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Definition

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DEFINITION

Andrew Kania

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Much of the time most of us can tell whether, and which of, the sounds we're currently hearing are music. This is so whether or not what we're listening to is a familiar piece, a piece we haven't heard before, or even music from a culture or tradition we're unfamiliar with. In cases where we're unsure, or initially mistaken in our judgment, we will often change our opinion based on further information. This near universal agreement suggests that the concept of music is one shared by different people, and has boundaries which we are implicitly aware of, and which we make use of in judging whether something is music or not. The project of defining the term "music" is the attempt to make explicit the boundaries of this concept.

PHILOSOPHICAL DEFINITIONS

Traditionally, a philosophical definition takes the form of a set of individually necessary, jointly sufficient conditions. A necessary condition on being X is one something *must* meet in order to be X. For instance, being female is a necessary condition on being a niece. Nothing that fails to meet that condition can possibly be a niece. If you specify a necessary condition on the concept you're interested in, you'll capture everything under that concept, but the danger is that you'll capture *more* than that. (There are plenty of women who aren't nieces.) A sufficient condition on

X is something that, once met, *guarantees* being X. *Being a woman with an aunt* is sufficient for being a niece, since if you meet that condition, you're thereby a niece. If you specify a sufficient condition, you'll capture *only* things that fall under the concept, but you might not capture *enough*. (There are lots of nieces who don't have any aunts.) Philosophers have usually attempted to specify a list of conditions that are each individually necessary, but when taken together are sufficient for falling under the concept in question. For instance, each of the following conditions is necessary for being a niece: (i) being female, with (ii) at least one parent who has a sibling. Taken together, these conditions are sufficient for being a niece. Thus we have produced a traditional philosophical definition of "niece." "Music" is not so easy.

One reason for the difficulty is that there is not universal agreement about what counts as music. One way to overcome this problem is to try to figure out a definition that covers what everyone agrees on, and then see what it has to say about the contentious cases. This won't necessarily settle the matter, since some might prefer to revise the definition rather than admit the results of its application, but the hope is that the parties to the debate will ultimately be swayed in the same direction by the same reasons. Another reason for the difficulty is that "music" is probably a *vague* concept, that is, one under which not everything either clearly falls or does not (perhaps because one or more of its necessary conditions is vague). On the one hand, this may helpfully allow us to classify disputed examples as "borderline cases." On the other, there may be just as much dispute over whether a particular example is a borderline case or a clear one.

One potential confusion that can be cleared up at the outset is that we are looking for a *descriptive* rather than (purely) *evaluative* definition of "music." There is a temptation to dismiss

an example of bad music as not music at all, but this would be incoherent. There is little disputing that there are some terrible musical performances, recordings, and works. However, there may be an evaluative *component* to the definition of “music.” Perhaps every piece of music must be *intended* to be rewarding, for instance.

There are some quite general objections to definitional projects of the sort I will be engaging in here. There is no space to consider these objections here, but some good starting points are Davies 2000, Dean 2003, Meskin 2008, and Margolis and Laurence 2008 (especially §§2 and 5).

THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

Philosophers have been discussing the nature of music since the beginnings of philosophy in both the East and West, but their work is not of much help to the definitional project. This is for two related reasons. First, the theory of music held by each of these philosophers is usually embedded in a much larger theory – often a systematic philosophy that attempts to answer fundamental questions in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy. Extracting a definition of “music” from so grand a theory is usually absurd. For instance, it makes no sense to consider Schopenhauer’s claim that music is *the direct objectification of the will itself* without first understanding what Schopenhauer means by “the will,” how it is objectified in “the world of representation” and the various other arts, and the roots of all of this in Kant’s “transcendental idealism.” Suppose we do understand Schopenhauer’s philosophical system. We may now be able to extract a definition of “music” from it, but we are unlikely to be satisfied with the definition of “music,” since we probably do not subscribe to the system upon which it depends.

The second reason the history of philosophy is not of much help in defining “music” is that most philosophers have simply not been interested in that project. So why are we? Let me note at the outset that many philosophers, musicians, musicologists, and ordinary music-lovers, are *not* interested in the definition of “music.” Those philosophers who *are* are part of a tradition known as “analytic philosophy,” with historical roots in the work of figures such as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein. One idea central to early analytic philosophy was that we could make better philosophical progress if we got clear on the precise definitions of our terms, and used them more carefully – an approach modeled in part on successful empirical science. While there are still methodological connections between the various strands of contemporary analytic philosophy and their forebears, few philosophers of music pursue the definition of “music” hoping it will shed much independent light on other aspects of the philosophy of music. Rather, the primary motivation for defining “music” is simply a curiosity about the nature of an art that is central to many people’s lives. Whether or not you are grabbed by the topic might depend on whether you’re moved more by Marx’s claim that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 1845: 145), or Harry Frankfurt’s that “There are plenty of people and institutions devoted to changing the world, but philosophers are among the few who are devoted to understanding it” (Leimbach 2008: 21).

WORKING TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF “MUSIC”

When we aim at defining “music,” what *kinds* of things do we want our definition to capture? Unsurprisingly, the concept of *sound* is central to most definitions of “music.” But you might

point to a musical score and say “That’s a great piece of music.” Scores make no sounds, however. Does that mean they are not really music? We might similarly ask whether we intend to capture musical works, performances, instruments, recordings, and so on, with our definition. The answer to these questions is that there is a central concept of a *musical event*, in terms of which we can define the other concepts. (For instance, a *musical instrument* may be a tool whose function is the production of musical events.)

Intrinsic, subjective, and intentional definitions

Even if you think that sounds are necessary for music, they are certainly not sufficient. Sounds occur throughout the world all the time, and very few of these are music. We might describe certain sounds as *music-like* – the babbling of a brook, for instance – yet still deny, when speaking strictly, that these sounds are really *music*. (It is natural to describe such sounds as “musical,” but I will reserve that adjective to describe things that are literally music, rather than merely *like* music in some way.) How can we characterize *musical* sounds so as to distinguish them from non-musical sounds?

One obvious way would be to try to figure out the *intrinsic properties* of musical sounds, as opposed to others. For instance, we might begin by figuring out the frequencies of all the sounds emitted by a standard piano keyboard, and say that any musical sound must have one of those frequencies. This is not very promising, however. For one thing, you still make music if you play on an out-of-tune piano. For another, there are many different musical scales, both within Western music and across the globe. Also, there are sounds whose frequencies are irrelevant to

their musicality, such as “untuned” percussion (e.g. a snare drum). We could perhaps extend our list of kinds of musical sounds to encompass all these, but the problem would then be that our definition included far too much. For all sorts of non-musical sounds have pitches. (I used to have a printer that emitted two sounds alternately, at the interval of a tritone.)

A second strategy would be to adopt a *subjective* definition, claiming, for instance, that whatever sounds like, or is perceived as, music by a given listener *is* music, regardless of its intrinsic properties. This kind of approach gives rise to unintuitive consequences, though. For instance, if you leave the radio on when you leave the house, the sounds it emits cease being music, according to the subjectivist, since there is no one around to perceive them in the right sort of way. On the other hand, you can transform the sounds of a train into music merely by hearing them as rhythmic. More troublingly, someone ignorant of a particular culture’s musical practices may not hear a given performance as music. At best, the subjectivist may say that this performance is not music for this listener, though it may be for other listeners. This seems wrong. This listener is simply mistaken about what he hears, as much as if he denied that the *Mona Lisa* is a painting.

A more promising approach is to adopt an *intentional* definition. According to such a definition, your radio continues to emit music when you leave the house because the sounds it emits are rooted in the music-making intentions of the people ultimately responsible for those sounds. While you cannot turn the sounds of a train into music just by hearing them a certain way, you could turn them into music by repeating them with musical intent (as, for example, Arthur Honegger did in *Pacific 231*). This strategy also seems to give us the right answer with respect to

the culturally ignorant listener. He has no effect on whether what he is listening to is music, which turns instead on the intentions of the people producing the sounds he hears.

Are there any sounds we might want to classify as music, yet which are not intentionally produced? When one *improvises*, one does not know in advance all of the particular sounds one will make. But this does not mean that one makes the sounds unintentionally. Paisley Livingston characterizes intentional action as “the execution and realization of a plan, where the agent effectively follows and is guided by the plan in performing actions which, in manifesting sufficient levels of skill and control, bring about the intended [i.e. planned] outcome” (2005: 14). Given this account, it seems plausible that the improviser intends to produce music, even the *particular* notes she produces, as evidenced by Slam Stewart’s singing along to his improvisatory performances, though these intentions may be formed very soon before the production of the notes themselves, and may not be fully conscious.

What about “music” produced by machines or non-human animals? It seems unlikely that even “higher” non-human animals have the capacity for the complex intentions necessary for the production of music. The animals we characterize as “singing” (particularly birds and whales) do not have the capacity to improvise or invent new melodies or rhythms (though they can make mistakes). Despite the name, then, bird and whale “song” should no more count as music than the yowling of cats. We call these displays “song,” of course, because they sound *like* music to us. But sounds can be music-like without being music.

Machines, such as music-boxes, CD players, and iPods emit music, but this music is rooted in the intentions of the musicians behind the sounds, just as in the example of the radio considered above. The case of a computer programmed to compose is slightly different, but I would argue that the sounds or scores produced by such a program should count as music for the same reason. The program is designed by someone to produce certain kinds of outputs (e.g. pitches and rhythms), though the particular outputs may be unpredictable. It is telling that we would not even ask the question about a word processing program, though it also emits sounds when it operates.

Basic musical features

So far I have implied that what distinguishes musical sounds from others is that they be *intended to be musical*. Initially, this suggestion looks *circular*. A circular definition is one that relies on the term being defined. For instance, defining “dog” as a “canine animal” is circular. While *true*, the definition is uninformative. We can escape the charge of circularity if we can define “musical” without referring to music. Roger Scruton attempts something like this, claiming that a sound is transformed into music when it is perceived as existing “within a musical ‘field of force’” (1997: 17), such as the arrangement of pitches in a scale, or beats in a measure. If we can characterize such “fields” independently of the concept of music, we will have escaped the circle. (Scruton’s suggestion is subjectivist, since it relies on a listener’s perception, rather than a musician’s intention, but we can eliminate the subjectivism by replacing it with an intentional condition, and retaining the account of musical “fields of force.”)

One concern some people have about defining music in terms of particular musical features, such as pitch or rhythm, is that these might be features of only *some* music, perhaps music in the European tradition (e.g. Levinson 1990: 270-1). This would incorrectly exclude the music of other cultures from the definition. As it turns out, however, the division of sounds into both *scales*, consisting of series of discrete pitches that repeat at the octave, and *measures*, consisting of a number of equal beats, seem to be culturally universal features of music (Stevens and Byron 2009: 16-18; Stainsby and Cross 2009: 54-6). This may be because all humans share a capacity to produce and understand music as a result of their common evolutionary history. (See Wallin, Merker, and Brown 2000 and Cross 2009.) If so, this gives us another reason to exclude animal sounds from music.

It is worth emphasizing that there is a difference between the concept of pitch appealed to here, and the concept of frequency, briefly considered above. Frequency is an intrinsic, objective characteristic of all sounds. Pitch, on the other hand, is already in itself a partly intentional concept. Although we may loosely say that the pitch of A above middle-C has a frequency of 440 Hz, no one would deny that the note produced by the relevant key on a baroque organ is also an A, though it may produce a frequency of 470 Hz, nor that you continuously play an A on the violin, though you use vibrato throughout (and thus produce a sound with a continuously changing frequency). In short, whether the sound you produce is an A depends more on the place it occupies (or you intend it to occupy) relative to the other notes you are playing (its place in a musical “field of force”) than on its frequency. There are also differences between musical pitch and the “pitches” of tonal languages that should allow us to exclude such languages from a definition of music (Stainsby and Cross 2009: 55-6). Similar points can be made about rhythm.

Though ordinary speech may have a certain periodicity that might naturally be called its “rhythm,” in a definition of music the term would be restricted to a division into stricter units of time, such as characterize measures of two or three beats.

Combining all of this into a provisional definition, we might say that

Music is (1) sounds, (2) intentionally produced or organized, (3) to have at least one basic musical feature, such as pitch or rhythm.

Temporal organization

Jerrold Levinson has argued that music must be “temporally organized” (1990: 273), and thus that our provisional definition is too broad – it encompasses some items that it should exclude. The solution would be to add a further necessary condition to our definition. What would such a condition amount to? All sounds occur in time, so Levinson must mean something more than this. He asks us to consider “an art in which the point was to produce colorful instantaneous combinations of sounds – i.e. chords of vanishingly brief duration – which [are] to be savored independently,” and claims that we would not consider this a *musical* art, since music is “as essentially an art of time as it is an art of sound” (1990: 273). Suppose it is true that we would not consider this tradition of sonic art a *musical* tradition. It does not follow that we ought to exclude *individual* instantaneous pieces or performances from the realm of music. We might similarly agree that a culture which only produced blank canvases, never applying paint to them, did not have a tradition of painting. It does not follow that there can be no blank canvases in a

tradition of painting. If Levinson were offering a definition of “musical tradition,” this criticism might be apt, but he is explicitly seeking the correct conception of “an instance or occasion of music” (1990: 269). (That said, I am not so sure that a tradition of exquisite instantaneous chords should not count as a musical tradition.)

Moreover, there seems to be an actual example of a musical work that violates Levinson’s temporal-organization condition. La Monte Young’s *Composition 1960 #7* consists of a single open fifth (B and F#), marked “to be held a long time”. This piece is not instantaneous, but it is difficult to see what kind of temporal structure it has that would not be shared by a variant marked “to be held for a short time” or “to be held instantaneously.”

Music without basic musical features

A more serious objection to our provisional definition is that it is too narrow, that is, it does not encompass enough. Some music seems intentionally designed *not* to be pitched or rhythmic, for instance John Cage’s *Williams Mix* (1952) – a tape composition painstakingly spliced together out of a variety of sound sources, without regard to their basic musical features – or Yoko Ono’s *Toilet Piece/Unknown* (1971) – an unedited recording of a flushing toilet. You might, of course, simply deny that such works are music, though that would require a revisionist view of much of twentieth-century music history. However, it would be wise to investigate why people have been inclined to call such works music before dismissing them.

Precisely in response to the wide variety of sounds employed not only in twentieth-century avant-garde music, but in musical cultures around the globe, Jerrold Levinson defends what might be called an *aesthetic* definition of “music,” since it appeals not to features of the intentionally produced sounds, but to a certain kind of experience they are intended to elicit. According to Levinson, music is “[i] sounds [ii] temporally organized [iii] by a person [iv] for the purpose of enriching or intensifying experience through active engagement (e.g., listening, dancing, performing) [v] with the sounds regarded primarily, or in significant measure, as sounds” (1990: 273).

We have already discussed the first three of Levinson’s conditions. (We can take “person” to refer to the kind of being capable of complex intentions.) What remains is an aesthetic condition (iv), and a requirement that musical sounds be intended to be heard “primarily...as sounds” (v). Levinson introduces the last condition in order to exclude aesthetically-pleasing or music-like language, such as poetry and oratory, from his definition. “To hear something *as sounds*,” however, must not be a disguised way of saying “to hear something *as music*,” on pain of circularity. We might explicate hearing something as sound in terms of *not* listening to it for its semantic content, or meaning. But many people believe that much music *does* possess meaning of some sort. In fact, it might be argued that even hearing sounds as pitched or rhythmic is to hear them as more than simply sounds, since a dog can hear the sounds coming from your stereo, but not the music (Hamilton 2007: 56-9). Perhaps a better way to exclude artistic language from a definition of “music” is simply to do so explicitly. Levinson almost does this when he introduces this condition, glossing “hearing sounds as sounds” as hearing them “not primarily as symbols of discursive thought” (1990: 272).

You might think that excluding language will make the definition too narrow, since many musical works include language, notably songs. But if we think of songs as a combination of words and music, then we can understand the definition as capturing the musical element of songs, and ignoring the linguistic element. Roughly, the definition should capture the features of sung words that would be absent if those words were merely spoken.

Let us turn, then, to the central aesthetic condition of Levinson's definition. To my mind, the most troubling counterexamples to this condition are ones of mundane music-making, such as the practicing of scales. Few would deny that such activities produce music, yet it seems questionable at best that such practice is aimed at enriching or intensifying anyone's experience. Indeed, it is not clear that the musician intends these sounds to be attended to at all. (Someone may practice scales simply to keep warm, rather than to work on tone production, or anything else that would require even the musician's own attention to the sounds.)

Levinson presents a thought experiment to defend his aesthetic condition. He asks us to imagine "a sequence of sounds devised by a team of psychological researchers which are such that when subjects are in a semiconscious condition and are exposed to these sounds, the subjects enter psychedelic states of marked pleasurability" (1990: 273). The idea is that such sounds should not count as music, since they are not intended to be attended to. I am not convinced by the counterexample, though, since we can use music for all sorts of purposes without its thereby ceasing to be music. I may sneak into a friend's bedroom and play the opening of the first-violin part of Strauss's *Don Juan* to startle him awake, with no intention that either of us attend to or

engage with these sounds at all, let alone for the purpose of enriching or intensifying our experiences. In such a case, it seems to me, I've woken my friend up with some loud *music*, not just music-like sounds. Thus, I would want to hear more about the experimenters' intentions regarding the sounds themselves – in particular, whether they are intended to be pitched or rhythmic. A final example we might consider is Muzak. Levinson rejects the idea that Muzak is music for the same reason he rejects the psychological experimenters' sounds – Muzak is not intended to be listened to, but to have a psychological effect on those who hear it (such as being more willing to spend money). But it seems undeniable that Muzak is music, albeit bad music put towards a mercenary end. (See also Hamilton 2007: 52-5.)

A disjunctive strategy

One advantage of an aesthetic definition is that it can explain why we might consider *Williams Mix* or *Toilet Piece* to be music, despite their lack of basic musical features, namely by pointing out that these pieces seem to be intended to be listened to in the way in which we listen to other musical works. We can apply this same insight to the basic-musical-features approach to defining music, however, thus avoiding the problematic consequences of an aesthetic definition. The idea would be that if you think that *Toilet Piece*, but not the sound of any old toilet flushing, is music, you must implicitly believe that we ought to listen to the sounds on the recording against a background expectation of encountering pitches and rhythms. This would be something like *listening for* such features, even if they are absent. Why should we listen for these features in the Ono piece, but not every time we flush a toilet ourselves? Because, presumably, that's what Ono intended us to do by placing it on an album (*Fly* (1971)), that is, a recording consisting

mostly of uncontentious examples of music, and which was released (that is, presented to the public) in the same way much other music is. (This argument resembles one Levinson gives for his definition of “art,” which differs markedly from his definition of “music.” (1989: 41-2).)

Intending people to attend to something for features it does not possess smacks of paradox, but it is common enough. Think of a detective story that does not resolve. You are intended to read it with an eye to discovering who the criminal is, even if you know from the outset that the story will offer insufficient evidence of whodunit.

We now have a tension between two kinds of cases. On the one hand, there is sound with undeniably musical features, but produced without the intention that those features be attended to, such as Muzak or the *Don Juan* wake-up call. On the other, there is sound that lacks any basic musical features, but counts as music because it is intended to be attended to for such features, such as *Toilet Piece/Unknown*. It may be that here, as with several recent definitions of “art,” we need to use a disjunctive strategy. Consider the following proposal:

Music is (1) sounds, (2) intentionally produced or organized (3) *either* (a) to have some basic musical feature, such as pitch or rhythm, *or* (b) to be listened to for such features.

Condition 3a should capture most music across history and the globe, while 3b should capture the remaining modernist and postmodern musical experiments, such as Ono’s work and Cage’s *Williams Mix*.

Musical silence

We began our discussion of the concept of music with the idea that it is, at least, *sound*. But many pieces of music contain significant periods of *silence*, that is, the absence of sound. In fact, the use of silence is a very common way of structuring sound. In particular, rests make a major contribution to the *rhythmic* organization of music. So when we talk of intentionally produced or organized sounds, we must include silences. The air of paradox here can be dispersed if we replace “sound” in our definition with “anything intended to be heard”:

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.

The rests in an ordinary piece of music would thus count as part of the music. A new question arises of whether there could be musical works that consist of *nothing but* silence. I have argued that there are in fact such pieces (Kania, forthcoming), but I must pass over that topic here.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested an intentional definition of music that relies heavily on the nature of basic musical features, but also allows for avant-garde music that deliberately flouts such features. To be truly satisfying, this definition would require an account of the features appealed to, such as pitch and rhythm, and arguments for the completeness of the list. There is no space to take on

that task here, but see Scruton (1997: 19-79), Davies (2001: 45-58), Hamilton (2007: chs 2 & 5), and, in this volume, “Melody, Rhythm, and Harmony.”

One might adopt the general approach taken here, but more conservatively stop short of the disjunctive condition I have suggested, excluding works without basic musical features from the realm of music. But it should be noted that the definition I have suggested is not totally liberal. For there are works of sonic art that will not count as music according to my definition. These are works like *Toilet Piece/Unknown* that lack basic musical features but (unlike *Toilet Piece/Unknown*) are not intended to be listened to for such features. (It could be argued that *Williams Mix* is in fact such a piece.) This is an advantage of the definition I have suggested, since there does seem to be just such a division in contemporary art practice between music and sound art (Hamilton 2007: ch. 2).

See also Silence, sound, noise, and music (Chapter ??), Rhythm, melody, and harmony (Chapter ??), Improvisation (Chapter ??), and Psychology of music (Chapter ??).

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