

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed journal of the



Volume 8, No. 1
March 2009

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Electronic Article

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ISSN 1545-4517

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What Music Isn't and How to Teach It¹

Arnold Berleant



Some years ago I participated in a philosophy study group. At one of our meetings the conversation turned, not surprisingly, to aesthetics. I could not resist remarking to this small gathering of non-aestheticians that I had long been dismayed by the commonplace answers people readily give to questions in aesthetics. Everyone but philosophers seems to know what art is, when art is good and when bad, mindlessly mouthing all the conventional answers to the central questions in aesthetics that philosophers puzzle over endlessly. Railing against such ready responses, I bemoaned the prevalence of so many misleading ideas. One of our group suggested that I write a book called *Ten False Beliefs about Art*. I immediately seized on the idea responding that it would be hard to limit myself to ten but that it would be easy to know where to begin. The first candidate would certainly be “Music is the language of emotion.”

Well, until now that is as far as the proposal went, but this may be my long-delayed opportunity to begin the project, although I have no intention of going any further than this first and most egregious misunderstanding. The music question is quite enough. On this, at least, I can hope to offer some enlightenment, for I bring to bear on the question my life as both philosopher and musician.

Still, this task is not an easy one. For unlike the other arts, music has no direct connection with the rest of the human world. True, there are bird songs and natural “melodies” in the gurgling of brooks, but these are hardly the materials of music in the way that landscape can be the subject of painting. And no natural sounds can stand alone as quasi-artworks the way that the deeply eroded limestone blocks from China’s Lake Tai can be admired as great abstract sculptures. Music demands to be understood in its own terms. This is not a new requirement, for others have urged us to focus on music as experience that is intrinsically and only musical. Still, the false analogies are convenient: Music is emotion that is linguistically structured! The way out of this error is to understand music as experience.

What Music Isn't

I should like to do two things in this essay, although two may be too many. Let me start by dispelling the characterization of music as language. The basis for the comparison is simple and obvious: both music and language have a formal structure, a syntactic structure of units whose order is guided by rules. Just as words can be combined into phrases, phrases into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into literary compositions, so musical tones can be shaped into motives and phrases, phrases into periods, and these into sections that are ordered depending on the larger form that has been chosen: three-part song, sonata-allegro, rondo, etc. And since sentences and their combinations are presumably the bearers of meaning, so musical meaning is embedded in music's larger syntactical structures.

Simple, yes, but not so simple, for problems remain, such as the problem of meaning. What kind of meaning resides in linguistic formations and what kind in music? When the language is prose non-fiction, we may confidently say that we can locate cognitive meaning there, meaning in the sense of verifiable propositions. At the same time it is often acknowledged that cognitive meaning does not exhaust the meaning content of linguistic compositions. In addition to the use of tropes, there may be innuendos and other such subtle and indirect shades of meaning that may not even be capable of articulation but reside in the choice of particular words and their order, not to mention extra-linguistic features such as gestures and inflection. The meaning of meaning is a major question in linguistics.

But what of the kind of meaning that inheres in prose fiction? Here is a question aestheticians continue to debate. One can ask, indeed, whether the question of meaning is the appropriate question to ask for understanding fiction. And of course this still says nothing about other uses of language such as poetry and rhetoric. Questions of meaning are problematic enough in the language arts where they might be considered more germane to the medium. In the case of music, an analogy with language raises more difficulties than it dispels and, indeed, dispels none, for I think that it starts the inquiry on the wrong track and is thus instantly misleading.

Then there is the matter of emotion, which is often cited as the answer to musical meaning. Here we encounter still more difficulties. It is hard to take issue with the claim that we may have emotions while listening to music. Yet emotion is not the only feeling we may have: we may feel languorous, erotic, resolute, energetic, or belligerent, all states of body-mind and not what is generally meant by what are called emotions such as happy or sad, the

usual candidates for music. Obviously the explanation of emotion is itself greatly problematic. Without expecting to resolve the not-so-simple question of what emotion is, we can still point out that the word is a short-hand term for an inchoate experience whose manifestations are invariably unique and hence not repeatable, exchangeable, comparable, or even classifiable. The common words we use to identify emotions as ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ are impoverished, high-order abstractions and clarify little about such experiences beyond a general and vague classification.

Discussions that attempt to relate music and emotion incur underlying assumptions that further vitiate the arguments. The assumptions are many, beginning with the idea that there is an identifiable something called emotion that is present in music. This is clearly an anthropomorphic projection and leads to claims that music expresses something apart from what it itself is. Music is said to express this something, or the composer or performer are said to express that something, and further, these supposed expressions are the right way to talk about what is going on in the music. This way of internalizing musical experience is part of the irrepressible tendency to psychologize emotion and so to characterize musical experience as subjective. On the other hand, as long ago as the late nineteenth century, psychologists began to credit emotions to physiological changes emanating from the autonomic nervous system (the James-Lange theory of emotions), and more recent theories find emotions resulting from physiological arousal joined with cognitive factors such as an appraisal of the surroundings (Schachter and Singer's [1962] two factor theory of emotion). The tendency to translate aesthetic experience into emotion is prevalent in the common misunderstanding of the arts in general but even more pernicious in the case of music, which has nothing external on which to pin it, as painting has to the landscape or the novel to a plot.

Because it is common for people to experience emotion when listening to music, the assumption is made that music is emotion or is about emotion. An insidious logical error often seeps through discussions associating music and emotion. The error consists in taking the effect, emotion, for the explanation. This is a type of common pre-scientific explanation of phenomena that occurs when the effect is taken as the cause, as in claiming—to use one of John Dewey's examples—that the heat in fire is caused by fire's calorific power. This is a false explanation or, rather, a non-explanation, since it is merely a tautology; that is, it “explains” something by merely citing itself in different words. In this example, ‘calorific’ means “productive of heat,” thus the “explanation” is only saying that the heat in fire is

caused by the power to produce heat! This is a kind of thinking still prevalent in social thought, as when selfish behavior is explained by saying that it's human nature to be selfish. In other words, people are selfish because people are selfish by nature! So from the fact that people have an emotional response to music, the inference is made that music originates in feeling or, in Langer's version, that art is the symbol of sentience.

But let us consider how we experience music. Sound is produced, usually from an external source except, of course, in the case of vocal sounds. It is activated by a person or device usually different from the listener and, when physical or electronic equipment is involved, often separate in time as well as space. The sounds themselves are physical events in the form of atmospheric vibrations. It is unnecessary here to enumerate the multiple factors involved in the production of music, but it is useful to remember them when confronted by the many commonplaces that try to turn music into a personal, private, inner, subjective emotion. Such accounts fail to recognize that music is not only a physical occurrence but a social phenomenon involving a community of composers, performers, and listeners and that it has a history of performance practice and of valuing.

Listening to music incorporates (I use this word literally) all the factors I have listed, and considering music in this way makes it into a physical, social, situational, and even historical art. The listener's participation in the perception of sound is physiological as well as social psychological, as if any of these could be separated. "[T]he social mind (Mead, Dewey, Peirce) always conditions perception selectively—it doesn't just automatically register stimuli."² Much more could be said on the subject but what I have offered is enough to situate and correct the bald misunderstanding that is assumed in regarding musical experience as a subjective and emotional experience. Music could better be described as a social-environmental art. Of course such an account does not fully answer the question of what musical experience is, but it sets us in the right direction. More on this question in a moment.

A corollary to the error of assigning music an emotional meaning lies in maintaining that music *expresses* that emotion. In its naïve use this mistaken insistence projects the human capacity to feel and express emotion into the musical sounds themselves. A more sophisticated version argues that the expression is *in* the music or that music has expressive properties. Apart from the anthropomorphism implicit in such assertions, the very language reifies emotive phenomena that are fluid and intangible. In one way or another, music is

taken to express emotion.

It is undoubtedly true for most people, musicians and non-musicians alike, that listening to music may evoke experience replete with feelings. What, then, is the relation between those feelings and the music? Often a parallelism and perhaps even an identity is proposed between the listener's emotional experience and the emotion the music is purportedly expressing. But it is hard to grasp in any but the vaguest sense how a feeling, itself so elusive and indeterminate, can be compared with or be assimilated to another, equally indeterminate feeling. Other difficulties emerge when attempting to distinguish components in emotion: a cognitive object, a physiological state, and the corresponding expressive behavior. When the fact that one has feelings while listening to music is used to claim that the music is expressing those feelings, what we have is more likely a projection of the listener's experience onto the music itself than anything in or true of the music. Stravinsky excised this issue neatly when he commented, "Music expresses nothing. It can express itself only."³

Much of the difficulty here stems from the common connotation of the very word 'music.' The term is usually taken to mean that there is some *thing*, an auditory event called 'music.' In fact, the word *music* is actually a shorthand way of speaking of an entire experiential situation. Understood purely as sound, the word 'music' is a synecdoche, taking a part of the entire auditory situational experience as if it were the whole. "Music itself" is thus synecdochic, since musical sound is inseparable from an agent who produces and one who hears it. (Obviously they may be the same individual.) Moreover, whatever emotion we feel in listening to music is culturally conditioned; it is not found *in* the music but is, at best, projected *onto* it.

All such misleading assertions could be avoided by recognizing that music is the human experience of certain sonorous phenomena. And any emotional expression that might be claimed of it occurs in the experience of those phenomena but resides neither in the sounds alone nor in the listeners themselves. Indeed, 'expression' is hardly the appropriate word to account for such experience. For, whatever else may be said—and this is of central importance—it is experience whose focus is on its very self as experience, not on the listener's interior feelings or response, which is what is implied by 'expression.' Indeed, experience is badly misconstrued if it is taken as subjective. As I hope to have made clear, experience in general and musical experience particularly is a complex phenomenon

involving a number of factors, events, and collaborating conditions. Language, emotion, and expression are poor, misleading surrogates for that experience.⁴

Once these misrepresentations have been avoided, it is still no easy task to give an authentic account of musical experience. But at the same time, such experience should stand at the very center of music education, and something must be said and done about it. For unless we consider music education to consist entirely of technical, theoretical, or historical information, we necessarily must turn to the ways music may be experienced. Theory, history, analysis, etc. are not a substitute for or an alternative to musical experience but must derive from and can enhance that experience. Understanding better what that experience is and what it involves is necessary before determining what and how to teach music.

What Can We Teach?

Having said what music isn't, we are left with the task of how to teach it. And since all we have are musical experiences, socially and culturally situated, and nothing else, what can we teach? Without language or emotion to rest on, is there anything we can say about music? All we can talk about is music itself: musical sound in its many modes and styles and with its indefinite boundaries. Can we teach experience? Not an easy undertaking.

Early in the process of music education is re-education: the task of dispelling pernicious misapprehensions of the sort I have been describing. But once we expose their seductive misdirections, a rich and complex range of experience lies before us. We can encourage and lead others first to focus on musical experience directly and without intermediary and to recognize its many dimensions and transformations. Then we can assist them in developing skill in engaging in the experience.

Let me offer some suggestions on how to structure and direct this process. What I propose here is hardly new, but I hope that, in its present context, these ideas may serve to help others engage with music on its own terms more directly and with greater satisfaction and fulfillment. The key is to attract and hold attention on musical experience itself by exposing students to the many ways by which musical sounds are shaped, organized, and developed so that they experience them and begin to recognize their nuances and transformations. How to do this?

Articulating musical meter and rhythm in body movement, as in Dalcroze Eurhythmics, is an effective way of encouraging participation in musical experience.⁵ One can be taught to

feel physically the pulse of different meters such as the common 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/8 and experience how they are embedded in musical forms, such as the waltz, mazurka, polka, tarantella, and march. Engaging in such experiences would transform these forms from conceptual distinctions into physical events with distinctively different metrical (and physical) characters. Actually learning dances in these different meters is an excellent corrective to subjectifying or abstracting their special identities. Moreover, translating into bodily movements such musical devices as the anticipation, suspension, the resolution of a dissonance, the pedal tone, and the persistent repetition of a rhythmic pattern or melodic motive (as in Ravel's *Bolero*, the Allegretto second movement of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*) or a distinctive rhythm (such as the Scotch snap) can help make them concrete. An inventive instructor could even choreograph some musical works as movement alone.

Other dimensions of education in musical experience include dynamic properties, melodic understanding, harmonic structure and movement, and musical form. Here a talented instructor can find illustrative materials and help students learn to listen and detect perceptual differences. Included among the dynamic properties of music are volume, intensity, and changes in volume and tempo, sensing intervals and texture, and noticing the movement of pitch. Differences in texture can easily be illustrated by the dense chords frequently found in Beethoven's piano works, the thin, diaphanous sound at the beginning of the *Intermezzo* in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and the wide spatial texture of the opening of the Sibelius *Violin Concerto*, my favorite example of musical spatiality.

Detecting the movement of pitch is probably one of the easiest perceptual changes to convey, shifts from low to high and the contrast between simple lines and florid passages. This can lead eventually to skill in following polyphonic textures and apprehending contrapuntal techniques. Repetitive patterns could be a part of developing pitch awareness, leading perhaps to the capacity to recognize melodic repetition in a ground bass and in sets of themes and variations. Examples of masterful jazz improvisation can be studied to illustrate pitch variation. Such changes could be combined in different ways to further develop perceptual acuteness.

Less obvious but just as revealing is harmonic movement, such as the different effects of typical harmonic progressions. Cultivating this sensibility may be more difficult for those without musical training, but I think an elementary capacity to notice changes can be developed. One could start with examples of harmonic movement in works built primarily of

chord repetition and sequences, such as the melodic and harmonic repetition of A-flat at the beginning of Chopin's *Etude* op. 25 no. 1 ("Aeolian Harp") and the widely familiar harmonic sequence of Bach's *Prelude* in C major, *Well-Tempered Clavier* Bk. I No. 1. Grasping harmonic pattern and movement can lead students eventually to the chaconne and passacaglia.

Finally, perceiving musical forms requires greater perceptual sophistication but there are simple levels of apprehending musical structure by noticing dramatic changes within a movement (such as the *Intermezzo Interotto* in the fourth movement of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* and the chorale *Es ist genug* quoted in the last movement of Berg's *Violin Concerto*). Recognizing the repetition of a section in baroque binary form and in Schubert's *Moments musicaux* requires somewhat more skill. Noticing the contrast between movements of larger works might lead eventually to recognizing the prospective termination that identifies a coda. Students could be led from noticing the contrasting character of different sections of a movement to learning to recognize the return of musical materials in the three-part song form, the rondo, and the recapitulation in a sonata-allegro movement.

It is tempting to begin the process of leading students to musical experience by recourse to the imitative use of music, something that occurs in many musical genres: classical, folk, rock, jazz, and pop. Although this actively encourages the listener to attend to the ongoing sounds and try to relate them imaginatively to what descriptive source the composer has used as a stimulus to musical imagination, it actually can subvert our intent for it can easily lead the listener to substitute a cognitive experience for a musical one by focusing on a narrative and trying to identify sounds by the non-musical features or events they purportedly represent.

The temptation to have recourse to imitation is, however, great. Some of us, myself included, were first captivated by the ability of music to represent stories in sound in such works as Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre*, Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and especially that classic of fairy tale narrative, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. Instances of imitation easy to recognize are the traits of people, things, and situations, as Mussorgsky revealed so ingeniously in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Debussy's music exhibits many descriptive opportunities, from the more obvious ("The Sunken Cathedral") to the less obvious ("Goldfish" and "Gardens in the Rain"). These could be followed by descriptive music that requires more abstract imagination to grasp, such as Debussy's *La Mer* and Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*. Examples of this sort can be varied with works that

use or imitate sounds that normally occur outside of music, such as bird song (Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*), a locomotive (Honegger's *Pacific 231*) and traffic (Gershwin's *An American in Paris*). Similar imitative sounds occur in the works by Debussy and Saint-Saëns mentioned earlier. If imitation is used, it is important to make clear that the sounds are suggestive and evocative only and that they do not get their significance from their imitative association. At the same time, such cases can make us aware that no sharp boundary can be drawn between musical and non-musical sounds.

These examples are only illustrative and reflect my interest in the classical literature, but there is no end of illustrations available in other genres, and imaginative instructors may enjoy finding examples from folk music, jazz, pop, and other bodies of musical literature. Developing and refining an informal curriculum in musical listening could easily become an exciting pedagogical project with a personal stamp, for interests and knowledge of the musical literature are invariably individual. And getting students to supply examples would serve a double purpose.

We end, then, with music, only with music, with musical experience⁶ (Widmer, 1996). But that is precisely where we should begin if we wish to avoid characterizing music by what it isn't. Let me conclude this section by contradicting the title of this essay and urge that we resolve to speak only of what music is.

Music as an Environmental Art

How, then, are we to understand music? How can we understand music in its own terms? The question has often been asked, especially since Hanslick (1986), and is still debated. Let me approach the question indirectly by locating music rather than by describing it, as I have just done here, or by speaking of its manifestations and workings as in composing and performing music. I should like to do this by thinking of music as an environmental art, not by referring to environmental music or to music in environment but of environment as a way of characterizing musical experience.

First, let me say that music does not exist in the abstract. Indeed, it is perhaps the most concrete, present, site-specific art. That is, music occurs; it occurs in space-time; its direct manifestation is immediate, and as an event it is always contextual, in other words, environmental. Scholars have engaged in interminable debates over what constitutes the musical object: the ephemeral sound, the score, performance tradition, and the like. But I

think the question is misstated, for there is no musical *object*; there is no aesthetic object; there is no object as such. To speak in this fashion is to offer an abstraction in place of an experience. Furthermore, the tendency, indeed the implication in introducing the idea of a musical object (or any object, for that matter) is that there is some thing out there, independent of us, to be located and identified, some thing separate and apart that needs to be understood.

But music is not an object, just as environment is not a place, separate from ourselves. Indeed, the common notion of environment as outside, as surroundings, involves the same objectifying process as in taking music as an object. I have long been working with the idea of environment as a contextual field that includes the human participant, not as a separate part but as an integral factor (Berleant 1992, 1997, 2005). Similarly, as participants in musical experience, we become part of the music or, to speak more precisely, we are participants and contributors as we engage in the musical process.

We can, in fact, think of the musical environment as a perceptual field, an aesthetic field in which the various factors and functions in appreciation are carried out. Four principal factors function in the musical situation or field: the creative one is, of course, the activity of the composer in shaping the (primarily) auditory experience. This may be focused in a musical score, a plan for listening created by the composer. Or it may be the sound itself, played or recorded directly using electronic technology. And for music to be heard it must be performed or activated at some time and in some way, so a performative factor accompanies the creative and focusing ones.⁷ A fourth factor is active, involved listening that fulfills the auditory possibilities the composer has embedded in the musical score or in the actual sound, and their realization by the performer. This is the process of appreciation.

These four functions—the creative, the focused, the performative, and the appreciative—are factors in every situation in which musical appreciation is fulfilled. These functions must not be thought of separately. Each involves and requires the others, and all of them together constitute an aesthetic field, a musical situation, a musical environment (Berleant 2000). What makes such a situation aesthetic is that it centers around appreciative experience that is primarily perceptual, involving all the senses, not only the auditory one, mediated and shaped through the manifold of cultural factors that affect all perception, and valued principally in itself for its own sake. To call a situation aesthetic thus identifies the kind of complex normative experience we engage in, here with music, elsewhere with other

arts, and still elsewhere in other domains of experience.

Perhaps we can teach students to engage in appreciative listening in this way, when their aesthetic engagement involves the conscious participation in this fourfold process of creating, focusing, performing, and appreciating. For this to be possible they must learn to listen to and participate in the maneuverings of sounds. And this becomes both a challenge and a discovery for both teacher and students.

Notes

¹ I want to acknowledge with appreciation the many useful suggestions of Wayne D. Bowman, Riva Berleant, Tom Regelski, and anonymous readers.

² Communication from Wayne Bowman, September 18, 2008.

³ Igor Stravinsky, as recorded on *Balanchine*, Kultur DVD D2448 (Kultur International Films, Ltd, 195 Highway 36, West long Branch, NJ 07764), n.d., Part 2.

⁴ It is indeed difficult to avoid thinking of music in terms that do not rely on or recall emotions. Undoubtedly music has a powerful psychic effect and evokes responses that may be emotionally powerful. I take no issue with this. The danger, however, lies in attributing this capacity to the music itself and in failing to keep the emotional factor where it resides, that is with the listener and performer, and not locate it in the music. Despite all his efforts to keep music “pure” and distinct from all extraneous features, even Peter Kivy (1990) eventually succumbs to the force of the emotional explanation. He seems to assume that emotional qualities are in the music and emotive terms are necessary to describe what is happening in the music. He even seems to relinquish the possibility of a purely musical explanation: “What we need, since we are primarily using names for the conscious states of human beings, is an explanation that brings in the lives and emotions of human beings” (p. 193). While Kivy seems to reject the claim that music is “in some way ‘about’ the emotions predicated of it,” he nonetheless attributes expressive properties to music, holding at the same time that they must be understood in “a purely musical way” (p. 193). This seems to me oxymoronic. For to even speak of music’s having expressive properties is, I think, at the very least to regard music anthropomorphically and, more directly, to attribute emotional qualities to music. Indeed, Kivy even includes expressive properties among musical ones. The fact that such attributions are commonly made only affirms the difficulty of extricating us from having recourse to an emotional explanation. There is undoubtedly a debate lurking here.

⁵ In writing of vocal music, Barthes emphasizes the participation of the body, and he finds this in other musical genres, both in the performer and the listener: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (Barthes 1977, 188).

⁶ “The purer the music the less it should be possible to know it. Knowledge re-establishes a relation with Having, nonidentity, which precisely music wants to overcome. The realm of

perfect music would be the realm of unknowing but also of the fullness of Being” (Widmer 1996, 300).

⁷ One could speak of focusing as an objectifying factor, referring to the musical work that is created. But this way of speaking encourages one to slip into the mistake of thinking of a musical *object*, a misunderstanding that must be carefully avoided.

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