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Explaining Musical Experience

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Music and the Emotions

1

I start with the observation that we often respond to a musical performance with emotion—even if it is just the performance of a piece of *absolute* music, unaccompanied by text, title or program. We can be exhilarated after a Rossini overture brought off with subtlety and panache; sombre and melancholy after Furtwängler’s performance of the slow movement of the “Eroica”. And so forth. These emotions feel like the real thing to me—or anyway very close to the real thing. When one experiences them, it takes time for them to wear off, and one gets irritated with the companion who, because not similarly moved, wants immediately to start discussing where to go for dinner. Like many others, I am drawn to the philosophy of music by a need to understand how such emotional responses are possible. How can absolute music move us in the way that it does, and to the extent that it does?

2

In seeking an answer to this question, we do not just seek any sort of answer. For example, we would not be satisfied with a brute *physiological* explanation along the following lines:

In listening to music, we are exposed to sounds. Sounds are vibrations in the air. These vibrations cause our ear drum to vibrate, which in turn causes nerve impulses to travel up the auditory nerve to the brain. In the brain, these nerve impulses cause certain neurons to fire, leading to the perception of sound. In certain cases, the firing of the

neurons that constitute the perception of sound triggers the firing of certain other neurons, leading to the experience of specific emotions.

I take it that, even if an explanation along these lines is actually true, it is not the sort of explanation we are looking for. Why not? What is missing from the brute physiological explanation just outlined?

3

What is missing, I think, is any explanation of the *rationality* of our emotional response. For all that the brute explanation cares to claim, music might induce emotional states in us in just the way that a drug might: certain chemicals cause us to feel things, and so do certain sounds. End of story.

On this view, it is pointless to ask whether it *makes sense* for us to respond to those sounds in the way that we do, in just the way in which it is pointless to ask whether it makes sense for us to respond to Prozac or to marijuana in the way that we do. And yet we think that it *does* make sense for us to be moved by music, that it isn't just a matter of a chemical response.

In fact, we not only think it's rational to be moved in this way, we are especially admiring of those who are capable of the right emotional response, and critical of those who aren't. We take the presence of the right emotional response to be indicative of understanding. We recommend music appreciation classes to those who profess not to see what the fuss is about.

So the question becomes: how could we explain the rationality of our emotional response to music?

4

Peter Kivy thinks that he can justify a minimal sense in which it can make sense to be moved by absolute music, and that is the sense in which one can be moved by the sheer beauty of the music, full of appreciation for the excellence of its craftsmanship and so forth (Kivy 2001: 92–118).

But that doesn't come close, in my view, to explaining the diversity of feeling that is aroused by our experience. Think of how differently you feel after listening to the witty elegance of the Mozart Piano Concerto K. 271

as opposed to the brooding gloom of the Tchaikovsky Sixth Symphony. They are both examples of craftsmanship and beauty.

5

I think our only hope of vindicating the range of emotional responses that we have to absolute music depends on our being able to see absolute music as *telling us things*, in much the way in which we see characters in opera or fiction as telling us things. In other words, we need to be able to assimilate the problem of absolute music to the problem of ‘feeling for fiction’ by finding meaning in absolute music.

That is not to deny that there is a genuine problem of explaining the rationality of our feeling for fiction. But everyone is agreed that there must be a solution to that problem.

Kivy says:

The question I am raising is how we are emotionally aroused by what the nineteenth century called absolute music ... It is important to remember this because when the resources of language are added to the musical work, the terms of the argument are radically changed. I have no quarrel, for example, with someone who says that when he attends a performance of *La Traviata*, he experiences real and intense sorrow over the death of Violetta, ... This is not to say that there is no philosophical problem in just how the emotions of sorrow and love can be aroused by the fates of fictional characters ... But the presence of language, with all its potential for conveying concepts, and the presence of delineated characters, such as Violetta and Alfredo ... provide materials for arousal of garden variety emotions far exceeding anything that can reasonably be postulated in absolute music. And that is why absolute music poses a problem far beyond opera, oratorio, song and programme music to those who wish to claim that it arouses the garden variety emotions.

(Kivy 2001:101–2)

It makes sense to be moved by opera, Kivy tells us, because characters in opera can tell us sad things. The problem for absolute music, he says, is that, lacking language, title or text, it can’t tell us anything; a fortiori, it can’t tell us anything sad, happy or whatever. Hence, it cannot make sense to be moved by absolute music.

My thought is a *modus tollens* on Kivy’s. Since it so obviously does make sense to respond to music with emotion, there must be a sense in which music is capable of telling us things. The question is how.

6

The fact that we can rationally respond to music with real emotions, I have been saying, is indirect evidence that there must be musical meaning. Not so much, perhaps, *representational* meaning—propositions that tell us how things are—though some, myself included, would be prepared to allow a limited role for such meanings; but, rather, *expressive* meaning, the capacity, principally, to express emotions.

But an inference from the legitimacy of our emotional responses is not the only sort of evidence that we have for the existence of musical meaning. Let me mention three other sources.

First, there is the sheer phenomenology of listening. Any reasonably experienced listener will hear the *Tristan* Prelude as suffused with the expression of yearning, whether or not they knew anything about the opera to follow, or even whether they knew that there is an opera that follows.

A second important source for our conviction that music possesses audible expressive properties derives from our *evaluative* thinking about music. We value some pieces over others because of what we take to be their greater expressive power. Derivatively, we value some musicians over others for their greater ability to unlock that expressive power. (A criticism that is often made, rightly in my view, of a famous New York opera conductor, is that he routinely sacrifices expressive meaning in favor of lush beauty, leading to performances that may be marvelously sensuous but are otherwise superficial and unsatisfying. We understand this criticism.)

A final source for our conviction in the expressive capacity of music derives from the role that music plays in opera or film. Clearly, music enhances the expressive impact of opera. The ceremony of the grail at the end of *Parsifal* wouldn't be half as powerful as it is if it were accompanied by "Baa Baa Black Sheep", would it? But how could music contribute in this way to the opera's expressive capacity if it didn't have an expressive capacity all its own that it was bringing to the scene? Philosophers routinely concede the expressive impact of opera. But part of that expressive power is provided by the music, something it couldn't do unless it had some expressive power all its own to contribute.

Explaining Musical Expression

7

In the final analysis, the real problem for musical meaning is not to justify belief in its existence, but to explain its possibility. How is it possible for mere sound, lacking speaker intention, or any of the other resources which make linguistic meaning possible, to express meanings? What properties of the sounds could constitute their expressive capacity?

Clearly, we would be looking at the *musical properties* of the sounds, properties like that of pitch, rhythm, harmony and melody. Sounds are heard as having the expressive properties they have *because* they are heard as having certain musical properties: it is something about the shape of the melody which opens the fourth movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony that makes us hear it as sombre. So what we are asking is: how could possessing certain musical properties amount to expressing a state of mind? Roger Scruton (1999) has argued that, in a sense, there is nothing to explain. His argument is distinctive and it will be worthwhile to linger over it.

Scruton's starting point is the observation that mere sound is not the intentional object of musical perception. Even when sound is understood not merely as a physical phenomenon but as a "secondary object"—a mental object—which exists only when it is heard, it is not what we hear when we hear music. The intentional object of musical perception is rather *tone*, where tone is characterized by such musical variables as pitch, rhythm, harmony and melody. But nothing can literally *have* such properties and so nothing can literally be a tone. A melody must rise or fall. But there is nothing either out there or in here that rises or falls in the way that a melody does. As applied to sound, therefore, he concludes, the concepts of pitch, rhythm, harmony and melody are *metaphorical*. To describe music, says Scruton:

we must have recourse to metaphor, not because music resides in an analogy with other things, but because the metaphor describes exactly what we hear, when we hear sounds as music.

(Scruton 1999: 96)

And the use of any metaphor cannot ultimately be explained.

It does not seem strained to suggest that Smetana's music expresses the shining and silken qualities that we hear in it. Smetana's music is not *literally* shining or silken. But its expressive power is revealed in its ability to compel these metaphors from us, and to persuade us that they fit exactly. Of course, it is a mystery that they fit. But the mystery is immovable. Every metaphor both demands an explanation and also refuses it, since an explanation would change it from a metaphor to a literal truth, and thereby destroy its meaning.

(Scruton 1999: 141)

8

Let me first get rid of the distracting claim, that Scruton ultimately takes back, that sounds are not the intentional objects of musical experience. Surely, we hear *sounds* when we hear music! In an afterthought to his chapter on "Tone," Scruton shows some awareness of this. He says:

Finally, we should not think of sounds and tones as distinct individuals—as though tones really existed apart from sounds. Perhaps the best way of understanding the relation between the two is in the way Spinoza understood the relation between mind and body. For Spinoza reality can be conceptualized in two ways: as mental or as physical. But that which we conceptualize in these two ways is *one*.

(Scruton 1999: 79)

Invoking Spinoza's obscure account of the relation between mind and body is not likely to help here. If sounds and tones are the same individuals, then sounds are equally the intentional objects of musical experience. At any rate, it is intuitively overwhelmingly clear that sounds are heard when music is heard. (Imagine Dick Cheney dressed up as Santa Claus to entertain (scare?) the children at a White House Christmas party. Is Dick Cheney the intentional object of the children's experience? Santa Claus? Surely, the right answer is: Dick Cheney, seen as Santa Claus.)

If we set the strange claim about intentionality to one side, we are left with three other theses, which jointly ground Scruton's claim that there is no explaining musical expression: First, the thesis of *musical anti-realism*: sounds do not literally have the musical properties we hear them as having. Rather, and this is the second thesis, the musical *and* expressive descriptions under which we hear sounds when we hear them as music are *metaphors*.

And, finally, although it is true that metaphors can be more or less apt,

there is no explaining any particular metaphor's aptness. Every metaphor both demands an explanation and also refuses it.

I think all three theses are deeply problematic, though here I will settle only for questioning the second.¹ Suppose we agree with Scruton that the musical descriptions under which we hear sounds are literally false. Still, is it really appropriate to call these perceptually exercised descriptions *metaphors*?

I would have thought that it is essential to metaphor that our use of it be *intentional*. Having experienced something and wishing to illuminate some truth about it, we intentionally use a false description to bring that truth to light. "Jimi's on fire" we say, for example, about a particularly exciting performance by Jimi Hendrix.² But could that really be what's going on when I hear the theme that launches the Goldberg variations? Do I have an experience of the sounds qua sounds, notice something about them and then intentionally decide to illuminate what I heard by hearing them as constituting that famous melody? That is surely absurd, for two reasons.

First, the tendency to hear it as that melody is as far from an intentional mental act as anything gets. It is completely ineluctable. Scruton mentions several examples of musical perception that do seem subject to the will. For example, the four opening drum beats of the Beethoven Violin Concerto can be heard either as part of the ensuing melody or just a preamble to it. But if his thesis were right, it would have to hold quite generally; any musical metaphor would have to be optional from the standpoint of the will. But they don't seem to be.

Second, if the use of the notion of metaphor is to be justified, we would have to be aware of some layer of musical experience with a perfectly literal content that our musical metaphors would be designed to illuminate. But there doesn't seem to be such a layer of experience; for the most part, our experience is always already musical.

If this is right, then we can no longer ground the claim that there can be no explaining music's expressiveness by appealing to the general claim that there can be no explaining any metaphor's aptness.

At any rate, the anti-explanatory thesis is independently implausible. The point is that the expressive properties of music are clearly grounded in its purely musical properties. It is *because* a passage has certain musical

¹ This represents a change of heart about musical anti-realism, to which I had been inclined to be more sympathetic. See Boghossian (2001).

² The example is Stephen Yablo's, though not the point it is being used to illustrate.

properties that it is heard as having certain expressive properties, as Scruton in effect acknowledges in discussing the “Todesklage” from Act 2 of Wagner’s *Die Walküre*:

This theme contains a tragic, and yet questioning expression. It is a normal exercise of the critical intelligence to look for the features which are responsible for so powerful an effect: the accumulated suspensions, and the final Neapolitan cadence finishing on a seventh chord, with its “unsaturated” and yearning character. Remove the suspensions and the tension goes. Alter the final cadence and we have (with a slight change of rhythm) the serene introduction to Mendelssohn’s Scottish Symphony in A minor, Op. 56.

(Scruton 1999:164–5)

Even if the musical properties are not themselves real properties of the sounds, but are only experienced *as though* they are real properties of the sounds, there would still be the question: how could the fact that sounds are heard as having certain musical properties explain why they are heard as having certain expressive properties? So, even if we were to concede the musical anti-realism, that would not invalidate the question with which this section began: How is it possible for mere musical sound, lacking speaker intention, or any of the other resources which make linguistic meaning possible, to express meaning?

9

The view I am most inclined to favor is a version of the *resemblance* theory, a view that has been very ably developed by Malcolm Budd (1995) and Stephen Davies (1994). I would put it like this:

A passage P is expressive of E just in case P sounds the way a person would *sound* who was expressing E vocally, or sounds the way a person would *look* who was expressing E gesturally.

This kind of account leans, of course, on the idea that persons have characteristic ways of expressing their inner states. For example, there are typical—and typically natural—ways that sad people look, typical ways that they sound, and so forth. The account I favor, then, seeks to explain a passage’s being expressive of sadness by equating this property with the property of *sounding like* the way sad persons sound (leaving out for now the difficult cross-modal case).

Jerrold Levinson (2005) has an interesting objection to this idea. If you say that sad music is music that resembles sad sound, he observes, you have to say to what degree, since everything resembles everything else to some degree. But the degree of resemblance required cannot be specified in terms of some fixable degree of resemblance between the two. It can only be specified as whatever resemblance is sufficient to induce appropriate listeners to hear the music as sad.

Levinson's conviction that the resemblance relation cannot be spelled out in substantive terms—in terms which avoid what Crispin Wright has called, in a different connection, a “whatever it takes formulation”—lies behind his own dispositional account of musical expression:

P is expressive of E iff P, in context, can readily be heard, by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E.

(Levinson 2005)

He tentatively glosses a listener readily hearing P as an expression of E as: the listener readily imagining that P is an expression of E.

I think this is a challenging argument; but I would like to resist it because I have qualms about the dispositional account of musical expressiveness to which it seems inexorably to lead. That dispositional account is itself a version of a no-explanation view of musical expressiveness.

10

Most of the objections that worry me are explicitly considered by Levinson; but I don't think they have been sufficiently answered.

First, I think the gloss—hearing P as an expression of E in terms of imaginings—is ill-advised. It's just too easy to *imagine* a particular passage as being the expression of a variety of different—even contradictory—emotions. Imagining is too unconstrained and so the resulting content too indeterminate.

Second, Levinson's definition is of “P's being expressive of E.” This is a property that a passage can literally have. One of the motivations for thinking that music has such expressive properties is, as we have seen, that we seem to be able to *hear them in the music*. But can our hearing reveal to us that a particular musical passage is expressive of sadness, for example, on Levinson's view? To do so, it would seem, our hearing would have to reveal to us that P is a passage that has the dispositional property to induce

listeners who are appropriately versed in the genre to hear the passage as though it were a literal expression of sadness. I don't see how *that* could be an audible property of the music.

Levinson has a reply to this objection. He says that qualified listeners tacitly assume that they are indeed qualified listeners, and so, for such listeners, hearing an expression of sadness in a passage becomes tantamount to hearing the passage's being expressive of sadness.

Qualified listeners arguably tacitly assume, while listening to music that they are qualified listeners, listening appropriately. Thus on the view I favor, hearing an expression of E in a stretch of music becomes, for such listeners, tantamount to hearing the music's expressiveness of E. All a qualified listener need do to readily hear the expressiveness of the music is to readily hear expression of emotion in it.

(Levinson 2005)

Whether this reply is adequate depends on what one takes the relevant datum to be. What are we claiming when we say that an appropriately qualified listener can just hear the sadness in the music? On a strong interpretation, it is to say that an appropriately qualified listener can *know*, on the basis of hearing alone, that the music is expressive of sadness, in just the way in which it is natural to say that an appropriately qualified taster can know, on the basis of taste alone, that a particular substance is sweet. On a weaker interpretation, the claim would be not that a listener can know on the basis of hearing alone that a particular passage expresses sadness, but only the psychological claim that most listeners will feel no need to make an overt inference from their hearing to the attribution of expression.

Levinson's observations can accommodate the weaker claim but not the stronger one. However, it is arguable that it is the stronger claim that needs respecting. As a matter of psychology, there may be no inference when an experienced observer sees some dark clouds and believes that it will rain. But as a matter of justification, the knowledge would have to be based on inference. Something is a perceptual justification of the belief that P just in case transitions from perceptions as of P (to the extent that there are any) to the belief that P are justified, without need of additional inference.

Levinson's listener is like the experienced observer, moving swiftly from his hearing to the attribution of expression. But he cannot be said to know, purely on the basis of hearing, that a particular passage has a certain expressive property.

Arguably, though, I never need to infer that some music I hear is expressive of sadness, let alone an inference that proceeds from some complicated premise about how others are likely to react. Rather, I hear the expression in the music much as I taste the sweetness in the wine.

Third, I worry that Scruton's objection that reference to the appropriate class of listeners is doomed to vacuity will stick. There is a possible world in which there are incredibly sophisticated musicians who write highly mathematically intricate music, perhaps *à la* Babbitt, but who profess to hear no expression in any of the nineteenth century music we play them. They have emotions, so they are not Spocks (as in *Star Trek*). They express those emotions as we do. But they simply don't see the resemblances between musical sadness and human sadness that underlie judgments of expressiveness. Of course, we will judge them incompetent in the genre. But will we have any basis for this judgment *other* than their failure to hear expression in the music.

This is, of course, a standard problem for this sort of ideal observer theory of a given fact. You have to make sure that your conception of who counts as an ideal observer isn't controlled by a prior conception of the fact in question, for the aim is to reduce the fact to the responses of the ideal observer.

11

What, then, should we say about Levinson's argument? He makes it sound as though there is a perfectly general problem here: everything resembles everything to some extent; so there is no saying in what respects music needs to resemble the expression of emotion if it is to express that emotion. However, there is reason for doubting this general argument.

Levinson agrees that listeners will often *use* judgments of resemblance to make judgments of expression. If we ask one of Levinson's ideal observers whether some passage P is expressive of E, he will give an answer and that answer won't be a stab in the dark. He will have reasons and those reasons will consist in judgments of resemblance. We could raise a similar puzzle for this use of judgments of resemblance: given that everything resembles everything else to some degree or other, how could a judgment of resemblance help a listener to make a justified judgment of expression?

To what extent should the musical passage sound the way a person would

sound who was expressing sadness before we could be justified in saying that the passage expresses sadness?

Well, it's obviously hard to say, but there had better be a solution to that problem if judgments of resemblance are to do what virtually everyone agrees they must be able to do: namely, *underlie* judgments of expression.

But if we can solve *that* problem in its epistemological guise, then I don't see a problem of principle in solving it in its analytic guise. If we can say to what extent a passage P must sound like the natural expression of E for it to be a good guide as to whether P is expressive of E, then we ought to be able to say to what extent P must sound like E for it to be the case that P is expressive of E. If there are problems with this analytic claim, they won't stem from an inability to specify the degree of resemblance that's required.

Conclusion

In this short paper, I have tried, very schematically, to indicate how I would be inclined to navigate my way through this very difficult terrain. The requisite details must await another occasion.

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Further Reading

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