

Notes on Stanford article.

WHAT IS PURE MUSIC?

‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ music — instrumental music that has no accompanying non-musical components.

Musical ontology is the study of the kinds of musical things there are and the relations that hold between them.

Nominalists hold that musical works are collections of concrete particulars, such as scores and performances.

Idealists hold that musical works are mental entities.

A genuine alternative that might be considered fictionalist is *eliminativism*, the theory that there are no musical works. A simple eliminativism could be defended by arguing that none of the positive theories of the nature of musical works can be convincingly defended.

David Davies has recently argued that musical works, like all works of art, are *actions*, in particular the compositional actions of their composers. Action theories have a particularly hard row to hoe since they imply, unlike any of the other theories we have considered, that an instance of a work is some action performed by a composer, rather than a performance.

Realism, the view that musical works are abstract objects, is currently the most popular view, since it respects more of our pre-theoretic intuitions about musical works than any of the other theories.

The ontologically simpler view, known as ‘Platonism’, is that works are eternal existents, existing in neither space nor time.

We may call the alternative ‘Creationism’, since one of its main motivations is a respect for our intuition that musical works are creatable, and thus cannot be eternal, but must come to exist in time as the result of human action.

Some theorists have pointed out that musical works are cultural entities, and thus the methodology appropriate to uncovering their ontological status might be quite different from that of general metaphysics.

It might seem that, since musical works are multiple entities, once we have figured out their true nature, we will know what relation holds between the work and its instances. However, since the fundamentalist debate is about the basic ontological category to which works belong, resolving that debate will leave open many questions about the instantiation relation.

There have been two sources of widespread confusion in the debate over authenticity in performance. One is a failure to recognize that authenticity is not simply a property, but a relation that comes in degrees and along different ‘vectors’. Something may be more authentic in one regard and less authentic in another.

Another is the assumption that authenticity is an evaluative concept, in the sense that ‘authentic’ implies ‘good’.

The central kind of authenticity that has been discussed is authenticity with respect to the instantiation of the work. Most agree that the fullest such authenticity requires the production of the right pitches in the right order. *Pure sonicists* argue this is sufficient. *Timbral sonicists* argue that these pitches must also have timbres reflecting the composer's instrumentation. *Instrumentalists* argue that such sounds must be produced on the kinds of instruments specified in the score. Much of the debate is over what

kinds of aesthetic or artistic properties are essential to musical works.

The debate reflects a wider one in aesthetics, musical and otherwise, between *formalists* (or empiricists, or structuralists), who believe that the most important properties of a work are intrinsic ones, accessible to listeners unaware of the historical and artistic context in which it was created, and *contextualists*, who believe that a work is strongly tied to its context of creation.

In addition to the question of what constitutes authenticity, there has been debate over its attainability and value. We may no longer be able to read the notation in which the work is recorded, or construct or play the instruments for which it was written. If so, full authenticity is not attainable. But we rarely have no idea about these matters, and thus we might achieve partial authenticity.

Those who question the value of authenticity often target kinds other than work-instantiation. For instance, one might question the value of producing a performance that authentically captures the sound of performances as they took place in the context of a work's composition, on the basis that musicians were not as highly skilled then as now, for instance.

Such arguments, though, have no consequences for the value of work-instantiation.

A second area of interest that is independent of the fundamentalist debate is that of comparative ontology. Theodore Gracyk has argued that instances of works of rock music are not performances.

Rather, the work is instanced by playing a copy of a recording on an appropriate device (1996). Stephen Davies has argued that rock is more like classical music than Gracyk acknowledges, with works for performance at the heart of the tradition, albeit works for a different kind of performance.

Work on the ontology of jazz has centered around the nature of improvisation, particularly the relation between improvisation and

composition. Some have argued that there is not as significant a distinction between improvisation and composition as is usually thought. Others have argued that all performance requires improvisation. Yet others restrict the possibility of improvisation to certain kinds of musical properties, such as ‘structural’ rather than ‘expressive’ ones. One might argue that jazz works are ontologically like classical works — composed for multiple, different performances — but that they tend to be thinner, leaving more room for improvisation.

The difficulty is to specify the work without conflating one work with another, since tokening the melody is not required, and many works share the same harmonic structure. As a result, some argue that the performance is itself the work.

A third topic of ontological discussion at the ‘higher’ level is the nature of the elements of musical works, such as melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, and how they come together to form complex wholes.

### **Scepticism about Musical Ontology**

Aaron Ridley (2003a; 2004, 105-31) argues that such study is a waste of time. He argues (i) that there aren't any genuine ontological puzzles about music, (ii) that musical ontology depends on musical value judgments, and thus (iii) that musical ontology has no implications for musical aesthetics.

Amie Thomasson has expressed a more measured scepticism about certain art-ontological debates. She points out that in grounding (and re-grounding) an artistic kind-term, such as ‘symphony’, there is a problem of identifying the kind of thing one intends to pick out with the term. Thomasson's scepticism arises from her view that our artistic practices may be vague or incomplete with respect to some questions, such as how many notes one can get wrong before simply failing to perform a certain work. On the other hand, the answers to some questions are unequivocally revealed by our

practice, according to Thomasson, such as that musical works are created.

## **Music and the Emotions**

The most widely discussed philosophical question concerning music and the emotions is that of how music can express emotions. There is a second group of questions centered around listeners' emotional responses to music.

Neither pieces of music, nor performances of them, are psychological agents, thus it is puzzling that such things could be said to express emotions.

Expression is something persons do, namely, the outward manifestation of their emotional states. Expressivity is something artworks, and possibly other things, possess.

Most theorists also distinguish between expressivity and representation, claiming that music is expressive of emotions, rather than representing them.

An obvious way to connect expressivity with expression is to argue that pieces of music or performances of them *are* expressions of emotion — not the piece's or performance's emotions, but rather those of the composer or performer. There are two major problems with this 'expression theory'. The first is that neither composers nor performers often experience the emotions their music is expressive of as it is produced. Nor does it seem unlikely that a composer could create, or a performer perform, a piece expressive of an emotion that she had never experienced. This is not to deny that a composer could write a piece expressive of her emotional state, but two things must be observed. The first is that for the expression theory to be an account of musical expressivity, at least all central cases of expressivity must follow this model, which is not the case. The second is that if a composer is to express her sadness, say, by writing a sad piece, she must write the right kind of piece. In other words, if she is a bad composer she might fail to express her emotion. This brings us to the second major problem

for the expression theory. If a composer can fail to express her emotions in a piece, then the music she writes is expressive independently of the emotion she is experiencing. Thus music's expressivity cannot be explained in terms of direct expression.

A second way to link music's expressiveness with actual felt emotions is through the audience. The 'arousal theory' is, at its simplest, the claim that the expressiveness of a passage of music amounts to its tendency to arouse that emotion in an understanding listener. The main problem with the theory seems more intractable. Essentially it is that in order for a listener to respond appropriately to the music, she must discern the emotion expressed therein. This is most obvious when the response is a sympathetic, rather than empathetic, one. The listener's response depends upon the emotion expressed, and thus the expressivity of the music cannot depend upon that response.

At the other end of the spectrum from the expression and arousal theories is 'associationism' — the theory that music's expressivity is a matter of conventional association of certain musical elements, such as slow tempi, with certain emotional states, such as sadness. This role is likely to be a peripheral one. The expressivity of music seems closely related to the resemblance between the dynamic character of both the music and the emotions it is expressive of.

The cliché that music is the 'language of the emotions' is often considered as a possible starting point for a theory of musical expressivity. The idea combines the attractive simplicity of conventionality that associationism makes the basis of music's meaning with the idea that music's order is to be understood in terms of syntax. A serious subsidiary problem is that even if music *were* about the emotions in the way that language can be, that would not account for music's *expressivity*.

Several theorists have defended accounts of musical expressivity known variously as resemblance, contour, or appearance theories.

The central idea is that music's expressiveness consists in the resemblance of its dynamic character to the dynamic character of various aspects of human beings undergoing emotions (i.e. facial expressions.) The expressivity itself resides in the music's disposition to elicit the imaginative response in us of hearing the music as a literal expression of emotion. As a logical consequence, the imaginative experience prompted must include some agent whose expression the music literally is.

For Davies the response of the appropriate listener upon which the expressivity of the music depends is one of an *experience of resemblance*. In other words, the answer to the question of the manner and extent to which music must resemble some behavioral expression in order to qualify as expressive of a particular emotion is simply 'in whatever manner and to whatever extent leads us to experience the music as resembling the emotion'. One might argue that what is logically prior is our experience of resemblance, and that our tendency to hear the music as a literal expression of emotion is merely a cause or ground of that experience. One worry about such a line is that it seems more suitable to a theory of emotional *representation* than emotional *expressivity*.

There is the fact that some apparently understanding listeners simply deny that music is expressive of emotion.

There are two main questions asked about our emotional responses to pure music. The first is analogous to the 'paradox of fiction'. It is not clear why we should respond emotionally to expressive music when we know that no one is undergoing the emotions expressed. The second is a variant of the 'paradox of tragedy'. If some music arouses 'negative' emotional responses in us, such as sadness, why do we seek out the experience of such music?

R. A. Sharpe (2000, 1-83), while stopping short of outright denial, suggests that our emotional responses to music are a much smaller component of our understanding experience of it than the philosophical literature on the topic would suggest. Peter Kivy

(1999) goes almost all the way, arguing that those who report emotional reactions to music are confusing the pleasure they take in the beauty of the music, in all its expressive individuality, with the feeling of the emotion expressed.

To elaborate, there is some consensus that emotions are cognitive, in the sense that they take intentional objects — they are *about* things — and that the nature of a given emotion's intentional object is constrained. For instance, in order to feel *fear*, one must believe that there is something (the intentional object) that is *threatening*. When one listens to a sad piece of music, however, one knows there is nothing literally feeling an emotion of sadness, and thus it is puzzling that one should be made sad by the experience. Shifting focus from benefits located in the expressive work to those located in the emotional listener, the oldest suggestion is Aristotle's theory of *catharsis*, according which our negative emotional response to negatively expressive art results in a (positive) psychological purgation of the negative emotions.

A less therapeutic approach is the suggestion that, since these emotions are without 'life implications' (that is, as discussed above, we are not sad *about* anything), we are able to take advantage of our responses to savor these emotions, gain an understanding of them, and be reassured that we have the capacity to feel them.

A different kind of solution to the problem argues that responses such as sadness that are evoked by expressive music are not really negative. Hume argues, with respect to tragedy, that the pleasure we take in the mode of presentation of the content of an artwork does not simply counterbalance the negative emotion evoked, but rather subsumes and transforms it into a pleasurable feeling.

## **Understanding Music**

At the base of the musical experience seem to be (i) the experience of *tones*, as opposed to mere pitched sounds, where a tone is heard

as being in ‘musical space’, that is, as bearing such relations to other tones as being higher or lower, or of the same kind (at the octave), and (ii) the experience of *movement*, as when we hear a melody as wandering far afield and then coming to rest where it began.

In a recent book, Jerrold Levinson makes a case against what he sees as the paradigmatic conception of musical understanding as a matter of the apprehension of form (1997). As a replacement for this ‘architectonicism’, he promotes ‘concatenationism’: the view that basic musical understanding consists in following the musical and emotional qualities of passages of music, and transitions between them, that are short enough to be apprehended as a single experience (‘quasi-hearing’).

While Kivy acknowledges that the kinds of experiences Levinson champions are necessary to basic musical understanding, he defends the idea that grasping the large-scale form of most pieces of Western classical music, at least, is necessary for an adequate understanding of them.

With regard to the value of art in general, there are two central points on which there is some consensus. First, most philosophers take the value of artworks to be intrinsic to them, in the sense that the value of a work is tied essentially to the experience that the work affords. Thus, artworks are not (properly) valued merely instrumentally, as means to some end, but ‘for’ or ‘in’ themselves. The question that naturally arises next is what it is about the experience an artwork affords that makes it valuable. That *pleasure* is a non-negligible part of the answer to this question is the second point upon which there is some consensus.

Most theorists agree that music's value is to be located in different kinds of experience, including the experience of purely musical features and expressive features; their disagreements are mostly about the relative weight of these different kinds of experiences in a complete account of musical value.