

A Framework for Musical Meaning^{*}

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ABSTRACT. Compared to other forms of art, speaking of “meaning” seems to be most elusive in music, since the kind of “meaning” involved basically is neither semantic nor depicting. One might conclude that it makes no sense to speak of musical meaning at all, but this conclusion has seemed too rash to many thinkers. Consequently, the problem has been approached in quite varied ways. The present paper proposes a framework in order to throw light upon the relations between those various approaches to understand the meaning of music. This frame is triangular, its three points being (1) musical structure and analysis, (2) the embodied experience of listening, (3) the hermeneutic approach to interpret music in terms of its relation to the world. I provide short descriptions of the relations of interdependence by which these aspects influence each other, as well as suggestions how to place several recent theories of musical meaning in the proposed framework.

1. Introduction

“Meaning” is a term which philosophy has tried to define in various ways, but in spite of approaches to render it more precise, it continues to be used in ordinary language in a broad sense. The interest of dealing with

^{*} NOTE TO THE READER. This paper was not designed in order to make one single coherent and elaborated claim. Rather, its aim was to situate many already existing theories on musical meaning and musical understanding in a systematic frame and to offer this sketch of a system to the discussion at the conference. Read in itself, the paper might thus appear unsatisfying due to the many loose ends left over in it. I might say that I was less interested in *answering* single questions than in simply *presenting* them and in finding out possible connections between them. Thus, this paper might best be read taking it as an attempt in conceiving a little guide through the field of philosophy of music.

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the problem of “musical meaning” consists not least in trying to find out which areas of a broad sense of meaning can sensibly be related to music, and how this relation might come to be. (Note that my talking of “meaning” is merely an unhappy translation. Writing in German, I use the word “Sinn” – and not “Bedeutung”, usually given as the closest counterpart to “meaning” –, closely related to English “sense”. However, since a notion of “musical sense” is not current in the discussion, I refrained from using the unfamiliar word.)

A narrow use of “meaning”, understanding it as dependent upon a notion of referential signification, may lead us to reject the thought of musical meaning at all. Then, music is something which “tells” us nothing and serves merely to create an agreeable atmosphere and to decorate our lives.

But does music really “tell” us nothing? Is there something that prods us to say that it “tells” us something, and that we can “understand” it? Then, what does it “tell” us, and what do we “understand”? (I consider “understanding” to be the correlate of “meaning”: Meaning is there when someone understands something.) There are at least three phenomena which motivate the thought that music has meaning and that music can be understood:

At least in the “language” of tonal music we grow up with, even a hearer who has received only scarce musical training can immediately distinguish right and wrong, for example in the sense of right and wrong notes. The tones of music thus seem to have a syntax, violations of which are obvious to anyone. Here, meaning is related to syntactical or structural consistency, and if this kind of consistency is missing, we might say that we do not understand the music. However, at this point music has not yet “told” us anything.

Furthermore, one of the most central kinds of experience related to music, which almost anyone is likely to report, is that it moves us – emotionally, and in a more narrow sense, bodily; that it can speak to our hearts without words, and that it invites us to move with it. The meaning of music implied in this kind of experience and action consists in its power of expression and impression and seems to transcend mere patterns of sound, including events and experiences which are related to human life as a whole.

Finally: Is it an accident that music could be established among the

group of Fine Arts and that it could maintain this status even in an era when beauty, which defines these Arts, no more was conceived in terms of harmony or taste, to be experienced non-conceptually, but was connected with reflection (Kant) and conceptual content (Hegel), that is, with meaning in that narrower sense which can be applied to music only with difficulty? How, then, should we think about composers who claimed and still claim to “tell” us something with their music, to reflect their time in tones, to turn the horrors of war and dictatorship into music, to depict the broken state of the modern individual?

The first of these intuitions characterized music as a quasi-syntactical structure, the second one as expressive and moving, and the third one as a form of art, a bearer of possible messages and liable to (propositional) interpretation. The framework for theories of musical meaning I want to propose here contains these three characteristics as central points of interest. Existing theories can be compared by analyzing how much weight each of these three points is given, how they are understood to be related among each other, or if one or more of them are dismissed, and why. The following inquiry does not contain detailed analyses; it merely tries to sketch the framework and to suggest how existing theories of musical meaning can be ordered in it. Since the problem is dealt with in schools and areas of study which often fail to take notice of each other, the attempt to systematize them may be useful to anyone who would like to find an access to the philosophy of music.

2. Structure

As I mentioned briefly, structure is understood principally as intra-musical. Understanding such structure involves order. Structure can be understood on various levels, beginning with immediate perceptual ordering and reaching up to sophisticated methods of musical analysis which try to uncover principles governing the composition of the music. Such principles may be hardly perceivable; twelve-note row structure may be the most popular example.

On the perceptual level, understanding structure is taken to mean that the hearer is able to memorize, to recognize or to repeat a piece of music. This kind of order involves the *expectation* that rhythmic, harmonic or

melodic structures continue in a certain way, that is, it involves learning of basic structures. If such basic structures continue with limited deviations from the expected order, the hearer will be *surprised*. If the deviations become more extreme, the hearer might say that he does not understand the music anymore; he might call it *meaningless* or nonsensical.

The order of the perceived structure may be described in technical terms: dominant chord, tonic, upbeat, downbeat, if we talk about order on a small scale; on a large scale, the descriptions will involve formal types of composition, like fugue, song form, variation, sonata form, rondo, etc. The latter may exceed our immediate perceptual grasp, but if we are familiar with them, they direct our expectations and thus provide the fundament of certain kinds of surprise, for instance, being surprised by the sudden breakdown of a re-introduced theme which seemed to be a recapitulation (in sonata form) but turns out to be a “Scheinreprise”.

The sketched understanding of musical structure may seem very simple, but nonetheless, it has been influential in popular thought on music, in some of the philosophical literature, and not least in the cognitive psychology of music. However simple this view of structural understanding may be, there are good reasons for its influence: If music is not essentially related on the level of perception to extra-musical objects and events – as language, signs, and pictures are –, we are likely to use the concept of meaning intra-musically, if we do not want to reject it entirely.

Moreover, it seems even necessary to analyse musical meaning as structure because it is precisely these structures which are responsible for sounds turning into music. Without the understanding of musical structure, we do not encounter *music* at all, but merely signals, or sounds which we hear as related to the thing or event which produced them. On the contrary, in order to hear sounds as music we have to hear them in a mutual relationship which we can describe as musical space and as musical movement¹: we have to hear that sounds are structures as melodies, as harmony,

¹ There is a vast body of literature on this subject. Scruton's (1997, esp. chapters 1 and 2) “acousmatic thesis” is the best-known elaboration, but maybe not yet the most profound one, since he does not try too much to answer the question *why* we hear sounds as musical movement in musical space, a fact is happy to take for granted. Theories which try to dig deeper include those elaborated by Christian Grüny (2009), Susanne Herrmann-Sinai (2009), Gunnar Hindrichs (2007), Andreas Luckner (2007) and Charles

in parts, as proceeding one behind or above the other, up and down, mixing up, forming dissonances, tension and release etc. This kind of hearing cannot be explained by relating the sounds to something external to them (for instance, to their physical cause: The mere fact that sounds are blown on three saxophones has nothing to do with our perception that they form a background for other sounds blown on a flute, which we perceive as the principal melody part).

Although the approach to conceive musical meaning in terms of structure is necessary, we must acknowledge that this concept of musical meaning is limited. The polemic label “formalism” points to the dangers of pushing this approach beyond its limits, since it seems to construe an impoverished concept of our experiences we describe as understanding music. I want to mention only two problems: first, the tendency to make an aesthetic norm out of the understanding of musical structure as conceived in cognitive psychology; second, the idea that structure is the fundamental source of aesthetic value in music.

The first case is quite simple, but nevertheless has served as a popular argument against all kinds of “progress” in music. The kind of structural order which average listeners are able to perceive and to follow is claimed to be “natural” and a necessary precondition of the possibility to understand music. If new harmonic structures develop, or if conventional harmony is given up entirely, or if the simple metrical structures which are familiar to the western ear are transcended, the preconceived “understandable” structures can no more take up such novelties, and it is surprising to see how often they have been rejected as meaningless and unnatural.

To these rejections, we can answer two things: First, we must acknowledge that our perceptive faculties are not fixed by nature on certain structures. They are able to develop and to learn to understand previously unfamiliar structures and elements – especially if confronted with products of culture like music. Second, it is a mere prejudice that musical meaning should be limited to immediately perceivable order. For instance, the approach of free atonality around 1905 is characterized by the intention of finding ways of expression which should not make use of familiar harmonic and melodic means, but instead be liberated from them. The meaning of

O. Nussbaum (2007).

such music, then, resides at least in part in structureless expression, which is determined much more by timbre, by dynamics and by a sense of happening than by a musical order of events as previously conceived. For a philosophy of music, it seems necessary to leave room for such possibilities.

The second case addresses a more fundamental problem and can be split up in two questions: First, if we are able to grasp the musical structure immediately – as we can do it with a great part of the “classical” tradition –, would we still maintain that our interest and the artistic value of such works resides *only* in the structure and our understanding of it? Second, if musical structure does *not* appear immediately understandable, but has been worked out on the basis of elaborate parametric procedures – this concerns twelve-note music and most of its successors –: is the value of such works founded on the composer’s ordering work alone? – Modern music often is reproached to appear random or arbitrary, and there are various ways of answering this objection. Some might say that the focus of interest is not musical order in a traditional sense, but expression, an event-like character, and so on; others reject this view as trivial and demand that the elaboration of a structural system which determines the work should *justify* all its other effects and expressive qualities, since the latter would be unfounded if they are not brought forth by the preconceived structure.² The relationship between structure and other ways of understanding musical meaning is a problem which is pressing almost everywhere in modern music.

3. The Moving Power of Music – Affect

Unconvinced by the thought that musical understanding is nothing more than being able to follow a structure, one might base an alternative view

² The first position took rise especially during the 1960s and was labeled as “post-serialism”, “New Simplicity” or “New Subjectivity”; the second one bears labels like “constructivism”, “de-constructivism” or “complexism”. They all have the power to mislead, I mention them only in order to locate the ideas I was talking about in the debate which makes use of such labels. See Ruthemeier (2012) for a discussion of this opposition based on a wealth of programmatic material, and Mahnkopf (1998 and successive writings) for statements of the second position, embedded in a historical sketch.

of musical meaning on the second of the intuitions I mentioned above, that is, on the moving and expressive power of music. This view stresses impressions of the kind that music contains expression, emotion, gestures, movement, or material features: weight, impulse, softness, roughness. These impressions may seem to lack unity. But there are features they share: They are perceptual features we grasp immediately, without thought and interpretation; and they seem to contain an extra-musical aspect, since their principal meaning refers to something material, to human behavior or to human experience. The problem to be solved in this respect is to explain how these two features – immediate access through perception, and extra-musical association – might go together.

Some might consider this level of musical experience – especially if it involves expressive qualities – as mediated by interpretation, that is, as dependent on the third of the mentioned types of musical understanding. However, I suggest that we accept the area of movement and expression as independent from the third point, mainly because of the immediacy of this type of experience. That this immediacy is mediated otherwise is a possibility to be taken into account in a second step, so let us inquire for a moment into the fundamentals of the experience of music as moving and expressive.

My suggestion is to link it up with the relation between hearing and feeling, or between hearing and bodily experience. Theories in the current philosophy of music which center on this area of perception and experience usually call themselves “simulation theories” (Cochrane 2010, Nussbaum 2007); however, the purest account of this area might be the one Helmuth Plessner introduced in his work *Die Einheit der Sinne* (*The Unity of the Senses*) in 1923.

Such an account requires a grounding in conceptions of perception in general and of auditory perception in particular. The general concept of perception which bears fruit in this context is one of “action in perception”, or of perception as means of relating the body to the world. It includes the thought that perception is not the passive reception of sensible data, but an orientation in a world of things, events, and behaviour. Consequently, if we listen to something our intention is not directed towards taking up isolated features like pitches and durations of tones, but towards the perception of sensible wholes. Here, we have not gone much beyond

the structural approach just discussed. In order to make one step further on, some thoughts about the nature of auditory perception will help us.

Eduard Hanslick compared the perception of visual patterns as they appear in a kaleidoscope with the way we take up audible structures of music and concluded that the former can be nothing more to us than an “interesting mechanical toy”, whereas we understand the audible patterns not as empty lines, but as “spirit forming itself from inside” (Hanslick 1854, p. 33f). Mysterious as this remark might seem, it directs us towards a question of central importance: Why do tones affect us in a way that colours and lines do not?

In my opinion, there has not been any exhausting answer to this questions, but various important hints:

1. Hegel (in his *Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes* – in Hegel 1830/1970) and Plessner both point towards the fact that humans beings express themselves primarily through their voices. The mere sound of voice is intimately related to our “inner” states; it is the material expression of pain, of tension, of relaxation etc., more than any other type of behaviour, so that we are hardly able to listen to a voice without grasping its expressive character, regardless of the words it speaks. It is consequent to suppose that the sense of hearing is our most direct access to expressive qualities.
2. Concerning the non-human world of sound, we should notice that sounds are related to events (and are supposed to be events themselves; see for example Casey O’Callaghan’s writings on the ontology of sound), and consequently, to force and material qualities. If we hear sounds, we hear the energy, the kind of motion, and the material properties of the objects involved in an event which produces the sound. Our hearing is made to detect such qualities of events, and that is why we are likely to hear music in terms of energy, motion, and materiality.
3. This point has led several writers – for instance, Charles O. Nussbaum and Tom Cochrane – to stress the relationship between hearing and touching, since the mentioned qualities of energy, motion,

and materiality are experienced in touch as well. Through them, the sense of hearing is connected to bodily experience.

4. Finally, the qualities of energy and motion which we take in through hearing might not only be related to objects moving outside us, but to the motion of our body itself. Thus, the kind of motion we hear in a piece of music invites us to assimilate it to behaviour in action and gestures, to a kind of silent dance, as has been emphasized by Helmuth Plessner and Roger Scruton, among others. Among inquiries with a more empirical approach towards gestural understanding of music, there is Marc Leman's study *Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology* (2008), which does not neglect philosophical points of view.

Let us sum up the kind of experience arising in this area. – It is the kind of experience the mentioned intuition formulated as “music speaking directly to our hearts and bodies”; “directly” can be understood as “not conceptually mediated”, as should be clear from the previous sketch. However, the fact that it goes beyond pure structure and involves qualities of material events and of expressive and bodily behaviour can be understood as the bridge between sounding structure and the world as we know it. (This linking function has been illustrated by Roland Barthes and, more recently, by Albrecht Wellmer (2009), just to name these two.)

Another point of this immediate experience should not go unnoticed: In it, we are not only moved passively; we move with the music, we re-enact or re-execute it, and if music is more complex than a one-part children's song, our listening and our way to “move with it” is a creative act. This has been stressed recently by attempts to reconcile the non-conceptual nature of music with our possibility to engage with it in a creative way, and further on, in an interpretative way. As some main examples for this way of understanding music, we might mention the theories developed by Alexander Becker and Matthias Vogel (2007) as well as Susanne Herrmann-Sinai (2009), who stress the capacity of “re-enacting” (“Nachvollzug”) as precondition for perceiving sounds as music at all, and the Goodmanian approach to musical cognition presented by Simone Mahrenholz in her work *Musik and Erkenntnis (Music and Cognition)* (1998).

4. Interpretation – Conceptual Meaning

Let me stress that I consider the areas of interest mentioned in the previous sections *indispensable* for any account of musical meaning. What I subsumed under the heading of “structure” is what makes music music – as compared to the non-musical world of sound. It is music’s essential *form*.

The second point considered the musical “stuff”, its “matter”, or its medium, and its particular characteristics, which are responsible for the fact that we can respond to music in the way we do: that we can respond to it directly, without having to include conceptual content. It is a necessary point of inquiry since it deals with the question: Could there be music in another medium than in sound? – and this I doubt. This point could be said to concern music’s essential *matter*.

The status of the third area is less clear. Very briefly, its subject is *speaking* about music. It is less about our immediate, non-propositional, perceptual access to it than the former two points, but about our interpretation of those ways of access. Now, what is the status of this area of musical meaning? On the one hand, it might look like an accidental add-on to the “pure”, wordless musical experience. On the other hand, the opinion is not unfounded that this “pure” musical experience is incomplete. There are various ways of formulating it. One is to claim that the non-conceptual affective experience we dealt with in the previous section is often such that it urges us to ‘make sense’ of it, to put it into words and to communicate it (Wellmer 2009); and many writers have pointed out the similarity between the affective experience of music and kinds of experience conceptualized as religious (Nussbaum 2007, chapter 6; Robinson 2005, chapters 12 and 13).

Another route towards musical conceptual content presupposes that music is understood as an art, and that as such, it should have “content”; and the “content” of an art should not be a private experience, but a communicable one, and it should be liable to reflection and to criticism.

One might object to this thought that it starts with a *petitio principii*, namely, that music is an art, and deny this status to it. This objection is the subject of much discussion around 1800 and has recently been revived by Peter Kivy (1993).

But there are reasons to reject this objection as too hasty. Here, one

has to look at the cultural context, and I suggest that at a certain moment in music history – at the end of the 18th century – two moments mutually reinforced each other: On the one hand, music as understood in the other two areas of meaning created a motivation to search for words in order to interpret the musical experience – interpretation which might not have been missing before, since the largest musical forms could derive their meaning from religious or dramatic text. On the other hand, musicians themselves proposed “extra-musical” ideas to guide the composition and the understanding of musical works; Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony is a case in point.

In consequence of this development, which established “absolute” music as one of the canonic arts, artistic intention and the listeners’ expectations and ways of understanding are no more to be separated from each other. As the purpose of expression gains weight in musical creation, so grows the urge on the part of the hearer to understand and to interpret such expression. Roger Scruton has elaborated on the urge to proceed from our immediate understanding of musical expression – which he calls “intransitive” – towards its interpretation: to relate it to human character and to cultural values, which are subjects of public access and of criticism, thereby requiring our ability to formulate our understanding in words. Scruton’s emphasis is especially on the idea that listeners are always engaged with music from the start in a way that the musical movement is related to modes of real movement and behaviour; one might say that music is always interpreted from the start through the ways of life of those engaged with it. A more theoretical engagement with musical listening and musical structures is an approach of musical semiotics. Michael Spitzer’s and Robert Hatten’s newer works (both 2004) take such an approach by relying on structural analysis of music as well as on theories from the psychology of cognition, emotion and gestural communication, thus forging a link between more structural and more affective experiences to music as sketched in our two previous sections.

Finally, the words we find ourselves and other persons using in order to describe the musical experience influence our following experiences. They may still seem to be immediate experiences, perceptions, but perceptions which have integrated conceptual interpretation. Thus, a circle closes itself: what looked like an immediate perception of music already is imbued

with interpretation and culture, but interpretation itself is continually fed by the more immediate and intra-musical access to the world of tones.

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