

The Perception of Music: Comments on Peacocke

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I

Christopher Peacocke begins his rich and fascinating paper ‘The Perception of Music: Sources of Significance’ (*BJA* 49, 257–275) by noting that we ‘can experience music as sad, as exuberant, as somber. We can experience it as expressing immensity, identification with the rest of humanity, or gratitude.’ This is interesting in that it claims that we not only hear music as *expressing* various properties and emotions, but that we hear music *as having* some of those properties and emotions. (We not only hear music as expressing sadness but as (being) sad.) He then notes:

The foundational question of what it is for music to express these or anything else is easily asked; and it has proved extraordinarily difficult to answer satisfactorily. The question of what it is for emotion or other states to be heard in music is not the question of the causal or computational question of how it comes to be so heard. . . . It is the constitutive question, the ‘what-is-it?’ question, that is my concern here.

It seems to me that two different constitutive questions are being conflated here. The first is about our *perception* of music:

(Perception) What is it for us to *hear* music *as* being sad or as expressing sadness?

The second is about music itself:

(Music) What is it for music to *be* sad or to *express* sadness?

Although Peacocke says that he is interested in the Music question, his paper is mostly concerned with the Perception question. This will be relevant later on.

II

On the Perception question, he has something very interesting to say, namely that we need to recognize that in hearing music we often enjoy *experiences* whose content is *metaphorical*.

The basic thought here is reminiscent of an idea that I first encountered in reading Roger Scruton’s *The Aesthetics of Music*:

To describe [music] 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.¹

1 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (OUP, 1997), p. 96. For discussion see my ‘Explaining Musical Experience’, in K. Stock (ed.) *Philosophers on Music* (OUP, 2007).

Peacocke develops this idea more than Scruton does and he tries to explain how it might help us resolve certain puzzles in the philosophy of music.

We need to think about two questions:

- (A) What exactly does it mean to say that the content of musical perception is metaphorical?
- (B) Why do we need to think of musical perception in this new and distinctive way?

III

I start with the first question. Peacocke formulates his view thus:

When a piece of music is heard as expressing the property *P*, then some feature of the music, possibly some relational feature, is heard metaphorically-as *P*,

where *P* can be any property in a huge range of properties, and need not be restricted to emotional states.² What does it mean to say that a subject experiences a feature metaphorically-as *P*?

Addressing this question initially by considering visual experience, Peacocke distinguishes between three different kinds of seeing:

- (a) Seeing *x* literally as *P*.
- (b) Seeing *x* as depicting *P*.
- (c) Seeing *x* metaphorically-as *P*.

Seeing *x* literally as *P* involves subsuming *x* under the concept *P*, predicating *P* of *x*. Typically, unless this is blocked by background knowledge or doubt, such an experience would lead to the *belief* that *x* is *P*.

What about seeing *x* as depicting *P*? Peacocke says:

This is a distinctive kind of experience – we are not here concerned merely with imagination or inference. But experiences of this type are evidently not to be characterized, at least straightforwardly, as representational content. In seeing the painting as of the river, it does not seem to you that there is a river in front of you. Taking your whole experience at face value does not involve judging that there is a river in front of you.

It is not wholly clear to me what is being claimed in this passage, but since it is not central to the issues that most concern me, I will not dwell on it. The main puzzle is why seeing *x*

² On a later occasion, when he gives the logical form of the perceived metaphorical content of music, Peacocke says that the ‘feature *F* of music *M* is perceived by a particular subject metaphorically-as representing the property *F*’. As we saw, at the very beginning of his paper, Peacocke says that we not only experience music as expressing sadness, but as sad. In other words, he seems to be emphasizing that we not only experience music as *expressing* or *representing* various properties, we hear it as *having* some of those properties. While some of his formulations allow for this greater generality, some of them (like the one in this footnote) retreat to the more modest claim that we hear music only as *representing* some or other property. It would be good to know which thesis is intended.

as depicting P could not be seen as a sub-species of seeing x literally as P, with the relevant 'P' being the property of 'depicting P'? Of course, seeing something as depicting a river does not involve judging that there is a *river* in front of you, but, for all Peacocke has said here, it might involve judging that there is a *depiction of a river* in front of you and so something deserving of the label 'representational content'. (Of course, that is not to say that the notion of *depiction* could not be further unpacked.)

As I say, though, there is no need to dwell on this, for the main question before us concerns the third kind of seeing on Peacocke's list: seeing something *metaphorically-as* P. What, for example, would it be to see the Zurbaran pots metaphorically-as people?

Clearly, the concept *people* is involved in this seeing and some kind of subsumption of the pots under that concept. But also clearly, this is not predicative subsumption, for predicative subsumption typically leads to belief, whereas this kind of subsumption does not. I think we need to hear more about what this obscure notion is before we can tell just how useful it is going to be.

IV

Now, someone might think: Look, whatever it is, there clearly has got to be such a thing for there clearly are metaphorical *thoughts* and so there must be such a thing as *thinking of x metaphorically-as* P. Once we have an account of metaphorical subsumption in *thought* why couldn't we use it to explain how there could be metaphorical subsumption in *experience*?

Although I am in complete agreement with Peacocke that there are not only metaphorical assertions, but also metaphorical judgements, I am not persuaded that metaphorical judgement gives us any purchase on the notion of metaphorical *content*. The reason is that metaphorical judgement seems amenable to an alternative construal, one that invokes not a special notion of content, but just the notion of an ordinary content *treated* metaphorically.

On this view, to judge metaphorically that life is a journey is just to think the straightforwardly false proposition *that life is a journey*. What makes the judgement metaphorical has to do not with its propositional content but rather with the way in which the judgement is assessed or treated. The fact that it is literally false is not held against it because its role is not to have stated something literally true, but to have drawn the thinker's attention to a potentially fruitful isomorphism between the two phenomena that it literally falsely relates. On this view, in other words, judging metaphorically is not thinking a thought with a distinctively metaphorical content, but treating a literal content in a metaphorical way, as a source of illumination via unexpected isomorphism rather than as a source of literal truth. Let us call such views *Metaphorical Use* views of metaphorical thought, in contrast with a *Metaphorical Content* view of them.

V

I much prefer a *Metaphorical Use* view of metaphorical judgement to a *Metaphorical Content* view of it. The reason is that the former view does not appeal to an obscure and

unexplained notion of metaphorical concept-subsumption, and relies only on notions that we need anyway – namely, on different ways of treating a propositional content. To reject it in favor of a Metaphorical Content view we would need to be shown that, even when fully developed, it would fail to characterize metaphorical judgement adequately. But I know of no such consideration.

So, a commitment to the existence of metaphorical *judgement* need not carry with it a commitment to the sort of special metaphorical content that Peacocke is attributing to visual and auditory experiences.

Could we perhaps treat metaphorical experience on the Use model rather than on the Content model? It does not seem possible to do that.

Treating metaphorical experience on the Use model would entail saying that we see the Zurbaran pots literally as people, recognize the falsity of that seeing-as, but nevertheless choose to ‘retain that experience’ because of its potential to illuminate what we are seeing. And there are at least two difficulties with this idea.

First, and as Peacocke himself is at pains to emphasize, it would not be correct to say that we see the Zurbaran pots literally as people.

Second, while it makes sense to say that we might choose to retain the false judgement that life is a journey, even while knowing that it is false, because we see its potential to illuminate the notion of a life, it does not seem to make corresponding sense to talk of ‘retaining an experience’. Retaining a false judgement amounts to deciding to continue to judge a false proposition. One cannot in the same sense decide to have, or retain, a given experience.

VI

The Scruton/Peacocke proposal, then, that we should recognize a distinctive kind of experience, an experience with metaphorical content, is arresting but obscure. Before we accept it, we should be persuaded that it really is indispensable for a proper account of aesthetic experience. Is it?

There is one respect in which a metaphor-based view might look as though it is bound to have a significant advantage over views that invoke only literal hearing-as. And that is that it seems to be able to accommodate the vast *range* of properties that music is heard to express or even, as I was previously emphasizing, have. The classical Resemblance View, for example, is geared only towards capturing how it is that music might *express* various *emotions*. One version of such a view might be formulated as follows:

A passage P is expressive of emotion 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).³

The metaphor-based view, by contrast, would appear to place no limits on the sorts of properties that music might be heard to represent or have. Since, given suitable isomorphisms, any x can be heard metaphorically-as any P, it would appear better placed to

3 For a statement of the Resemblance view see Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (London: Penguin, 1995).

accommodate the range of properties that listeners hear music as having. As Peacocke says, music can be heard to express not only emotions but also such properties as expressing immensity, or identification with mankind.

But the appearance of advantage here may be misleading. Theories that invoke literal hearing-as are not obviously precluded from accommodating just as wide a range of heard properties as metaphor-based views. If we were restricted to thinking of musical perception in literal terms, we could make sense of hearing music as expressing sadness or even of hearing it as sad.

What we would have trouble with is not the hearing-as *per se*, but getting such perceptions to come out being *correct*. The problem would be not with explaining how we might hear music as expressing sadness; it would be with explaining how music *could* express sadness. (In other words, the problem is not with answering the Perception question but with answering the Music question in a realist way.) One of the factors that help explain the appeal of the Resemblance view of musical expression is that it makes it not impossible that musical perception might be correct, since we just might be able to make sense of the idea that a passage of music resembles the way in which a person would naturally express a particular emotion.

So the problem for a literalist view is not accounting for the range of things we hear music as expressing, but getting those hearings to come out as possibly correct. A metaphor-based view, though, would presumably have given up on the idea of correct musical perception altogether. So it does not seem as though its advantage could consist in doing better on the question of correctness.

Now, Peacocke denies this last claim. He thinks the metaphor-based view can perfectly well accommodate the correctness of a particular way of hearing a passage of music. He says:

It may seem that in emphasizing the experienced content of music, and simultaneously distinguishing metaphorical content from representational content, we deprive ourselves of any hope of explaining a distinction between correct and incorrect, better and worse ways of hearing the emotional content of a piece of music. But this is not so. An experienced metaphor relies on the existence of a mentally represented isomorphism. The isomorphism can exist even if it is not mentally represented; which is what happens when a piece of music is not perceived correctly.

According to Peacocke, a particular metaphorical way of hearing a passage of music will be incorrect if it ignores various isomorphisms that genuinely exist. But this account of incorrectness seems questionable in at least two ways.

First, if I understand the account of metaphorical perception that Peacocke has presented, any metaphorical perception will be *causally dependent* on exploiting a real isomorphism. So the most we could say about a given metaphorical way of hearing a passage of music is that it is *incomplete*, not that it is incorrect. (If I report that the cat is on the mat without mentioning that it is on a straw mat, I would not have spoken falsely.)

Second, even if it were possible to have a metaphorical perception that was based on no real isomorphism, that still would not suffice to make that perception *incorrect* in any obvious sense, since, as Peacocke is at pains to emphasize, metaphorical perceptions do not report on the existence of isomorphisms but rather ‘exploit’ them.

In general, it seems to me, the most we could say about the application of a particular metaphor to a work of art is that it is *unilluminating* – it fails to disclose the work’s most interesting features. And so one could fault someone for choosing to describe the work with one set of metaphors as opposed to another.

But even this attenuated form of criticism would appear not to be available at the level of experience, because as previously emphasized, we cannot in general *choose* which experiences to have.⁴

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4 An earlier version of this piece was presented as a comment on Peacocke’s essay at a ‘Roundtable on Music and Mind’ held at Columbia University in March of 2006. I am grateful to the participants at that session, and especially to Christopher Peacocke, for useful discussion. Thanks also to John Hyman for comments on an earlier version.