

A Nonrepresentationalist Argument for Music

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ABSTRACT

Music is a universally accessible phenomenon that resists understanding. These conditions have prompted a considerable discourse on music's transcendental properties, tied up with the notion of an exclusively musical meaning. Following a literature review, I reject this notion, favouring a leaner theory that takes music's lack of objective meaning just as a lack of objective meaning.

I argue that music is a self-directed practice, contingent on a perceiver's prerogative to block the perceived objective significance of an object and engage with it for the sake of engaging itself. This subversion of meaning is, I suggest, a mechanism in virtue of which we may have consciousness of sound tout court: when the world is separated from the aspect of self that is affording the means of perception and the latter is taken as a subject of experience. Such an argument can make intelligible the concept of intrinsically cognitive operations- those that do not refer outwardly

Emerging research in music psychology gives empirical grounding to this concept, accounting for music experience with psychological structures that are nonrepresentational and thus lack extrinsic content.

The upshot is that music can exemplify nonrepresentational experience, where a 'representation' is an individuated (mental) object with semantic properties. There may be no specifiable object true to the experience because music is partly constituted by that which is intrinsically cognitive. This framework could thus be wielded in a discussion of qualia, potentially elucidating the intuition that some qualities of experience are irreducibly mental in nature.

I. Music's Intrinsic Value

Scholars of music have often made the claim that music's meaning is closed from the world. This position is intimately related to ideals concerning music's *autonomy*- the idea that music's meaning is inherent or intrinsic. As Eduard Hanslick- the progenitor of such a view- put it, music's meaning 'inheres in the combinations of musical sounds and is independent of all alien, extra-musical notions.'ⁱ While Hanslick may have set the tone in the 19th century, there have been numerous variants on music's closure in recent years.

Perhaps most strikingly, John Cage, known for polemicizing the Western Art music tradition through both writing and composition, seems to share Hanslick's view that music's meaning is intrinsic rather than extrinsic: 'Music means nothing as a thing'ⁱⁱ he argues; for Cage, 'sounds should be just sounds.'ⁱⁱⁱ Note the uncanny resemblance of the latter comment to something that his ideological opponent Hanslick wrote: 'music speaks not only by means of sounds, it

speaks nothing but sounds.'^{iv} What both Cage and Hanslick agree on is that music is segregated from meaning. For Cage this is the separation of music from ideas, ideologies, conventions and human control. For Hanslick this is the separation of music from all worldly concepts: from lyrics, narrative, emotions and culture.

However, Cage was radical in his rejection of meaning tout court, and it seems that a common stance in musicology and aesthetics has rather been to appeal to ideals of an *exclusively* musical meaning, and in so doing propagate the transcendentalist conception of music structure. Hanslick helped instigate this line of thought by suggesting that '[m]usic's kingdom is, indeed, "not of this world"' (p.70.) Although more recent examples are not hard to come by: Jim Samson, while implicitly opposing himself to the likes of Hanslick in places, nonetheless seems to concede to the inaccessible musical meaning:

'Music, it might be argued, is so utterly and irreducibly specific, its meaning so embedded in its essence, that we are forced to borrow from other systems of thought in order to attempt any kind of description at all.'^v

Samson may stop short of explicitly advocating a transcendentalist discourse here, although he does imply that music is special in its isolation from the world. Conversely, Roger Scruton, exhibiting far more ardor and conviction, vehemently affirms music's closure from the world, holding that not only should it be conceded that music is beyond rational enterprise but also that it should be protected from it:

'It is obviously the case that advances in the neurosciences have begun to impinge upon what for me was a sacred and protected territory [music] and one has to, as it were, herd the call to rush to the boundary to defend it.'^{vi}

However, a particularly succinct and explicit expression of this transcendentalist position comes from Lawrence Zbikowski who, writing on music-cognition, states that "Musical concepts are of another world, another order, because they extend into a domain that is beyond words."^{vii}

The postulate that musical sound has its own meaning, that does not refer to extra-musical properties, is a pervasive one then, seemingly persisting in various quite disparate approaches. In this paper I adopt what I see as the premises of the above arguments- that music is an intense experience, and is not reducible to objective properties- but argue against the notion of a musical kind of meaning that is central to transcendent views. Such views may be rather heavily ideology-laden, and as such likely constrain understanding of music by promoting a particular bias. Certainly, a transcendent view does glorify music, which musicologists

would presumably be keen to do, and yet I think the notion of there being something unique, or even peculiar about music's content seems to be at odds with certain cultural realities. For example:

Juslin notes that the most typical listening attitude is one of indifference, where music is not the focus of attention;^{viii} musical experience has been observed, in the form of a favourable response to consonance, in children in the early stages of infancy (Trehub: 2009; 231); music is practiced by all known peoples of the world (Agawu 1999); music is highly heterogeneous both in its production and its interpretation.

Also, the reliance of this view on the opacity of the ineffable is in danger of dissolving into fallacy- the transcendentalist argument equates, I think, to the assertion that absence of an observable musical meaning does not indicate an absence of meaning but rather the existence of an unobservable meaning. A leaner theory would posit the absence of musical meaning *just as* an absence of musical meaning. To take this line would be to accept that music is only sound. This obviously opens a gaping explanatory gap to the order of: *what is the nature of music's apparent meaningfulness?* To close the gap I propose that the experiential intensity of music can be accounted for by *intrinsically value-laden cognitive operations*. The effect of this concept is to endorse experiential autonomy by bestowing a *constitutive* role on cognition itself. I later argue that the lack of referential meaning in music is in fact necessary for the intensity of experience to obtain, since conceptual constraint would do violence to the freedom of cognitive engagement characteristic of musical intercourse. On this view, much of the explanatory burden is on music psychology to account for music experience in terms of intrinsically cognitive phenomena; I will discuss several studies but only one in any real detail.

II. Music Psychology

A. Cognitive Categorisation

Zbikowski^{ix} applied a number of cognitive models to music; the model I am concerned with pertains to *cognitive categorization*:

'[Our] recognition of... things reflects the categories through which we structure our thought: to recognise a book is to identify it as a member of the category *book*; to recognise a tree is to identify it as a member of the category *tree*. Categorization occurs in all sensory modalities and throughout the range of mental activities: we categorize smells and sounds, thoughts and emotions, skin sensations and physical movement. Categories are...basic to thought.'
(p.13)

It was Zbikowski's insight to demonstrate how this fundamental cognitive process is essential to music listening. He did this in the form of a motivic analysis- explicating the musical motif, and the reported phenomenology of a musical motif (ascriptions of value etc. in discourse), as a cognitive

category- although, as he puts it, while this 'is a good example of a musical category, categories can be much more various and structured around whatever set of musical relationships seems best to account for what is salient about a particular repertoire' (p.59.) Indeed, the principle themes for a cognitive category analysis are the establishment of a prototypic form and then the manifestation of further forms that can be observed to hold some relationship with the prototype, such that a range of musical elements, e.g. rhythm, phrase structure, harmony, key and melody, ought all to be well-suited to such analysis.

The conclusion that one of the most pervasive and essential human characteristics- that of the ability to categorise- can be linked to one of the most pervasive and essential characteristics of music- that of structural relationships between component parts- seems to me a fairly spectacular one, in as far as it proffers a clear and tangible cognitive account of a very significant means by which music has experiential value. Zbikowski chooses the transcendentalist position over this conclusion, however, as mentioned above, although there seems nothing necessary about making this move into mysticism. I am going to take his findings at face value- the strong relation between cognitive categorisation, music structure and music discourse seems sufficient to give cognitive categorisation *alone* considerable explanative worth. On this view then, it is not what is expressed *with* categorical structure that makes music phenomenally salient, but rather just *that there is* categorical structure.

B. Image Schemata

Image schemata^x are embodied structures, so derive their content from the body as opposed to mental representations; and they are *metaphorical* in that they can apply to lots of different experiences. This structural multiplicity helps us 'carve up our world'^{xi} into manageable chunks. Hence image schemata *facilitate* rather than *constitute* understanding, and by the same token are *intrinsically* cognitive, having no reality outside the bounds of the cognitive. That these structures have proven explanative in music analyses by Alan Moore (2010) and Larson and Van Handel (2005) is highly instructive, since they are so explanative without having attendant concepts: it is the operation of image schemata *alone*, and not their functional role of explicating the world that is linked to musical value.

C. Ecological Theory

Clarke^{xii} developed an approach to music based on James Gibson's^{xiii} work on *ecological theory*. This is the theory that there is much inherent structure in the environment and in the perceiver that thus affords the perceiver *direct* perception- without mediation from abstract knowledge or representations. This theory refers to- and is supported by- work in the field of robotics and connectionism.^{xiv} Clarke describes an example of how musical texture can specify volumetric space:

'in bars 103 and 104 all four instruments play semibreves... in unison and octave doublings, but at 105... the four instruments break out into four-part harmony, and then... six-part harmony at 106. The effect is of a narrow space, or singularity, bursting open'' (p.184).

The space of which Clarke speaks is, of course, illusory- or 'virtual,' as he prefers. These spatial properties are by no means part of the music in any objective sense (part of physical, or semantic content); they are products of, and exclusive to, the cognition of the music. Again, the point here is that myriad ecological meanings can be found in analysis in lieu of high-order semantic or conceptual meaning, which suggests that the perceptual function itself has experiential efficacy, irrespective of its aim of gleaning salient environmental information.

D. Other Studies

I will note but not detail a few other points that indicate music's cognitive intrinsicity. Generic musical materials have been explicated without referencing external processing units or representations. For example, tonal hierarchy has been modelled in connectionist architecture;^{xv} this research demonstrates that human responses to (an aspect of) musical sound can be modelled by a system that has no mediating external processor. Also, rhythm has been theorised as neurological entrainment, which suggests a conceptually unmediated neural mechanism for the development of rhythm-expectancies.^{xvi} Finally, Stevens and Byron^{xvii} have indicated universal musical constraints, i.e. those that obtain across all conceptual frameworks and so are not specific to any particular epistemology.

E. Psychology in Sum

These cognitive operations lack extrinsic content then; they do not give an account of how music is meaningful as part of the world, and they suggest that a person listens not for what music can express or communicate but rather for the experience of being cognitively engaged.

There are most probably studies revealing intrinsic cognitive contents that I have missed, and future developments will undoubtedly proffer much to expand the music-psychologists explanative repertoire in this regard. But, I think the studies reviewed would afford sufficient ascribable content to explicate a particularly intense experiential phenomenon. Certainly, it is not at all clear that there would be a need, or even room, for the addition of an exclusively musical meaning. In fact, I think the absence of extrinsic meaning is key to facilitating music's intensity: the lack of mediation by understanding implies a direct engagement with the faculties for feeling; meaning can be regarded a constraint that is lifted to allow freedom of cognitive structuring. Consider the profusion of distinct categories that play out simultaneously in a piece of music (rhythm, harmony, melody, etc.), along with the ecological specification of numerous dynamic sound sources and the operation of embodied schemata; such structural complexity would not be possible in a conceptual narrative, at least not in the same time-frame.

III. Elaborating a Nonrepresentationalist View

A concept of experiential autonomy trivially follows from the concept of experience without extrinsic reference. However, with this concept of autonomy I do not aim to specialise music (viz. Hanslick and the rest.) Rather, I suggest

that music listeners enjoy a basic and completely general human prerogative.

I argue that music is a *self-directed* practice. Consider that music is a 'species-specific trait'^{xviii}; it is one that '[a]ll cultures regard... as at least minimally valuable'^{xix} and one that non-human primates dislike- they prefer silence;^{xx} it is trivially accessible.^{xxi}

These points suggest music rests on a distinctively human characteristic that is basic to humans generally, one such characteristic being that of a sophisticated concept of self. Suppose that a self-aware being might break its tie to meaningful perception- the perception of what is held to be significant as regards the aims and intentions of the organism- by directing intentionality toward (aspects of) *itself*. It seems like such behaviour would give nothing by way of extrinsic referents. The *formal* experience of sound- as of a psychological entity distinguishable from whatever conceptual framework it might refer to- would, on this account, be that which is facilitated by the turning inward of consciousness. To have sound in itself, then, would be to have the epistemic foundation to conceive of the perceiver, and to comprehend the means by which the perceiver perceives. It is the active ignorance of meaning and engagement with self that affords this capacity- when the world is separated from the means of perception and the latter is taken as a subject of experience.

Far from specialising music, the thrust here is rather that music is a specific employment of the most general and fundamental of human abilities, that of conceiving oneself as oneself. As such, this account of music as self-directed and irreducibly phenomenological is easily situated in a discussion of phenomenological experience generally.^{xxii} Levine outlines the problem of the *explanatory gap*:

'By appeal to the physical properties of the brain we seem able to explain how we process information, how our bodies react to the environment, and even- on analogy with computers- how we reason. But why any of these processes should give rise to consciousness, that there should be something it's like for creatures who have these processes going on inside them, this seems mysterious to us.'^{xxiii}

Problems pertaining to music seem germane: the musicologist Nicholas Cook^{xxiv} cites a wealth of empirical, theoretical and phenomenological evidence to argue that forms of music representation and forms of music experience are 'two essentially different things,' that there is a 'disparity between the experience of music and the way in which we imagine or think about it' (p.135,) and that formal music-representations are 'explanatory metaphors or fictions' (p.241.) Music, it seems, forces the explanatory gap on us powerfully, given that centuries of academic research seems not to have revealed the nature of what is a trivially accessible experience. But this separateness of experience and understanding, whether pertaining to music or qualia generally, is just what would be expected, where we to endorse the notion of intrinsically value-laden cognitive operations. On this view, qualia are elucidated by music.

Consider Jeffrey Gray, a neuroscientist, lamenting science's ineptitude in accounting for qualia:

'given that there is a scientific story that goes seamlessly from sensory input to behavioural output *without* reference to consciousness then, when we try to add conscious experience back into the story, *we can't find anything for consciousness to do.*'^{xxv}

Music might be a good example of how a mind can have experience without having anything 'to do,' in Gray's sense. Sounds or images may only manifest as distinct entities when they are conceived as affording the functions that they do, thus providing the cognitive utility to detach the subject from the object and conduce to the exploration of the former. What music can be observed 'doing' or what 'behavioural output' it produces, are only sensible questions on the view that music's content is a property of objects that is represented by the mind. When this view is rejected, and the mind is assumed to contribute towards music's content in virtue of its intrinsic operations, that there is a scientifically inaccessible realm of experience becomes intelligible. Perhaps Stravinsky characterises this argument succinctly when he says: '*I haven't understood a bar of music in my life, but I have felt it.*'^{xxvi}

REFERENCES

ⁱ Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, trans. Gustav Cohen (Michigan: the University of Michigan, 1891), 12.

ⁱⁱ John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1961), 66.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cage 1961; 61

^{iv} Hanslick 1854/1891; 119

^v Jim Samson, 'Analysis in Context,' in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47

^{vi} Scruton, Rodger, 'Can there be a Science of Musical Understanding?' (2011) url: <http://www.themusicalbrain.org/events> accessed 02/2012

^{vii} Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualising Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002,) 326

^{viii} Juslin, 'Emotional Responses to Music' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*: 2009 p.133

^{ix} Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualising Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).

^x See Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987.)

^{xi} Johnson 1987

^{xii} Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005).

^{xiii} Gibson 1966, 1979

^{xiv} For a review of embodied and ecological cognitive content see Shapiro 2011

^{xv} Emmanuel Bigand and Benedict Poulin-Charronnat, 'Tonal cognition,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, ed. Susan Hallam, Ian Cross and Micheal Thaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59-71.

^{xvi} Mari Riess Jones, 'Musical time,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, ed. Susan Hallam, Ian Cross and Micheal Thaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81-92.

^{xvii} Catherine Stevens and Tim Byron, 'Universals in music processing,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, ed. Susan Hallam, Ian Cross and Micheal Thaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14-23.

^{xviii} Kofi Agawa, 'The Challenge of Semiotics,' in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 102-138

^{xix} Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: thirty-one issues and concepts* (Illinois: University of Illinois 2005), 23.

^{xx} Josh McDermott and Marc D. Hauser, 'Nonhuman primates prefer slow tempos but dislike music overall,' in *Science Direct Cognition* 104 (2007): 654-668 2006 accessed March 2012, URL:

http://www.cns.nyu.edu/~jhm/mcdermott_tempo.pdf

^{xxi} Nicholas Cook, *Music Imagination and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990), 218

^{xxii} Note that I am circumventing a thorough discussion of qualia here, as space is limited: quite whether qualia are limited to perception, whether they indicate dualism etc. is not strictly pertinent here. For a review see the Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Mind (2009) esp. 223-313.

^{xxiii} Joseph Levine, 'The Explanatory Gap,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin, Ansgar Beckermann, Sven Walter (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 281-291

^{xxiv} Cook 1990

^{xxv} Jeffrey Gray, *Consciousness: Creeping up on the Hard Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), 40, his emphasis

^{xxvi} Cited in Cook 1990; 186