

Taking Music Philosophically · Guenter Zoeller

PHILOSOPHICAL INTEREST IN MUSIC goes back to the very beginnings of Western thought. In the late sixth century B.C., the Greek philosopher and sect founder Pythagoras discovered the mathematical basis of musical intervals, thereby assigning the study and practice of music to the activity of the intellect, well beyond the confines of the senses. In their cosmological speculations Pythagoras and his school extended the concept of music to include the music produced by the movements of the celestial spheres—a music inaudible to the human ear but detectable in philosophical meditation. It could be argued that Western music never completely ridded itself of the Pythagorean spiritualization of this particular art form. Even in its institutional and sociological history, music was set apart from the other arts through its historical proximity to philosophy. The medieval educational system considered music one of the seven “free” or “liberal arts” (*artes liberales*), grouped together, in the *quadrivium*, with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, and strictly separated from such “mechanical arts” as painting and sculpture.

Throughout the centuries the recognition of music’s affinity to philosophy has taken various forms. Quite a number of philosophers, among them Augustine and Descartes, wrote musical treatises, others engaged in contemporary musical controversies or actually composed music. A few philosophers, most notoriously Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Adorno, did all three of those things. In the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music, with its appreciation of music’s unique power to express the essence of the world, proved highly influential among composers (Wagner) and the wider public alike. In the twentieth century, efforts at taking music seriously from a philosophical perspective have been divided between a Continental camp, whose championship of the Schoenberg school tends to be partisan, polemic, and even pontificating, and the more sober and pedestrian work done by Anglo-American scholars trying to apply the tools of philosophical analysis to the recalcitrant topics of the production and reception of musical works of art.

Over the past decade the American philosopher Peter Kivy (Rutgers University) has published a series of five books in the philosophy of music.

On the basis of his double training as an analytic aesthete and as a historian of aesthetics, Kivy has been pursuing a project that is at once modest and ambitious. It is a modest project in that Kivy has not set out to give us a systematic aesthetics of music with encyclopedic scope and completeness. Rather, each of Kivy's books takes up a fairly specific, although central topic in the philosophy of music, and pursues that topic with an intriguing mix of erudition, scrutiny, and casual tone. The project is quite ambitious, though, in its goal of bringing philosophical respectability to talking about music. There are, to be sure, two well-established discourses about music, that of the musicologist and that of the layperson. But musicological knowledge is concerned with the technical dimensions of music and does not address itself to the ordinary music listener and lover, while the layperson's verbal reaction to music is for the most part methodologically naive and not the result of actual thinking about music. Kivy proposes to overcome this dilemma between inaccessible expertism and unacceptable dilettantism in musical discourse by instituting a thoughtful, methodologically reflective, and yet generally accessible discourse on music—a discourse he terms "humanist." Kivy's books are intended to provide the foundations for such humanist music criticism.

Each of Kivy's books on music aesthetics addresses one of four major issues in the criticism of music. The topics are music and the emotions, discussed in *The Corded Shell* and its revised and substantially enlarged edition under the title *Sound Sentiment*; music and representation, in *Sound and Semblance*; music and drama in *Osmin's Rage*; and instrumental music, so-called absolute music, in *Music Alone*. In dealing with these four issues, Kivy relies on numerous musical examples taken from the Western classical tradition. The writing proceeds in the form of careful philosophical reflections, often organized by the progression from an initial thesis through its substantiation and defense against contrary views to conclusions drawn under the honest admission of how much work still remains to be done. In addition to being logically sound, Kivy's reasoning is also historically informed. The views of quite a number of past music theorists and philosophers are presented and critically evaluated.

In *Sound Sentiment* (and its precursor, *The Corded Shell*), Kivy examines the relation between music and the emotions. He contrasts two major views on the expressive powers of music. In the arousal or stimulation

model, a specific piece of music causes a specific emotional response in the listener. The music itself is devoid of emotional qualities; it merely provokes an emotional reaction in the listener. Kivy presents evidence for the historical significance of the theory, and goes on to critique its inadequacies. The arousal theory of musical expression cannot account for the pleasure we take in music of the negative emotions. As a purely physiological account of musical perception it is furthermore blind to the presence of mental activity in music listening. We do not just passively undergo sensory stimulation when enjoying a musical performance. Rather, we engage, more or less actively, in thought processes. Typically these thought processes involve the recognition of the music as sad, or triumphant, or whatever may be the case.

This is where the alternative, representational model of musical expression comes in. In this view, the emotional features of music are objects of cognition. According to the representational model, the expressive features of music manifest themselves in the listener through processes of recognition. The sadness of the music is recognized as that music's emotional content. Yet even on the representational view, the emotions are not literally present in the music. Kivy clarifies the situation with a crucial conceptual distinction in the language of musical expression. Things, among them works of art such as musical compositions, can be *expressive of* emotions without *expressing* those very emotions. Calling a piece of music sad is a figure of speech for the more literal account that the music exhibits properties which resemble a certain emotion. The composition itself is not a sentient being; hence it can neither feel nor express sadness. Yet the music can convey the thought of sadness to its listeners by resembling the emotion of sadness as felt and expressed by human beings.

Kivy provides two complementary accounts for the resemblance between music and the emotions. On the contour model, the music shares certain gestural features with the human expression of emotions. The most basic case is the imitation of the human voice in singing. But Kivy suggests extending the application of the model to more abstract forms of isomorphism between musical properties and expressive properties. Kivy attributes the recognition of emotional contours to the general psychological fact that human perception tends to animate its objects by interpreting given data in ways that meet the anthropomorphic world view. In

the case of music this natural fact takes the form of the spontaneous animation of sound. The second, supplementary account of the affinity between music and emotions is the convention model. Here the recognition of emotions in music is mediated through cultural rules that are learned and exercised as part of one's membership in a musical culture. Kivy traces the convention-governed recognition of emotions to the psychological phenomenon of association whereby a previously encountered conjunction of musical properties and emotional meaning predisposes the mind to connect the occurrence of the former with that of the latter.

Kivy's account of emotional musical content carefully avoids the appeal to the composer's intention. Like other practitioners of analytic aesthetics Kivy is deeply suspicious of the logical deficiencies in an argument from artistic intention ("intentionalist fallacy"). Rather, Kivy locates the basis for emotive musical description in the music itself. To that extent, he defends the objectivity of emotive discourse about music. It needs to be kept in mind, though, that music is the sound as perceived in anthropomorphic animation and cultural interpretation. Kivy's objectivism regarding emotionally effective musical properties is thus parasitic upon the limited objectivity of musical conventions. No claim to universal validity is raised.

In *Sound and Semblance* Kivy addresses the question whether and how music can represent. The discussion of music's representational powers is strictly descriptive. No value judgment concerning the aesthetic merits of musical representation is attempted. Kivy examines in detail the functions that text and title have in providing music with reference to extramusical reality. In an attempt to sharpen the concept of resemblance that underlies the relation between art work and mundane referent, Kivy distinguishes two kinds of artistic representation. They are picturing, in which the reference can be grasped without verbal aid, and representation in the narrow sense, which requires some verbal guidance for identifying the reference in question.

Kivy establishes an intricate typology of musical illustrations by drawing on dozens of examples from Western music. The classification is not meant as a rigid schema. It is intended as an orientation in dealing with the great variety of ways in which music can refer to things outside itself. Kivy argues that, in the absence of a semblance of sound between music

and referent, a more abstract communality of structure (isomorphism) can take the place of the relation of resemblance. However, in those cases detecting the reference will take both verbal leads and a certain degree of musical sophistication.

Among the functions of representation in music discussed by Kivy is the use of musical illustration for expressive purposes. Kivy shows through examples how representational music can be expressive of emotions: either by arousing the emotions that would be felt in the presence of the object musically depicted, or by having the music itself be expressive of certain emotions. Kivy's point that music of a certain kind can arouse certain emotions in the listener might seem at odds with his earlier rejection of the arousal theory of musical expression. It must be kept in mind, though, that Kivy nowhere disputes the fact that some music causes an emotional reaction. What he disputes is the claim that the arousal theory can sufficiently explain the emotional dimension of musical experience.

A major challenge to musical representationalism is musical purism, or the view that representational features of music are either irrelevant or of little importance in the understanding of music. Kivy meets the challenge by showing that, historically speaking, music has been successful at representing through sound and structure what is otherwise referred to by words. This is not to deny that some music may not represent at all. In fact, one of Kivy's other books, *Music Alone*, addresses exactly that issue. For now, Kivy merely defends the very possibility of music representing some extramusical thought—and he does so by pointing to the indisputable fact that music can illustrate thoughts by semblance of sound or some structural identity between music and thought.

With the possibility of musical representation established and the principal ways of achieving musical representation enumerated, Kivy examines how the representational dimension of music should inform the listener's interpretation of music. Kivy concedes a crucial role to the composer's manifest intention, while at the same time reminding his readers that reliably documented intentions are scarce. Moreover, intention is merely a necessary condition for interpreting music representationally. The lack of known intentions rules out representational interpretation, but intention alone will not do. Intention needs to be supported by evidence from the musical text itself. Thus the success of both the expressive and the repre-

sentational interpretation of music is seen as a function of one's musical sophistication. Responsible music criticism may not require excessive technical knowledge, but it certainly demands a high familiarity with the cultural background and artistic conventions of the music.

Ossmin's Rage is a study in the aesthetics of a particular musical genre, opera. Kivy does not attempt a comprehensive philosophy of opera. His examinations of the relations between text, drama and music are limited to three historical forms of operatic music, each associated with a particular composer: the Florentine reform opera represented through Monteverdi, the baroque *opera seria* in Handel's works, and Mozart's contributions to eighteenth-century *opera buffa*. Kivy proposes to study all three types of opera as so many approximations to the aesthetic ideal of "drama-made-music." In this view, the purpose of opera is the representation of the emotional content of the libretto in the medium of music. The music acoustically illustrates the thoughts and emotions contained in the text. This way of viewing opera is contrasted with the competing aesthetic ideal of "opera as drama." In the latter view, music accompanies the text as one of the several artistic media involved in the rendition of the drama. It must be stressed that the distinction is not meant to classify individual operas or kinds of operas. Its primary purpose is to organize the critical discourse on operatic music by providing a standard for assessing the artistic merits of given operas.

In electing the approach of drama-made-music, Kivy has chosen an aesthetic that values music which in its very structure mirrors ("represents") the emotional meaning of the text. Kivy argues that the construal of emotions in a given operatic text is just as culturally determined and historically shifting as their representation in musical form. More specifically, Kivy holds that the texts of each of the operas considered are informed by the philosophical account of the emotions reigning at the time, and that the musical representation of the text aims at the perfect musical equivalent of the emotions so understood. For Monteverdi, the philosophical background is the humanist revival of Plato's psychology and the Platonic-Aristotelian understanding of art as imitation. In the case of Handel, the underlying philosophy is Descartes's account of the "passions of the soul." Mozart, finally, is connected with the associationist theory of the emotions prevalent in the eighteenth century. Kivy does not claim that the

composers, or even their librettists, had any familiarity with the philosophies in question. The correlations between text, music and philosophy are attributed to a common cultural-historical climate.

The intriguing feature of this somewhat speculative account of music history lies in some of the details of the proposed correlation. That monody and the *recitativo* treatment of the human voice in Monteverdi are attempts to musically represent emotionally inflected human speech may not be a new insight. But to suggest, as Kivy does, that the ABA-form of the *da capo* aria in *opera seria* represents the discrete, abruptly changing and peculiarly obsessive character of Cartesian emotions is an ingenious reading. Similarly innovative seems the attempt to understand the fluidity of the emotions—their indefinite and varying character—in Mozart's *opere buffe*. In this view, the emotions permeate the whole of mental life by accompanying the mind's various activities with affective responses. Kivy views that conception of the emotions best represented in the dramatic developments of Mozart's ensemble and finale scenes.

In his interpretations of Monteverdi, Handel, and Mozart, Kivy attributes philosophical dignity and cultural significance to what might otherwise seem merely internal musical conventions. Kivy thus consolidates the general point made in his treatments of musical expressiveness and musical representation. The understanding of music is shown to require familiarity with the broader cultural circumstances of a composition. More specifically, it calls for the ability to have such background knowledge inform one's perception of the work in question by entertaining affinities and correlations between extramusical culture and compositional facts.

While Kivy's earlier publications examine the relation between music and various extramusical factors, *Music Alone* is devoted to "music unaccompanied by text, title, subject, program, or plot." This ideal of musical purity is realized in certain kinds of instrumental music that seem to be devoid of any reference to things outside the music itself. Kivy thus takes up the nineteenth-century musical controversy between the neo-German program music of Liszt and Wagner and the conservative adherents of "absolute music," centered around Brahms.

The philosophical problem underlying musical purism can be formulated as the dilemma between the two competing models of musical experience introduced in Kivy's earlier works. While the stimulation model is

able to accommodate the insight that certain music is without content, it reduces musical perception to a mindless reception of sensory stimuli. In the alternative, cognitive model, the insight into the distinctively intellectual nature of musical perception is preserved, but at the price of having music possess a content that compromises its purity. Kivy proposes to circumvent the two horns of the dilemma. He construes the experience of pure music to have a structure *sui generis*. Pure music is not a representational object that refers the listener to some extramusical reality. Rather, it is an object in its own right, to be perceived by an experience in which cognition and enjoyment enhance each other.

Kivy discusses various ways in which pure music can be experienced, ranging from the naive listener's reaction to the most sophisticated technical appreciation. Kivy himself sides with neither of the two extremes. He considers the former approach inadequate to the complexities of the music, while the latter is seen as suppressing the experiential side of music listening. Kivy advocates an "emotive formalism" that combines the understanding of musical structures with the recognition of non-technical, emotive properties of pure music. He rejects the two standard accounts of the role of emotions in pure music. Pure music is neither simply the cause of certain emotions in the listener, nor is it "about" emotions in the sense of telling us something about the world as a place governed by emotions. For Kivy, emotions are present in pure music along with other qualities of the music that organize the musical structure. This view sets Kivy apart from extreme music formalists who deny the legitimacy of describing pure music in emotive terms.

The vindication of the language of emotions for formal musical criticism is certainly Kivy's main accomplishment in his study of pure music. It is the final step in the comprehensive project of laying the foundation for a generally intelligible, yet intellectually responsible ("humanist") musical criticism. For Kivy, the comprehension of pure music includes the apprehension of its emotional qualities. The perception of emotions in music is not seen as a way of going beyond the purely musical, but as constituting an integral part of the essentially formal experience of music alone. But does the enjoyment-enhancing perception of structure exhaust the experience of pure music? Kivy himself acknowledges the fact that pure music, while definitely not being about anything in particular, can yet be experi-

enced as significant or “profound.” To a more speculative mind this experience might suggest the view that pure music, in its best exemplars, is not about anything in the world but rather about the world as a whole—that it is, in Heidegger’s term, world-disclosing, rather than discovering anything particular in and about the world. But Kivy’s analytic scruples and methodological cautions leave no room for such conjecture. He would rather not give any explanation at all—thereby inviting our own.

Works Cited

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