

# ***Solving the Antinomy between the Aesthetics and the Politics of Music***

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ABSTRACT. The aesthetic experience of a piece of music and its political significance are sometimes said to be in a tension. Sometimes these two dimensions are even understood as two mutually exclusive or incompatible aspects of its appreciation considered as an artwork. Interestingly, this view is shared by two positions which are in all other respects at the opposite sides of the philosophical spectrum. Whereas musical autonomists or formalists deny the relevance of any possible moral or political significance for the aesthetic appreciation of, at least, absolute music, moralists and functionalists tend to underrate the importance of the particular intrinsic value of a piece of music as a work of art. The negative or critical aim of this paper is to argue against the incompatibility view which formalists and functionalists share. Its main positive or constructive claim consists in arguing for the possibility of an interaction between the aesthetic experience and the political functions of a work of music.

## **I.**

The aesthetic experience of a piece of music — and in particular a piece of instrumental or absolute music — and its potential political significance are sometimes said to be in a tension. Sometimes these two dimensions are even understood as two mutually exclusive or incompatible aspects of its appreciation considered as an artwork. Interestingly, this view is shared by two positions which are in all other respects at the opposite sides of the philosophical spectrum. Whereas musical autonomists or formalists deny the relevance of any possible moral or political significance for the

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aesthetic appreciation of, at least, absolute music, moralists and functionalists tend to underrate the importance of the particular intrinsic value of a piece of music as a work of art, which is also a part of the particularly aesthetic appreciation of it. While both positions adhere to an incompatibility thesis between the aesthetic and the political dimensions of music, they both do so for very different reasons. The negative or critical aim of this paper is to argue against the incompatibility view which formalists and functionalists share. And its main positive or constructive claim consists in arguing for the possibility of an interaction between the aesthetic experience and the political functions of a work of music.

After these introductory remarks, in my second section I will give a critical account of the autonomist and the functionalist position by summarizing the recent contributions of Peter Kivy and Ph. Alperson/N. Carroll. In a third section I would like to give a short review of two traditional suggestions for solving the antinomy between the specific aesthetic value of music and its possible political content. And I also will try to show why I think these suggestions ultimately fail. In section four I will present a new proposal for solving this antinomy, and I will call this proposal the interaction thesis. In my last section I will demonstrate the plausibility of this interaction thesis by presenting various possibilities of understanding the instrumental music of the Russian composer Dimitrij Shostakovich.

Before starting, however, let me say that in previous presentations of this paper I have been criticized for using a concept of “politics” which apparently is completely unclear. I was quite surprised by this criticism as I think, that my argument does not depend on any specific notion of the term “politics” or “political significance”. What I mean by that term is just simply that a piece of music might relate — in one way or another — to questions of how people live together in a particular community which usually is larger than the family and smaller than humanity and which is furthermore characterized by certain relations of power and domination. And it seems obvious to me that these questions raise certain moral or ethical problems and that they might also be the object of particular emotions. (One could think of the attitude of tolerance as being an example for the political significance of music. Another example might be music which expresses the collective emotion of terror.) But it isn’t really the admittedly vague and broad notion of politics which is controversial in this

debate in the first place. The controversy is about whether there is any interaction between the aesthetics and the politics of music. And it is this controversy which I am going to address here.

## II.

Let me now first give you the outlines of a recent debate between a musical formalist — that is to say: Peter Kivy — and two musical functionalists — Philip Alperson and Noel Carroll. (Employing these terms certainly is a little bit dangerous, but for the present purposes that should not matter too much.) Peter Kivy, in his new book “Antithetical Arts”, is interested in the possibility of what he calls a “moral force” of music and does not really speak of its political significance. But if we understand our term “political significance” — very broadly — as the articulation of a view on how we are to live together, politics can be understood as a subset of moral matters. Someone like Peter Kivy, who denies the moral significance of music, thus also will have to deny its political significance.

Let us have a closer look at Kivy’s arguments. First of all, he frames the debate in a particular way. The question he raises is whether music can have “a moral force”.<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to distinguish three ways in which this concept might be construed. Something might possess, first, “epistemic moral force” by possessing the power “to convey or impart moral insights”. Something might possess, second, “a behavioral moral force” by making people act in a morally good way. And third, something might possess a “character-building moral force” by making a person “a better human being”.<sup>2</sup> Kivy rejects the possibility of an epistemic moral force of music and writes: “Absolute music does not, because it cannot, express propositions.”<sup>3</sup> Music also cannot influence the behavior of hearers because “absolute music cannot arouse the garden-variety emotions”.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, Kivy admits that music *can* have a character-building force: He writes “that during the experience, at least, we are better people; our characters

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<sup>1</sup> Kivy 2009, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Kivy 2009, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> Kivy 2009, p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> Kivy 2009, p. 225.

are, during that experience, themselves made better”<sup>5</sup> But as he talks of an effect that is merely transitory, one might question his claim that the “character” of a person really might be improved just simply during the act of listening.

(In brackets one can note that Kivy willingly admits the moral force of music which is not absolute music. By definition, for Kivy, absolute music is music without extra-musical content,<sup>6</sup> but vocal music or program music certainly might express propositions, and it thus might certainly also be politically significant. But it seems that for this very reason, the reception of vocal music with extra-musical, like for example moral content, for Kivy, does not permit of a form of aesthetic experience as pure as that of absolute music.)

The main objection against this view is that even absolute music is often perceived and understood as expressive. While Kivy would admit this point, a persona-theorist of musical expressiveness would go on and claim that the experience of expressive music invites the listener to imagine a musical persona which might be said to have a particular character.<sup>7</sup> (This is what I will later on call the internal purpose of a piece of music.) And as the listener is invited to sympathize with this persona, a piece of music might certainly have certain cognitive and moral “effects” on him or her. But the empirical, causal “effects” are not the main point, and they cannot explain the phenomenon of the expressiveness of music. Music can have a moral and sometimes political significance without having any “effects” at all. Certainly, a listener who does not understand a particular piece of music will not be moved at all by it. So the main objection against Kivy’s formalist position is that he doesn’t acknowledge this kind of internal purpose of a piece of absolute music: Its expressive character might not solely be an object of a particular kind of aesthetic emotion — as, for example, the admiration of its beauty — which is detached from any other emotions. It might move the listener to quite ordinary, non-aesthetic emotions of joy or sadness.

Interestingly enough, the functionalist shares this position. A functionalist also doesn’t acknowledge the possibility of an internal purpose of

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<sup>5</sup> Kivy 2009, p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> Kivy 2009, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Levinson 2006, pp. 91-108; Rinderle 2010, pp. 118-156.

a piece of music which might be an object of understanding. He admits the possibility of a moral or political significance of a piece of music, but he in the same time reduces the term “significance” to refer to a merely causal or empirical relation. Music may have — according to the particular context in which it is used — a particular moral or political function. Alperson and Carroll write that “most music has not been absolute music”<sup>8</sup> and they usefully distinguish between several social functions of music: Music, on the one hand, contributes to the stability of society; it is used “to regulate behavior, enforcing compliance with social norms and mores”<sup>9</sup>; music furthermore “can serve to integrate society by marking or celebrating significant events in the life of a community”<sup>10</sup>. But music also may have disintegrative functions, it may induce behavior which violates certain social norms; and — they point to the Blues as an example — it sometimes is “composed or performed to raise awareness of oppressive conditions”.<sup>11</sup>

How can music achieve this end? How can music “contribute to the ethical life of cultures”? To put their answer in a nutshell: Music performs its functions mainly by arousing movements, affects and emotions of its listeners.<sup>12</sup> Emotions obviously are a motive for action, and music, by arousing emotions, thus might also have an influence on the political behavior of its listeners. It thus might have the kind of ‘moral force’ which Kivy denies.

For my part, I certainly do not want to deny that music may actually be used and is actually used for those external purposes. What I want to deny is the claim that those external purposes of music give us an exhaustive view of the possible internal significance of music. There is a simple reason why such a reductionist claim is highly implausible: We sometimes say the particular use of a piece of music — let’s say the use of the “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony as the anthem of the European Union — does not do justice to the internal significance of this work. An appropriate aesthetic experience of this work does not simply reduce to the emotional stimulation of European citizens. To give you just two ex-

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<sup>8</sup> Alperson & Carroll 2008, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Alperson & Carroll 2008, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Alperson & Carroll 2008, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Alperson & Carroll 2008, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Alperson & Carroll 2008, pp. 10-14.

amples: Esteban Buch, in his book on the political history of the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony quotes the philosopher Agnes Heller saying: the European anthem “c’est la mort de la Neuvième Symphonie”.<sup>13</sup> And James Schmidt writes in his very interesting article that this symphony “rings false” in a place like Mauthausen, where it has been performed in 2000, to celebrate the fifty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp in this place.<sup>14</sup>

So the dilemma we face might be characterized as follows: The functionalist doesn’t have an idea of what it means to understand and aesthetically experience a piece of music; or, at least, he is not interested in this issue. But the emotional stimulation or arousal of the listener is not all there is to “understand” the meaning of a piece of music. And vice versa the aestheticist does not realize that the aesthetic experience of music does not reduce to a mere aesthetic contemplation of its beautiful form; the listener might sympathize with certain emotional characters of a piece of music, and this emotional response surely is a genuine part of the aesthetic experience of music.

### III.

En passant, I have already pointed to my solution of the problem. But before spelling this out in some more detail, let me first look back and give a short review of traditional suggestions for solving our dilemma. One might distinguish between two general strategies:

First, one could distinguish between two types of music and thus speak of the compatibility of two different ways of understanding these types of music: On the one hand, one could say absolute music might be devoid of any moral or political significance. And the way we have to “understand” it is by admiring and enjoying its particular beauty. On the other hand, we could say vocal music or program music demands a reception which is altogether different: Here the listener has to grasp the extra-musical content of the work: For example, he understands a song if he understands the political propositions it expresses. The antinomy might thus be solved

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<sup>13</sup> Buch 1999, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Schmidt 2005, p. 160.

by limiting the validity of the respective claims of the autonomist and the functionalist: Absolute music offers a specific kind of aesthetic experience but does not have any political significance. And some forms of vocal or program music are purely functional music; they might have a specific political significance, but they cannot offer the listener a particular type of aesthetic experience.

Secondly, one might claim that it is precisely because music has *no* specific social or political function that it *is* of especially high political significance. Adorno might have been an advocate of this strategy by which the aesthetic experience of absolute or autonomous music tends to become identified with its political significance. The particular aesthetic experience music might offer and its particular political significance, in this way, tend to become one and the same matter. Adorno sometimes speaks of the “autonomy” of a particular kind of avant-garde music. And by this he means, that some music does not have any particular (external) social function. But it is precisely by denying its social functions, by resisting certain external uses, that an artwork might gain its political significance and might be understood as a kind of mirror of the autonomy of a person or the emancipation of society from an instrumentalist form of rationality. Lydia Goehr, commenting upon Adorno, writes: “only a work which is autonomous is truly political”<sup>15</sup>. So according to this view, it is precisely because aesthetic experience cannot be politically functionalized that it might be seen as politically significant. (In a very particular and maybe limited sense of the term “political significance”, one might add.)

Now I think, both of these strategies ultimately fail. As far as the first strategy is concerned, I think that simply drawing a line between two kinds of music is highly controversial. Surely, also vocal music and program music may be the object of a genuine kind of aesthetic appreciation, and surely it can not be assumed just by a definition that absolute music is devoid of any moral or political significance. As far as the second strategy is concerned, I think that once one succeeds in disambiguating its main claims the identification of the aesthetics with the politics of music collapses either in the autonomist or in the functionalist view and therefore, in the end, does not succeed in solving the antinomy.

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<sup>15</sup> Goehr 1994, p. 102.

**IV.**

My own proposal achieves more than the first strategy does by going beyond postulating the mere possibility of a certain coexistence of two completely different kinds of music. But it achieves less than the second strategy aspires to: namely the identification of those two aspects. I therefore want to call it the interaction thesis which, on the one hand, articulates the possibility of a mutual influence between its aesthetic and its political dimensions, and, on the other, allows for their mutual independence and irreducibility.

This proposal for solving the antinomy depends on two distinctions: First I distinguish between the internal and the external purpose or function of a piece of music. Its external function results from the use it is put to in some specific circumstances or its causal effects. But its internal function is an object of the understanding and particularly depends on its expressive meaning which remains independent of any particular social or political circumstances of its reception. This distinction between an external and an internal or inherent function, I borrow from a recent paper by Jerrold Levinson. He writes: "Excluding from the aesthetic appreciation of music the appreciation of music for external purposes that it happens to serve does not mean excluding from the sphere of aesthetic appreciation all consideration of music's internal purposes, or in other words, of its inherent functionality in virtue of being music of a certain kind."<sup>16</sup>

I secondly distinguish between a traditional, narrow and affect-oriented concept of aesthetic experience which exclusively focuses on the specific aesthetic pleasure of the listener of a piece of music and an extended, content-oriented concept of aesthetic experience according to which the aesthetic experience of an artwork has its aesthetic properties as its content. By the way, Noël Carroll himself has argued for this extension of the traditional and narrow concept of aesthetic experience.<sup>17</sup>

With this two distinctions in place I now can formulate my own proposal to solve the antinomy: Once we grant the possibility of an internal purpose of a piece of music becoming the focus of its aesthetic experience in the new and extended sense of the term, then we do not need to speak

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<sup>16</sup> Levinson 2009, p. 416.

<sup>17</sup> Carroll 2001, pp. 41-62.

of an antinomy between the aesthetics and politics of music any more. We might instead speak of the possibility of an interaction between these two aspects. The internal purpose of a piece of music might itself have some political significance, and for that reason its political significance might become a component of its genuine aesthetic experience. With this proposal, we do not need to identify these two aspects. They still might be recognized as mutually separate and irreducible. And surely, the aesthetic experience of much music does *not* depend on its political significance. And vice versa: The political significance of a lot of music does not depend necessarily on an adequate understanding by an informed and competent listener.

## V.

To illustrate my main claim and to give some flesh to the dry bones of my schematic presentation, I want to give you one example: the instrumental music of Dmitri Shostakovich or rather different interpretations of it. Some recent contributions to the debate of how to understand the aesthetic aspects and the potential political significance of his music quite neatly fit into the categories of my philosophical discussion of the interaction between the aesthetics and politics of music in general. (I do not present these contributions in their chronological order, but in the order in which I have presented these positions in my paper.)

First we have the aestheticist or formalist position: Peter Kivy claims that Shostakovich's symphonies are to be understood as absolute music devoid of any external (or, for that matter, internal) moral or political significance.<sup>18</sup> And for Kivy, obviously, this is also what ultimately gives the high value to his music. (For some of his critics in the Soviet Union, the charge of formalism obviously was not a term of praise, but a term of criticism.) But given the wide-spread political reception of his music, this seems a quite implausible suggestion.

Secondly, we may observe that there are — broadly speaking — two different attempts to attribute some kind of political significance to his instrumental music from a more or less functionalist perspective. Tradi-

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<sup>18</sup> Kivy 2009, pp. 173-174.

tionally, Shostakovich has been seen or, rather, heard as a composer conforming to and supporting the communist ideology of the Soviet state. New revisionist interpretations by Ian MacDonald and Solomon Volkov try to make his music into the expression of a dissident.<sup>19</sup> Both of these views clearly attribute a certain social function to his music. And both of these interpretations are rejected by Peter Kivy because they fail to see that Shostakovich might have had an interest in hiding the potentially dangerous fact that his music really was autonomous.

In my eyes, these two attempts of understanding Shostakovich's music as politically significant are not all there is to be said about its meaning. Both the traditional view — making Shostakovich a supporter of the communist regime — as well as the revisionist view — seeing a dissident in Shostakovich — fail to make a clear distinction between the external and the internal purposes of his work. The question of whether his music is to be understood as conformist or even ideological (traditional view) or as the work of a critical dissident (revisionist view) makes sense only on the assumption that the external function of his music exhausts its possible meanings. But music might have an internal function with a political significance — independently of the external uses it is put to. Shostakovich's music might be said to express and articulate a particular collective emotions, the fears and sorrows of a people at a particular time living under a particular regime. Richard Taruskin, for example, writes that his music was understood as “the secret diary of a nation”<sup>20</sup>. Certainly, this might not have been the composer's intention, but at least, this is how his music was understood by his listeners. So we don't do justice to his work if we simply ask ourselves whether his music was supportive or critical of a particular totalitarian political regime. His music rather can be understood as being the expression of a particular emotional reaction — of fear and horror, pessimism, loneliness and despair — against any kind of totalitarian politics. And for this very reason his music, although it is not — as an aestheticist like Kivy would like to have it — always very beautiful or enjoyable, might be worthy even of our aesthetic appreciation today. Moreover, in this particular case, its aesthetic appreciation closely interacts with its

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<sup>19</sup> MacDonald 1991; Volkov 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Taruskin 2009, 305.

political significance.

To conclude: Independently of any external political uses to which music has been put and might be put, it may be its internal purpose which gives music its particular political significance as well as its aesthetic value.

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