unfamiliar culture as music, they are thereby not music – at least for you. It would accord better with our conception of music (and human creation in general) to make the musical status of sounds depend on the actions of those producing them, rather than the attitudes of those listening.

I have thus suggested an intentionalist definition along Scrutonian lines, according to which music is "(1) any event intentionally produced or organized (2) to be heard, and (3) *either* (a) to have some basic musical feature, such as pitch or rhythm, *or* (b) to be listened to for such features" (Kania 2011: 12). Because this definition appeals to "basic musical features," it allows for the distinction, argued for by Andy Hamilton (2007: 40–65), between music and (nonmusical) sound art. (By contrast, Levinson must count "sound art" as music, since it meets all the conditions of his definition.) But the disjunctive third condition allows for a further distinction between "indiscernible" works of music and sound art. Suppose Yoko Ono and John Cage independently took copies of the same recording of a toilet flushing and presented them as works of art. It would seem a significant difference if Ono intended you to listen to the sounds for features such as pitch and rhythm (even though these expectations would be frustrated), while Cage intended you to listen to them as the pure sounds they are in themselves. This definition captures the difference, classifying Ono's work as music but not Cage's, even though they sound the same.

To return to the issue we opened with, since a lullaby has pitches and rhythms, and is intended to be heard, it counts as music according to this definition. But is it art? On the present account, this is a separate question, presumably to be decided by a general theory of art, rather than a musical theory in particular. For instance, those with inclinations towards an aesthetic theory of art might argue that the lullaby is art in virtue of its beauty, while institutionalists may argue that the singer in this case does not possess the institutional authority in the art-music world to transform this music into art. (See "Definitions of art," Chapter 21 of this volume.) Whatever theory of art is proposed, though, it is likely that some music will be excluded, such as musical exercises (scales, arpeggios and so on), doorbells and simple ringtones. The features that make these things music are what could be addressed in a chapter on music in the art-neutral sense, just as the chapters on pictorial representation and metaphor in this volume have application to nonartistic uses of pictures and language.

The value of music

Music, like anything, can be valuable for all sorts of instrumental reasons: Lullabies are useful for putting recalcitrant babies to sleep, ringtones let us know when someone is calling us and so on. But many have thought there is something more intrinsically valuable about much music, especially musical works of art (understood to include performances, recordings, etc.). The idea is that while any soporific lullaby might do to put the baby to sleep, whatever it is that we value in our favorite piece of music is essentially tied up with an experience of its individual features, making it

irreplaceable as a means to that experience. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider two aspects of music that philosophers have argued are centrally valuable: its emotional expressivity and its formal features.

Consider a song, such as Radiohead's "We Suck Young Blood," from *Hail to the Thief* (2003). If you think it is a *good* song, what is it about it that makes this so? (For all the questions and answers that follow, there are obvious counterparts if you think the song is bad or mediocre.) Part of the answer may be that the lyrics are powerful, whether you interpret them to be about aging stars in the music industry, intergenerational relations in general, or factory farming. But, as with most songs, the lyrics seem rather thin when read by themselves. Clearly, the musical components of the song contribute greatly to what makes it good. (If I wrote a song with the same lyrics, it would not be nearly as good.) For instance, the glacial tempo, the insistently chromatic piano accompaniment and the languidly scattered handclaps reinforce the gloominess of the lyrics. But how can purely musical features such as these imbue the sounds with an emotional quality such as *gloominess?* This question, of how music can express emotions, is perhaps the one on which most ink has been spilled in contemporary philosophy of music.

Emotional expressivity

It might be tempting at first to think that the gloominess of the music is easily explained by the gloominess of the lyrics. But this can't be the whole story. After all, setting the same lyrics to the music of the Beatles's "Can't Buy Me Love" would not make that music gloomy. Rather, the music suits the lyrics precisely because it is, antecedently, emotionally expressive. However, it may be that the music does not by itself express *gloominess* exactly. Perhaps in itself the music is languid, dark and off-kilter, and the lyrics sharpen this feeling to one of gloominess in particular. We might say similar things about music's ability to represent things other than emotions. It is plausible that the music of an instrumental work such as Smetana's "Moldau" represents (or perhaps simply exemplifies) a general structure of small elements in motion coming together to form one large movement. Smetana's "program" may be enough to make this a matter of representing several tributaries leading to a great river (the piece is one of a cycle of works entitled *Má Vlast* (*My Country*); its particular subject is the Czech river). But the same music could be successfully used in a film, say, to represent a multitude of people joining in a pilgrimage.

What explains the music's antecedent expressive properties – those it possesses before the addition of (or in the absence of) lyrics or a program? One answer that remains persistently appealing, despite its rejection by most philosophers, is the theory of *expressionism*: the emotional properties of the music are those felt by the musicians (the composer and/or performer), expressed through the music. One objection to this view is analogous to the one given above. Just as music is antecedently more or less appropriate for combination with a given text, it is antecedently more or less appropriate for the expression of some felt emotion. This suggests that the expressivity of the music is independent of its use as an expression of an actually felt emotion and explains how people can fail to express what they intend to in their

compositions and performances. A related objection is that it seems possible for people to create highly expressive music without having experienced the emotions it expresses. None of this shows that people cannot express their emotions by producing music, but it leaves the central puzzle unsolved: how is it that music can be expressive in the absence of literal expression?

Another enduringly popular but philosophically problematic solution is *arousalism*, according to which music has the emotional properties it does in virtue of arousing those emotions in listeners. The two main objections to the view are both claims that it gets things the wrong way around. First, when music does arouse a certain emotion in a listener, it seems usually to be *because the music is expressive*. But this would mean that the expressivity would be logically prior to the arousal, and hence couldn't be constituted by it. (This point raises two further problems for the theory. First, some people seem not to be emotionally moved by music at all, even when they recognize that it is emotionally expressive. Second, the emotion aroused by the music need not be the emotion it expresses. For example, the gloominess of "We Suck Young Blood" may elicit *horror* in you, rather than making you feel gloomy yourself.) The second main objection to the arousal theory is that by locating the emotion in the *listener* it fails to explain the emotion in the *music*. As Derek Matravers puts it, "hearing music as sad is not equivalent to hearing music and feeling sad … [Moreover,] the feeling ends up in the wrong place: not in the music, but in the head of the listener" (2011: 218; Matravers goes on to consider two recent limited, but more sophisticated, arousalist theories).

Perhaps the most popular view among philosophers recently has been that a musical passage expresses an emotion in virtue of resembling some aspect of the emotion as ordinarily experienced by people. Susanne Langer's early version of this view suggests that music resembles the phenomenology, or inner feeling, of emotional states (Langer 1953). One problem with this view is that the phenomenological components of emotions seem too thin to ground the particularity of expression many find in music. For instance, rage and joy may share a kind of upwards-rushing feeling; thus, if the music resembles only that feeling, it will be at best ambiguous. (Langer embraced the conclusion that music cannot express particular emotions.) Most resemblance theorists have instead argued that music resembles not just the phenomenology of a given emotion, but its typical vocal, facial or behavioral expressions (e.g. Kivy 1989; Davies 1994). Thus, the music of "We Suck Young Blood" is gloomy because it resembles the typical behavior of a gloomy person, even though no one is actually expressing their gloominess through the song, just as a basset hound's face is sad because it resembles the typical facial expression of a sad person, even though the dog is not actually expressing its emotional state through its physiognomy.

One objection to resemblance theories is that they do not get to the heart of expressivity. The fact that a musical passage resembles something does not thereby imply that it expresses that thing. If a musical passage and a basset hound's face both resemble a sad person, then the musical passage resembles the basset hound's face (and vice versa); the fact that the musical passage doesn't express or represent a basset hound shows that there must be more to expressivity than resemblance. Jerrold Levinson (2006) argues that the missing factor is that the musical passage typically

causes us to *imagine* that its contours are an actual expression of emotion by a person (but does not typically cause us to imagine that they are the contours of a dog's face). Stephen Davies (2006) resists this addition because he thinks, first, that it is implausible that listeners necessarily or even typically imagine that there is some person in or behind the music, expressing themselves through it and, second, that you do not need to posit such a response in order to respond to the objection. In fact, resemblance theorists have always given some sort of dispositional account of our responses to music. They argue that, for some psychological reason, we are simply disposed to hear musical passages as expressive of emotions, and not as representing dogs' faces. This does not require imagining that anyone is literally expressing themselves, any more than believing the temperature has risen requires imagining that something has literally moved upwards in space.

There is one other way that most philosophers agree music can express emotions, namely by convention. For instance, in Western music the minor mode has come to express darker emotional states. Exactly how and when this came about and the extent to which it is still the case are complicated musicological questions, but it is relatively uncontroversial that it is a convention based in part in a slow accretion of cultural associations between the minor mode and an unsettled feeling. The lack of controversy is due to two facts. First, there is no obvious significant difference between the resemblance to ordinary emotional expression of the contours of a minor triad or melody and the closest major triad or melody, yet they clearly differ in their expressivity. Second, musical systems are culturally contingent. Being an expert practitioner or theorist in one culture's music is of little to no use in assessing the expressivity of the music of an unfamiliar culture. It is difficult to determine how much musical expressivity is due to convention and how much to some other kind of reason; it could be that philosophers have focused on the latter kinds of explanation not because they account for the lion's share of expressivity but because they are more philosophically interesting.

Some have argued that, however music expresses emotions, this expressivity cannot be enough to explain music's value. For one thing, the mere fact that music is expressive is not obviously a reason to value it. Emoticons express emotions, but we do not consider them valuable works of art. Of course, it is plausible that we value musical expressions of emotion because they are more richly detailed than emoticons. But still, why value an expression of emotion at all, especially if it is not an emotion anyone is actually experiencing? One answer might be that we just do value accurate, detailed representations of things. The value we accord to music's expression of emotion is in this respect no more puzzling than that we accord to the lifelike narrative of a novel or the realism of a lobster in an oil painting (Kivy 1989: 112–31). Another might be that in appreciating expressive music, we do not simply *observe* the emotions expressed, but ourselves experience those emotions, or others, in response. Perhaps this experience is cathartic, purging us of somehow unhealthy emotions. Or perhaps it helps us understand our emotional states or capacities, or is simply pleasurable in itself (Levinson 1990b). (In the case of "negative" emotions, such as gloominess, we might obviously prefer to have such experiences in the absence of their usual causes.)

Against all this it may be argued that other art forms are superior to music in expressing emotional states, and thus that these explanations fail to account for a

significant portion of music's value (Goldman 1992: 35–37; Budd 1995: 155–57). It is plausible that there are some emotional states that music is powerless to express, for instance those with complex intentional structures, such as envy. And, of course, representational arts are much better at presenting us with emotions in fully realized contexts, which might suggest these arts are superior to music in, say, helping us to understand our emotional states and capacities. However, it is not obvious that other arts' superiority in representing or expressing emotions implies that they are superior in eliciting the emotional *responses* that lead to such benefits.

Musical form

However these disputes are resolved, some have argued that music's emotional expressivity cannot account for its great value. They point to the fact that there are extremely valuable works of music (such as many of Bach's fugues) that are not particularly expressive, and that, in general, the differences in value between pieces of music can hardly be accounted for in terms of differences in their expressivity. These theorists argue that it is *formal* features of musical works that account for the greatest part of their value (Budd 1995; Goldman 1992; Kivy 1990, 2009). The formal features of a piece of music are traditionally understood as those that have to do with the relationships of various parts of the piece to one another. So, we recognize that we are encountering the second verse of a song when the same musical material returns accompanying different words, and that we are encountering a return of the chorus when other music and lyrics are repeated together. Since the nineteenth century, much of the study of Western classical music has been devoted to formal theory and analysis.

The promise of formalism as an account of music's value should be obvious to those familiar with canonical works of Western classical instrumental music. (I shall call such music, without accompanying words, program, film and so on, "pure" music.) This is music that seems to have a syntax but no semantics. That is, just as with ordinary language, we can tell whether or not a given musical event is a suitable continuation of a previous passage (a matter of syntax). For instance, in the key of C major, moving from a D-minor chord to a C-major chord would be a "syntactical" error akin to writing a "sentence" without a verb (e.g. "The quick brown fox the lazy dog"). In C major, a D-minor chord "needs to" move to the tonic (C major) via the dominant (G major) – it is a "pre-dominant" chord – just as that sentence obviously needs a verb. But unlike ordinary language, the elements of musical language do not mean anything (a matter of semantics). Our faulty sentence is clearly about two animals, even if we're not sure how they're related, but neither the C-major nor D-minor chords seem to refer to anything beyond themselves.

Formalism is the theory that accords value to syntax, thus it seems custom-made for instrumental music (whereas it faces obvious problems when it comes to representational arts such as painting and literature). A great work of music, according to this theory, is one that creates certain expectations in the ears of listeners by beginning a formal structure in a certain way, and then goes on to satisfy and frustrate those expectations in a complex manner by means of the continuation of the formal

structure in such a way that the listener is not driven away by too much frustration, yet is intrigued enough by the remaining expectations to keep listening until they are ultimately satisfied (Kivy 1990: 68–145).

This is the barest characterization of musical formalism, yet it is enough to raise some difficult questions for the formalist. First, even if formalism can be developed into a compelling theory of the value of instrumental Western classical music, this is but a small fraction of the world's (or even the West's) music. So it might be objected that this theory has only narrow application and is thus of little interest. One reply the formalist can give is that pure music is an interestingly difficult case for a theory of musical value. We may not think immediately of formalism when asked to explain the value of songs, film music, dance music and so on. Yet it may explain why we would not give up songs even with all the poetry in the world, or why a musical representation of a river cannot be replaced without loss by a film, painting or literary description of it. For perhaps formalism can explain the value contributed to these "impure" works by their purely musical aspects. And if this is granted, we can see the utility of thinking primarily about purely instrumental music when discussing the value of *all* music – pure or otherwise: instrumental music isolates musical features, enabling us to think more clearly about what they are and how they work, just as isolating chemical elements in a laboratory enables us to understand more easily what goes on in the messiness of the world outside the lab.

A second question is how formalism is supposed to explain the high value we place on purely instrumental musical works. That is, the formalist has pointed to complex features possessed by such works, but, as we saw with respect to emotional expressivity, one might still ask what reason we have to think such features are valuable. The formalist might give the same initial response: we *just do* value formal complexity, and if there is a further explanation to be given of this fact, it is psychological rather than philosophical (Kivy 2009: 205–13). Moreover, we especially value formal complexity skillfully produced by human beings, and thus displaying their (and thereby, in general, *our*) cognitive capacities (Davies 2002). (This kind of response could be applied to many sources of musical value, such as emotional expressivity, virtuosity and so on.)

This answer will be insufficient if it turns out there are artifacts as formally complex as the greatest purely musical works, yet which we do not value as highly. Candidates are bound to be controversial, but we might consider (actual or hypothetical) abstract visual artworks, such as arabesques or tapa cloths, and mathematical proofs – even chess moves (Davies 2002). Peter Kivy suggests that (again, for reasons beyond the scope of philosophy) hearing may be the faculty "most amenable to being pleased and intrigued by pure formal structure, in the absence of representational or semantic content" (2002: 263). Malcolm Budd points to the ability of music (as opposed to, say, mathematical proofs) to say something about formal features themselves, as when a movement seems to be a critique of, say, sonata form (Budd 1995: 164–71).

More philosophically profound justifications of formalism have been given which have roots in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer 2010: bk III). These theories turn the problem of the abstract nature of instrumental music on its head, arguing that music is valuable not *despite* but precisely *because of* its lack of relation

to the "real world." The idea is that in appreciating pure music we gain entry into a world where there is tension and struggle, but where this can be resolved in a completely satisfying way (unlike the typical case in the real world). Moreover, we enjoy the cognitive challenge of understanding the music's formal complexity, and while engrossed in the music we are temporarily lifted out of our everyday troubles (Goldman 1992; Kivy 1997: 179–217).

It may be that no one has ever been a "narrow formalist," denying the relevance of even such basic musical content as melodies, harmonies and rhythms – the elements that formal relationships hold *between* (Hamilton 2007: 87–89). But even "broad formalism," which acknowledges the musical importance of these elements, has recently been challenged by philosophers and musicologists in a number of ways. For instance, recent formalists have argued that the emotional content of a purely musical work can contribute to its formal structure (Kivy 2002: 88–101). More attention has also been paid to timbre, the least formal of basic musical features, especially in light of the expanded timbral possibilities of music constructed in the recording studio, such as (some have argued) rock or contemporary popular music (Gracyk 1996; Zak 2001).

A more radical challenge to traditional formalism is Jerrold Levinson's "concatenationism" (1997). Levinson argues that large-scale formal features, of the sort represented in a formal diagram (which have been the focus of most musicological theory and analysis) are much less important to understanding a piece of music than the relationships that hold between contiguous musical events, which can be simultaneously apprehended in the "mind's ear" in the moment. Ultimately, Levinson can be interpreted as offering an alternative formalist theory, albeit one that, like contemporary architectonic theories such as Kivy's, accords an important role to the emotional content of pure music. The fact that this attack on architectonicism might be taken as an attack on formalism shows how deeply traditional formalism itself is rooted in the assumptions Levinson questions.

Other issues

Like most philosophers of music, I have focused here on philosophical problems raised by thinking about purely instrumental music, or the purely musical aspects of other works. That is because these are arguably the most puzzling philosophical problems music raises. But the theories proposed as solutions to these problems have application beyond purely instrumental music. For to the extent that vocal, sacred or dance music, for instance, are musical, the same problems will arise, and the same kinds of solutions will likely suggest themselves.

There are also philosophical questions not touched on here regarding many aspects of music. There is a large literature on the ontology of musical works (the kinds of things they are and their relationships to performances and recordings). Some of this literature is on rather general, abstract issues (e.g. Dodd 2007), while some is very closely tied to particular musical traditions (e.g. Davies 2001). There are also many descriptive and normative issues concerning performance and recording, such as the nature and value of virtuosity, improvisation, authenticity and hearing

live performances vs. recordings. (For introductions to these issues, see respectively Mark 1980; Brown 2011; "Authenticity in performance," Chapter 44 of this volume; and Kania and Gracyk 2011.) There is no consensus on the nature of fundamental musical understanding, such as what it is to hear a melody as *rising* – moving through some kind of musical space (Scruton 1983; Budd 1985; Davies 2011). And there is growing interest in the relation of the philosophy of music to other disciplines that study music. Moreover, there is a rich history of answers to many of these questions stretching back to the ancient world. For introductions to these and other issues (which still only scratch the surface), see Gracyk and Kania (2011).

See also Idealism (Chapter 7), Nietzsche (Chapter 8), Formalism (Chapter 9), Expressivism (Chapter 11), Goodman (Chapter 18), Definitions of art (Chapter 21), Ontology of art (Chapter 23), The aesthetic (Chapter 24), Value of art (Chapter 28), Art, expression and emotion (Chapter 39), Authenticity in performance (Chapter 44), High art versus low art (Chapter 46).

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Further reading

Davies, S. (2012) "On Defining Music," *Monist* 95: 535–55. (Offers a taxonomy of different kinds of definition of music and an argument that a hybrid definition appealing to both structural and historical features is most promising.)

Gracyk, T. and Kania, A. (eds) (2011) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, New York: Routledge. (The only reference work devoted to philosophy of music, containing fifty-six chapters on a wide range of topics, including general topics such as improvisation and recordings; various musical kinds, such as jazz and opera; important historical periods and figures; and related disciplines.)

Hamilton, A. (2007) *Aesthetics and Music*, New York: Continuum. (An idiosyncratic introduction to the philosophy of music, combining historical chapters with essays devoted to topics such as definition, rhythm, recordings and modernism.)

Kivy, P. (2002) *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (An introduction to the traditionally central problems in philosophy of music.)

Robinson, J. (2005) *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Part 4 is a contemporary defense of musical expressionism.)