

Department of Philosophy

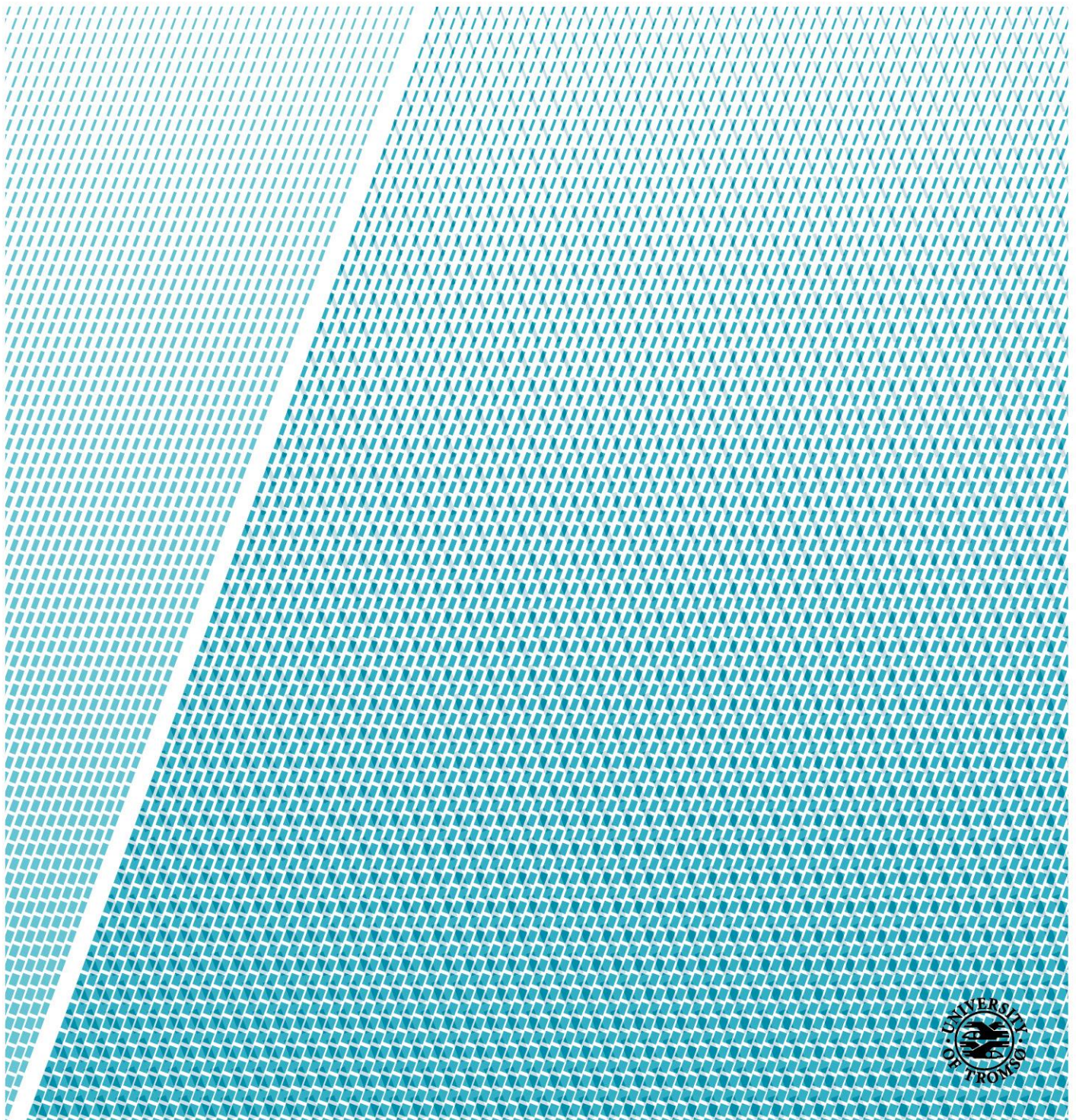
# Conceptions of Meaning in Music

*On the Possibility of Meaning in Absolute Music*

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# Introduction

There is so much talk about music, and yet so little really said. For my part I believe that words do not suffice for such a purpose, and if I found they did suffice, then I certainly would have nothing more to do with music. People often complain that music is ambiguous, that their ideas on the subject always seem so vague, whereas every one understands words; with me it is exactly the reverse; not merely with regard to entire sentences, but also as to individual words; these, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so unintelligible when compared with genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. What the music I love expresses to me, is not thought too *indefinite* to be put into words, but, on the contrary, too *definite*.<sup>1</sup>

The main aim of my thesis is negative. I want to challenge claims from Peter Kivy about so-called

“Absolute music,” then, as defined, is pure instrumental music without text, title, program, dramatic setting, or any other extra-musical apparatus. It is music, as defined, without representational, narrative, semantic or other extra-musical content.<sup>2</sup>

Or, that it is a “quasi-syntactical structure of sound understandable solely in musical terms and having no semantic or representational content, no meaning, making reference to nothing beyond itself”.<sup>3</sup> The essence of these, and similar claims about music, is that music does not have meaning. If I succeed in showing that these claims can be refuted, I will have achieved much. A secondary aim of this thesis will be positive. I hope to point in the direction of a plausible account of meaning in music. Given the space available, I do not have a full, well-argued account of *how* and *why* there is meaning in music. Still, with the help of a few other philosophers of music, I have some suggestions that I would like to put forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, “Letter to Marc-André Souchay” in *Mendelssohn’s Letters*, pp. 298-300.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 202.

The reason I want to challenge Kivy's claims is that I believe that music, also of the so-called absolute kind, has meaning. Music can convey something about something other than itself. For people *not* partaking in the debate of whether music has meaning, this is not a controversial claim. However, trying to pin-point it philosophically proves difficult. As such, the main question that runs through my thesis will be: does music have meaning? Intuitively, I am prone to answer yes, and I will argue that there are good reasons to. The question of what counts as meaning, or how to define it is a difficult one. Both Peter Kivy, and James O. Young, one of his main adversaries, want to reserve the term meaning for the linguistic sense. If meaning is conceived like that, most people agree that music does not have meaning. There is another sense of meaning in play here, though, which is not trivial, even if it is not linguistic in nature. Through my discussion of Kivy's opponents, I hope that this sense will become clear.

There is implied in our culture a strong connection between music and the emotions. Both those who believe that such a connection is real, and those that do not, agree that this implication exists. As such, an exploration of what musical meaning might be, will also have to explore the nature of the connection between music and emotion. All theories concerning musical meaning (whether it is *pro* or *contra*), relies on discussions of the relation between music and emotion. Both Jenefer Robinson (to a degree) and Young give accounts of musical meaning grounded in an account of music arousing emotion. What aesthetic relevance the emotions have, will therefore also be a recurring theme in the thesis. Much time, then, will be spent discussing the relation between music and the emotions, both in Kivy, and in his adversaries.

Another recurring theme in the thesis is a discussion of the term *absolute music*, i.e., instrumental music with no accompanying text, and with no obvious function. In the modern debate, absolute music is the central example among a majority of the participants, as it is thought to present the best case study of music. However, I will argue that the nature of the term in many cases obscures the discussion.



The structure of the work will be as follows. In the first chapter, I will set the stage for Kivy, by discussing some of the background for his position. I will begin by discussing absolute music, to show how the emergence of the term coincides with both formalism, the idea of musical autonomy, but also the idea of music alone having meaning. I will go on to a short discussion of Kant, to show how he has been an inspiration to the formalists. Then I will turn to Eduard Hanslick, which in the current debate is considered the original formalist. The central problems he dealt with are still widely contended in the philosophy of music, and his work still widely discussed.

In the second chapter I will give an overview of Kivy's position. I will look into his conception of absolute music, before I lay out his strain of formalism, *enhanced formalism*. Then, I will look specifically into what he has to say about the question of meaning in music.

This will lead us to the third chapter, where I give answers to Kivy's claims regarding the impossibility of meaning in music. I will use works by Jenefer Robinson, James O. Young and Aaron Ridley to give a criticism of Kivy's theories from different angles. At the same time, I will relay their respective positive views on what constitutes meaning in music, to see if any of their alternatives seem plausible.

In conclusion I argue that neither a purely formalist view of music, nor Kivy's enhanced version are plausible, and that we would be wise considering alternatives. I will also provide a sketch for such an alternative, based largely on the discussion of Robinson, Young and Ridley.

# 1 The Roots of Formalism

Musical formalism is the view that the content of music is, in one way or another, just the formal aspects of music. A piece of music contains tones, rests, rhythm and similar musical building blocks, and nothing else. The appearance of formalistic theories about music is closely linked to the appearance of the idea of musical autonomy. As Andy Hamilton notes in *Aesthetics and Music*, music has not always been considered something worth pursuing on its own.

From ancient times, vocal music was ranked above purely instrumental music, and the rhetorical or linguistic interpretation of instrumental music dated back to Ancient Greece. Since it now seems obvious that music is an aural phenomenon, and that a text – such as the lyrics of a song – is in some sense an extra-musical element, it is easy to overlook the fact that music, in almost all traditions, was once centrally vocal and dramatic. But the autonomy of music from text or rhetoric is an historically moulded assumption no more than two centuries old.<sup>4</sup>

Music, for the most part of history, and apart from music as high art, even today, is either mostly vocal or in some sense functional. Listening to music just for the sake of listening to music is a relatively new activity. The etymology of the word music betrays this; *music* from ancient Greek *mousike techne* means the arts of the muses, i.e., the arts that were the domain of the muses. It originally incorporated poetry and myths as well as songs. It was not restricted to merely what we think of as music today, and it did probably not include a concept of instrumental music without accompanying text, play or dance. Throughout history, all the way up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we do not find the same reverence as we do today of music on its own. The shift, then, that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was indeed profound. Today, we see the symphony, often without a single word connected to it, not even a title apart from the number, as something exalted in its wordlessness, not deprived of anything. Some hundred years ago, rhetorical analysis of music was the most common way of analysing it. There is nothing given about the position instrumental music has achieved, it is the result of a shift in the way of thinking about music, and musical formalism has its roots in this shift.

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music*, p. 67.

## 1.1 A Note on Absolute Music

The term *absolute music* has both a normative and a descriptive dimension. This is because the term originated as an ideal for a way of composing music. Absolute music is music for its own sake, not filling a function, or “helped” by an accompanying text. In other words, it is music without extra-musical apparatus. It is the descriptive dimension that is most used today, as examples of absolute music has been dominating the debates of philosophy of music the past 30-40 years. The reason for this, as noted in the introduction, is that music which is thought to be stripped of any extra-musical apparatus makes for good case studies in a lot of the central problems in the philosophy of music. That is, if we want to explore the possibility of semantics in music, for instance, it seems prudent to exclude music with words in it.

The normative dimension of absolute music points to absolute music as an ideal for composing. As Andy Hamilton notes in *Aesthetics and Music*, this was not the most prominent ideal for music when it arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with tone poems, programme symphonies, *lieder*, and the like dominating in the romantic period.

Absolute music was, therefore, a metaphysical aspiration and not a social fact; a part of composers’ self-understanding, which presents a model of what they are trying to achieve. Indeed, as [Roger] Scruton puts it, ‘The term “absolute music” denotes not so much an agreed idea as an aesthetic problem.’<sup>5</sup>

Absolute music could spring forth at this moment in time because of the shift to a romantic aesthetic. With this shift, music was liberated from the other arts, and came to be seen as autonomous. Indeed, this separation of music from the other arts was so successful, that when the romantic paradigm of autonomous art came to the fore, music became the example for the other arts to follow. As Walter Pater proclaimed in the 1870s: “All art, constantly aspires to the condition of music”.<sup>6</sup> Lydia Goehr argues that with the emergence of the Romantic aesthetic, two things happened; there was a “transcendent move from the worldly and

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<sup>5</sup> Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione” in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, p. 86.

particular to the spiritual and universal”,<sup>7</sup> and a “formalist move which brought the meaning from music’s outside to its inside”.<sup>8</sup> On the back of this, Aaron Ridley observes that

The conflation or intertwining of these two moves resulted in a highly peculiar position: music’s significance was now all its own, but the ‘purely musical, in these terms was now synonymous with the moral, the spiritual, and the infinite in its uniquely musical form’. Therefore ‘matters in relevant circumstances considered extra-musical could in other circumstances be regarded as purely musical’, so that theorists came to ‘accept a double-sided view of musical meaning, that it be transcendent, embodied spirituality and purely musical at the same time. In sum the new romantic aesthetic allowed music to mean its purely musical self at the same time that it meant everything else’. Clearly such a position was unstable (not to say unintelligible). But its long-term effect was to move the idea of the *autonomous* musical *work* to the centre of the conceptual stage, so that when the Romantic aesthetic finally collapsed it was the transcendent move that was repudiated, leaving the formalist move (which shifted musical meaning from the outside in) in place. By the beginning of the twentieth century, then, the view that pieces of music were essentially those autonomous structures of sound capable of being symbolically represented in scores was firmly entrenched.<sup>9</sup>

As we can see, the idea of absolute music (referred to as “the purely musical” above) is closely tied to the emergence of romantic aesthetics. Music needed to be autonomous for absolute music to come forth as a term. Moreover, the idea of absolute music is closely tied to the emergence of formalism as well. We can see here the aesthetic problem Scruton pointed to; music at this point in time was supposed to be both autonomous and still able to convey deep, spiritual meaning. For the composers, this became an ideal to aspire to. In the end, the formalist part of this move was the one that was kept. But the term absolute music understood normatively, seems to contain both the formalist and the transcendent move, at least throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. When the descriptive use of absolute music, then, is taken to be that absolute music is almost definitionally devoid of meaning, it has moved away from the term’s origins as normative. The meanings of words change, so there is nothing impermissible with using the term absolute music descriptively today, seen from this angle. Discussions of the term which draw on history, however, need to take the duality of the use of the term absolute music into account. The main point to be drawn out from this, is that

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<sup>7</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 9. Citation within citation: Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, pp. 156-157.

the difference between the normative and the descriptive aspect of the term absolute music, is the difference between the aspiration to create music that can stand on its own, separate from other forms of art or expression, and the description of such works of music as devoid of meaning.

## 1.2 Kant as Inspiration for Formalists

While Peter Kivy does not rely much on Kant explicitly, his focus on the form of music can be seen to have its roots in Kant. In addition, Hanslick makes his considerations against a decidedly Kantian background (even though he differs from Kant in many important respects). Thus, to set the stage for the rise of formalism, an explication of Kant's idea of the beautiful, as it pertains to the formalist, seems in order.

For, although of course it [music, the art of tone] speaks through mere sensations without concepts, and hence does not, like poetry, leave behind something for reflection, yet it moves the mind in more manifold and, though only temporarily, in deeper ways; but it is, to be sure, more enjoyment than culture (the play of thought that is aroused by it in passing is merely the effect of an as it were mechanical association); and it has, judged by reason, less value than any of the other beautiful arts.<sup>10</sup>

The influence Immanuel Kant has had on formalism in general, and musical formalism specifically, does not stem from his thoughts about music in particular, but from his aesthetics in general. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to give a full account of Kant's aesthetic theory, or to go into critical discussion of it, I want to highlight two parts of it that seem to be of importance to both Kivy and Hanslick.

Kant puts forward his aesthetic theory in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. He makes an analysis of the beautiful, or of the judgment of taste, in four moments, according to his four categories of judgment. These four moments leads to four definitions of different aspects of the beautiful. Two of these definitions are of particular interest to the formalists, the definition

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 205 (5:328).

regarding purposiveness without the representation of an end and the definition regarding disinterestedness.

The first definition of the beautiful of interest to the formalist concludes that “*Beauty* is the form of the *purposiveness* of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it *without representation of an end*”.<sup>11</sup> When judging an object as beautiful, we must pay attention to the form, and not the colour or charm. “Taste is always still barbaric when it needs the addition of *charms* and *emotions* for satisfaction, let alone if it makes these into the standard for its approval”.<sup>12</sup> But it is not merely the object’s form that is to be considered, it is the object’s form of purposiveness without the representation of an end.

If one would define what an end is in accordance with its transcendental determinations (without presupposing anything empirical, such as the feeling of pleasure), then an end is the object of a concept insofar as the latter is regarded as the cause of the former (the real ground of its possibility); and the causality of a *concept* with regard to its *object* is purposiveness (*forma finalis*).<sup>13</sup>

Something is a purpose when a concept is the cause of an object. The concept is the cause of the end. Beauty seems to have purpose, and as such it should have an end. However, beauty does not have an end. This definition turns out to be paradoxical in its form. What it tries to capture is that the beautiful seems to be *for something*, and seems to be *intended*, while at the same time it is not. In a sense, beauty reaches towards something, which is, however, not an end.

The second definition of the beautiful that formalism draws on states that the object of an aesthetic judgment must be something that we do not take an interest in. “*Taste* is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction *without any interest*. The object of such a satisfaction is called *beautiful*”.<sup>14</sup> The beautiful is our satisfaction in an object, or in its representation. When we have an interest in the object

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 120 (5:236).

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 108 (5:223).

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 105 (5:219-220).

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 96 (5:211).



we deem beautiful, we cannot be sure if the satisfaction is a result of our judgment of the object as beautiful, or if it is the result of the interest we take in it. I could say that I think my shoes are beautiful, but the pleasure I get from them comes from the fact that they keep my feet safe. They may even actually be beautiful, but as long as I have this interest regarding the safety of my feet, I cannot make a pure judgment of taste about them. If I am able to make a pure judgment of taste regarding my shoes, it is because I can see beyond my own interest in them, and find satisfaction or dissatisfaction in them in a way that is not connected to their usefulness for me. In contrast; that I am able to judge a piece of music, or a work of art in general as beautiful, is because they have no utility. Music typically does not have instrumental value,<sup>15</sup> hence I have no interest in it. My judgment of a piece of music as beautiful, then, is free from the notion of usefulness, and hence disinterested.

If there are no interests at play in us, so that our judgment of an object (or the representation of it) is based purely on its pleasing or displeasing us, then this judgment holds universally. We must assume that everyone else, if they too are able to make a disinterested judgment of the object, will find the same pleasure or displeasure in it. This explains why, when we say “this concert was beautiful”, we do not mean “this concert was beautiful *to me*” in the same manner as we would say “this apple tastes good *to me*”. We make a universal claim about the beauty of the concert, *as if* the beauty were a property of it. Kant does not believe that beauty is in fact a property of an object, but the subjective judgment about the beauty of the concert, taken that the judgment is deprived of all interest, will still be a *universal* subjective judgment that everyone else will also make.

The notion of a judgment that is both universal *and* subjective may seem to lead into trouble. The judgment of taste is based on our feeling of pleasure, and yet it holds universally. There are, however, no universal rules for this feeling of pleasure, since the beautiful pleases without a concept. Therefore, it must be the feeling of pleasure itself that in some way is capable of being universally communicated. “Nothing, however, can be universally

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<sup>15</sup> No pun intended.

communicated except cognition and representation so far as it belongs to cognition”.<sup>16</sup> This means that the feeling of pleasure we experience in judging something as beautiful must be based on cognition or representation belonging to cognition. Cognition concerns itself with concepts, but when we judge something as beautiful, we do this without concepts.

Now if the determining ground of the judgment on this universal communicability of the representation is to be conceived of merely subjectively, namely without a concept of the object, it can be nothing other than the state of mind that is encountered in the relation of the powers of representation to each other insofar as they relate a given representation to *cognition in general*.<sup>17</sup>

This state of mind encountered in the relation of the powers of representation, Kant calls the state of *free play* of the faculties of cognition, or in other words, the free play between the *imagination* and the *understanding*. When these faculties of cognition are in free play, there are no determinate concepts, and this enables us to make subjective claims. Yet, since it is still cognition, we are able to make universal claims, even if there are no concepts involved. Hence, the notion of the state of free play of the faculties of cognition seems to make both the subjectivity and universality of a judgment of taste simultaneously possible.

### 1.2.1 Formalist Legacy

The parts of Kant’s aesthetics outlined above, shows why he has inspired formalist theories of art in general, and music specifically. He asks us to pay attention to the form of the object of a judgement of taste, and to disregard its superficial properties. As Donald W. Crawford writes in his entry on Kant in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, “Ornamentation or elements of charm or emotion may attract us to beautiful objects, but judging them purely in terms of beauty requires us to abstract from these elements and reflect only on their form. To this extent Kant advances a formalist aesthetics”.<sup>18</sup> Kivy also gives an account of what he calls Kant’s formalism.

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<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 102 (5:217).

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 102 (5:217).

<sup>18</sup> Donald W. Crawford, “Kant” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, p. 60.

When we agree that the sunset is beautiful, if we have really achieved the attitude of disinterestedness towards it, it is the *form* of the visual appearance that we are talking about. Furthermore, Kant points out over and over again, we do not even make a commitment to the *actual existence* of the thing, whatever it might be, the form of which we judge beautiful. The form of the sunset is, after all, invariant with the mode of the sunset's existence. Whether it is a real sunset, a dream sunset or a hallucinatory sunset makes no difference. Whatever the existential status of the sunset, the form of its visual appearance remains constant; and it is its *form* that we are reacting to in the pure judgment of taste. This is Kant's 'formalism'.<sup>19</sup>

Kant does not undoubtedly advance a formalist aesthetic, and labelling him as one would be anachronistic. Different readings yield different results, but his insistence on the importance of the formal properties in the judgment of taste has inspired many formalists in the time after him. Most prominently among these, at least before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was the Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick.

### 1.3 Hanslick's Formalism

Eduard Hanslick is something akin to a smallest common denominator for formalists. He was an Austrian music critic and theorist, active in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, hence situated in a time and place where both the classical and (in this case more importantly) the romantic tradition had a solid foothold. Hanslick was opposed to the romantic, metaphysical conception of music as a *language of the feelings*, and wished to have a more sober discussion of what the content of music is, or possibly can be, and to celebrate what is already there in music, instead of trying to embed something extra-musical as a part of music. Hanslick's main work on the aesthetics of music (and until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of just a few works on aesthetics dedicated specifically to music) is entitled *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* in German, variously translated to English as either *On the Beautiful in Music* or, more correctly, *On the Musically Beautiful*. Hanslick believes that a theory of what is aesthetically beautiful in the arts should treat the different arts differently, so that what is beautiful in music is beautiful in a different way than what is beautiful in painting or poetry. Hence, to borrow a point from Hamilton, the latter of the translations of the German title of the book fits better, as

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 55-56.

the phrasing *On the Beautiful in Music* may give the impression that he has a theory of what beauty is in general, and that this book shows how it can be applied to music.<sup>20</sup>

The book itself is relatively short, and rather polemical in its style. He opens it by setting forth a negative and a positive thesis. The negative is that he opposes the view that music is supposed to represent feeling, the view most common in Hanslick's day.<sup>21</sup> The positive thesis is that the beauty of music is specifically musical, i.e., not the result of any factors external to music.<sup>22</sup> He spends the two first chapters of the book trying to refute what he terms as *feeling theory*. Hanslick gives the following account of the two main arguments of the feeling theorists.

According to this doctrine [feeling theory], music cannot entertain the intellect by means of concepts the way literature does, any more than it can the eye, as do the visual arts. Hence music must have as its vocation to act upon the feelings. "Music has to do with the feelings," we are told. This expression "has to do" is a characteristically vague utterance of previous musical aesthetics.<sup>23</sup>

Hanslick's reconstruction of the arguments of feeling theory does not seem to be done with an interest of giving his opponent a strong argument in mind. His attribution of "has to do" to his opposition, and then attacking it for being vague is characteristic of his style throughout the book. He offers to clear this "has to do" up for us, and finds two senses in which people claim that music "has to do" with the feelings.

Of music in the first of these two rôles, it is claimed that to arouse the delicate feelings is the defining purpose of music. In the second, the feelings are designated as the content of music, that which musical art presents in its works. The two are similar in that both are false.<sup>24</sup>

In the spirit of the last sentence, he swiftly moves on to argue against both of these claims. His refutation of the first seems to be based on the Kantian idea that beauty is purposiveness without purpose (or, the representation of an end). Since his discussion is about the musically

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<sup>20</sup> Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music*, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. xxii.

<sup>22</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. xxiii.

<sup>23</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 3.

beautiful, and since he agrees with Kant that beauty can have no purpose, it follows that the *arousal of feeling* cannot be the *purpose* of music, since beauty can have no purpose at all. “Beauty is and remains beauty even if no feelings are aroused and even if it be neither perceived nor thought”.<sup>25</sup> In general, then, Hanslick believes that music in no way can be defined from purposes, not even the arousal of feeling, even though he admits that the relation between music and feeling is a close one: “The fact that this art is intimately related to our feelings in no way supports the view that the aesthetical significance of music resides in this relationship”.<sup>26</sup>

In preparation to his refutation of the second claim, that *feelings* are the *content* of music, he first makes a distinction between feeling and sensation, which again seems reminiscent of Kant. “Sensation is the perception of a specific sense quality: this particular tone, that particular colour. Feeling is becoming aware of our mental state with regard to its furtherance or inhibition, thus of well-being or distress”.<sup>27</sup> Hanslick believes that feelings always have an aboutness or intentionality. We do not for instance have a general feeling of fear, we are specifically afraid of something.

The feeling of hope cannot be separated from the representation of a future happy state which we compare to the present; melancholy compares past happiness with the present. These are entirely specific representations or concepts. Without them, without this cognitive apparatus, we cannot call the actual feeling “hope” or “melancholy”; it produces them for this purpose. If we take this away, all that remains is an unspecific stirring, perhaps the awareness of a general state of well-being or distress.<sup>28</sup>

Since feelings are specific representations or concepts, it is not possible for us to represent them in general terms.

This consideration by itself suffices to show that music can only express the various accompanying adjectives and never the substantive, e.g., love itself. A specific feeling (a passion, say, or an affect) never exists as such without an actual

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<sup>25</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 8.

historical content, which can only be precisely set forth in concepts. Music cannot (as if by way of compromise) render concepts as “indefinite speech”.<sup>29</sup>

From this, Hanslick believes to have proved that it is not possible for music to have feeling as its content. Since music is not able to express anything specific, and since feelings according to Hanslick are always specific, it is not possible for music to express feeling. The feeling that result from our listening to music is a reaction in us to the music, it is not something in the music that is communicated or in any other way transferred from the music to us.

After his refutation of what he sees as the central claims of the feeling theorists, as part of his negative thesis, Hanslick turns to the positive thesis of his book, trying to show what music *can* contain.

What kind of beauty is the beauty of a musical composition? It is a specifically musical kind of beauty. By this we understand a beauty that is self-contained and in no need of content from outside itself, that consists simply and solely of tones and their artistic combination. Relationships, fraught with significance, of sounds which are in themselves charming – their congruity and opposition, their separating and combining, their soaring and subsiding – this is what comes in spontaneous forms before our inner contemplation and pleases us as beautiful.<sup>30</sup>

His view is that the only thing that music can contain is musical building blocks: tone-material: tones, rhythm, timbre etc. These building blocks are combined artistically in different forms, and that is all we can say about the matter. There are no specific feelings being communicated by this or that specific combination of tones, and it is not possible to represent feelings generally, as feelings are always specific. The structural parts of music just come together in different forms, to make different works of music. Some of these works are beautiful, some are not, but they do not contain anything other than musical elements. What can be beautiful in music, then, is the form that the tone-material is assembled into. From this, Hanslick concludes that the only thing music is capable of expressing, the only thing that can be contained in music, is musical ideas.

If we now ask what should be expressed by means of this tone-material, the answer is musical ideas. But a musical idea brought into complete manifestation in appearance is already self-sufficient beauty; it is an end in itself, and it is in no

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<sup>29</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 28.



way primarily a medium or material for the representation of feelings or conceptions. The content of music is tonally moving forms.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, the only permissible way to speak about music for Hanslick, is in internal, music-technical terms. The only things we can say about music, concerns the relations between the different parts of a piece, or their relations to other musical objects. However, what he believes to have achieved with this, is to establish the beautiful in music on music's own terms. He elaborates:

Thus, in order to make our case for musical beauty, we have not excluded ideal content but, on the contrary, have insisted on it. For we acknowledge no beauty without its full share of ideality. Basically what we have done is to transfer the beauty of music to tonal forms. This already implies that the ideal content of music is in the most intimate relationship with these forms. In music the concept of "form" is materialized in a specifically musical way. The forms which construct themselves out of tones are not empty but filled; they are not mere contours of a vacuum but mind giving shape to itself from within. Accordingly, by contrast with arabesque, music is actually a picture, but one whose subject we cannot grasp in words and subsume under concepts. Music has sense and logic – but musical sense and logic. It is a kind of language which we speak and understand, yet cannot translate. It is due to a kind of subconscious recognition that we speak of musical "thoughts", and, as in the case of speech, the trained judgement easily distinguishes between genuine thoughts and empty phrases. In the same way, we recognize the rational coherence of a group of tones and call it a sentence, exactly as with every logical proposition we have a sense of where it comes to an end, although what we might mean by "truth" in the two cases is not at all the same thing.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, when Hanslick puts forward his own view on what music can contain, he has to resort to the same vague language that he criticizes the feeling theorists for using at the outset. In a sense, he even echoes Mendelssohn who said that what was expressed in the music he loved was not too *indefinite* to put into words, but rather too *definite*.<sup>33</sup> It points in the direction that Hanslick may have believed that music had content of an *ineffable* kind, something too profound to be put into words. However, through his wording, he is careful not to explicitly commit to a position of this kind. Ultimately, his resort to a more poetic language is understandable, though. The description of the aesthetic experience we have of music lends itself badly to a scientific and precise kind of language. What he tries to do in the above

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<sup>31</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, "Letter to Marc-André Souchay" in *Mendelssohn's Letters*, pp. 298-300.

citation, then, is to capture the feeling of listening to music, without having to commit to a view that claims that this is all held *in the music*. Hanslick acknowledges the close connection between music and the emotions, but he holds firmly onto the assertion that music cannot contain feelings. In this regard, he becomes the model for Peter Kivy.

Hanslick's explication of the musically beautiful anticipates some of the central themes in the debate that follows. The analogy he made between music and language is a common one, and is often used as an argument against the possibility of extra-musical content in absolute music. As I will go into later, it is argued that music is a language, with syntax and pragmatics, but deprived of semantics. Moreover, his insistence on the primacy of the form in musical beauty gave rise to the formalist views on music, which has become a prominent position in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2 Kivy's Formalism

It is not an understatement to say that Peter Kivy is, almost singlehandedly, responsible for the fact that there is an active debate in the philosophy of music today. This is the main reason why I have chosen him as my main adversary when targeting formalism. While there are, of course, other formalists, it is with him that the position today is most closely associated. In addition, his views are well considered, even if I ultimately believe that they are wrong. I will spend this chapter going through his views on music, insofar as they are relevant to the main themes of my thesis. Hence, I will first see what he has to say on absolute music, then go through his strain of formalism, termed *enhanced formalism*, before I look at his views on the main question: whether there is meaning in a significant sense in music.

### 2.1 Kivy's Conception of Absolute Music

Kivy's definition of absolute music is straightforward. "By absolute music we mean instrumental music without text, program, extra-musical title, bereft of either literary or representational content. In other words, an art of purely abstract but perhaps expressive sound".<sup>34</sup> In short, Kivy's use of the term absolute music is music without any extra-musical content. It is music that, *qua* music, cannot refer to anything beyond itself in a significant way. Kivy is wary of the use of the term absolute music. He prefers the use of *music alone* or *pure music*, but the use of absolute music has become ubiquitous, so in most cases he follows suit. His definition, however, of this kind of music remains the same throughout, even though he uses different terms on occasion, and the different definitions are sometimes worded slightly differently. I have two concerns regarding Kivy and absolute music. The first is that in mainly concerning himself with absolute music, he over-estimates the role of absolute music today. Most works of music are not examples of absolute music, neither historically nor today. And, as Jenefer Robinson will argue later, many works which are considered to be examples of absolute music, perhaps are not. This worry is not restricted to Kivy, but he does not go free of it either. The second is, as I will discuss when looking at Jenefer Robinson's criticism of Kivy, that his definition, even though it is consistent, is perhaps not as general as

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 119.

he claims, and that he asks the definition to do too much work. In the present chapter, I will let Kivy's definition of absolute music stand uncontested, to better facilitate the understanding of his views.

## 2.2 Enhanced Formalism

In the previous chapter we saw how Eduard Hanslick denied two claims about music and emotions; that it is the purpose of music to arouse the feelings, and that the content of music is feelings. Peter Kivy agrees that neither of these claims are true. Yet, as Hanslick, he still has a strong intuition that there is a close connection between music and the emotions. In his own strain of formalism, based on Hanslick, he claims that music can *be expressive of* feelings, more specifically what he calls the *garden-variety emotions*. To this effect, he sees his version of formalism as an enhancement of Hanslick's formalism, hence the name *enhanced formalism*.

Kivy gives a definition of enhanced formalism in his book, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*,<sup>35</sup> stating that enhanced formalism is

the doctrine that absolute music is a sound structure without semantic or representational content, but, nevertheless, a sound structure that sometimes importantly possesses the garden-variety emotions as heard qualities of that structure – an enhancement, in effect, of formalism as it has traditionally been understood.<sup>36</sup>

This definition clarifies the core claims that enhanced formalism makes about absolute music. First, that absolute music is a sound structure. Second, that absolute music does not possess semantic content. Third, that absolute music does not possess representational content.

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<sup>35</sup> While this book is an introduction to the field, and an excellent one at that, there are many claims he makes in this book which are not stated elsewhere. Furthermore, as the title suggests, it is an introduction to *a* specific philosophy of music, namely his. While it deals with a variety of theories in the field, his aim in the book is always to argue for his own view. The fact that it is an introduction does not, in this case, mean that it is dumbed down. As such, I will be quoting a fair bit from this book.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 101.

Fourth, that absolute music *can* (but must not) possess the garden-variety emotions as *heard qualities* of the sound structure.

The first claim is contested by some theorists,<sup>37</sup> but I will not be discussing that issue at present, as it falls outside of the scope of this thesis. The second and third claims will be the focus of this chapter, and I will turn to them shortly. However, I would first like to discuss the fourth claim, since it may not be clear to the reader what garden-variety emotions and heard qualities are.

### 2.2.1 Garden-variety Emotions and Heard Qualities

*Garden-variety emotions* is a key concept for Kivy, and is a term that he uses regularly throughout his works. As the wording of the term shows, it is meant neither as a precise term, nor as a term that points to an exhaustive list of emotions that are included in the term. What I can gather from his use of the term, is that it refers to any of the more or less “regular” or “normal” emotions that we experience. The following example of a definition (or at least an explanation) he gives of the garden-variety emotions in *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, shows how he usually uses the term: “...the ‘garden-variety emotions,’ which is to say, the common, ordinary, basic emotions in the human repertory: joy, melancholy, anger, fear, love, and a few others of that kind”.<sup>38</sup> The way garden-variety emotions can be *in music* (as opposed to *in us*), is analogous to the way redness is considered a *seen property* in a billiard ball.<sup>39</sup> There is no *semantic content* in the billiard ball, and usually we would not say that it *represents* redness. It just *is* red. In the same manner, Kivy says that a melancholy piece of music does not have melancholy as semantic content, nor does it represent melancholy. It just *is* melancholy. The melancholy of that particular piece of music is a *heard property* or *heard quality* of it. There is a difference, however, between the way a billiard ball just *is* red, and the way a piece of music just *is* melancholy. The billiard ball’s redness is a

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<sup>37</sup> For instance, Jerrold Levinson in the article “What a musical work is”.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Note that Kivy uses the terms *property* and *quality* interchangeably in this context.

*simple quality*, while the melancholy of music is a *complex quality*, or an *emergent property*. To argue that the billiard ball is red, we can do nothing else than to point to the billiard ball and say “look, it is red”. To argue that a piece of music is melancholy, however, we can point to specific structural properties in the piece and say, “this property and this property makes it so that the piece is melancholy”. This does not mean that we need to be aware of the properties that make a piece melancholy.

That the emotive qualities of music are *complex* qualities should not be thought to imply that when someone is hearing, say, the melancholy quality of a musical passage, he or she is necessarily aware of the other qualities productive of the melancholy.<sup>40</sup>

This kind of view on how emotions are a part of music is usually called *cognitivism*. The emotions we attribute to music are *in the music*, and we cognize them (perceive them as heard properties).

The statement that music can possess garden-variety emotions as heard properties may lead us to suspect that Kivy is letting semantics back into music. However, he argues that it is possible for music to possess garden-variety emotions as heard qualities, through neither semantics nor representation. The answer to him lies in the structure (or form) of the music. When music is expressive of emotion, the expressivity is emerging from the structural features. In turn, however, the expressivity itself becomes a structural property at times. The expressivity of music has a dual role for Kivy; it is both emerging from the structure, and a part of the structure. Kivy thinks there are three emotionally expressive features in music:

1. Sounding like humans expressing emotion (most prominently speech).
2. Resemblance between the sound and visible expression of human emotion; a kind of analogous “movement” in the music to how people move when they are affected by different emotions.
3. Certain musical features, most notably the major, minor and diminished chords.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 38.



The first feature is about the similarities of how people sound when expressing emotion, and how music sounds.

Melancholy music and melancholy speech and utterance have some obvious sound qualities in common. Melancholy people tend to express themselves in soft, subdued tones of voice; and melancholy music tends to be soft and subdued. Melancholy people tend to speak slowly and haltingly; and melancholy music tends to be in slow tempi and halting rhythm. Melancholy people's voices tend to 'sink,' and tend to remain in the low vocal register; and melancholy music too exhibits the same characteristics. In contrast, cheerful people express themselves in bright, loud, sometimes even raucous – certainly not subdued – tones; and cheerful music tends to be bright, loud and in the high register. Cheerful people are not slow or halting in speech and utterance, but light and sprightly; and cheerful music, likewise, is quick and sprightly. Cheerful people's voices rise energetically into the high register; and so too do the melodies of cheerful music.<sup>42</sup>

In this way music can be expressive of emotion without representation or semantics. It is more a case of mimicry; the music sounds like the way emotionally affected people sound like. We hear emotions in the music, but according to Kivy we need not assume that it is a case of music representing the emotions or expressing them in propositions. We hear them in the same manner as we can see the face of a St. Bernard as sad, without believing that the dog actually *is* sad, nor believing that the dog tries to convey sadness in any way, either semantically or in another way representationally. This kind of musical expressiveness is most often present in the melody. "In all of this, particular attention should be paid to melody. For there is no aspect of Western music that is more amenable to analogy with the rise and fall in pitch of the human speaking voice than the rise and fall in pitch of music's melodic line".<sup>43</sup> The single, prominent voice of the melody (and not polyphonic patterns, or the accompaniment) lends itself most easily to being *heard as* a human speaking voice, as it is the melody that draws our attention and becomes our focus when listening to music, when there is a melody present.

The second expressive feature of music is the resemblance between the way the music sounds and how people affected by emotion move, or what they look like.

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 39.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 39.

Music is customarily described in terms very similar to those we use to describe the motion of the human body under the influence of such emotions as melancholy and cheerfulness. Thus a musical phrase may leap joyously, or droop, or falter, like a person in motion. To put it more generally, music is customarily described in terms of motion; and so the same descriptions we use to characterize it are frequently the ones we use to describe the visible motions of the human body in the expression of the garden-variety emotions.<sup>44</sup>

While the analogy between the emotive tone of voice and the emotive tone of music gains plausibility from the fact that they are both sonic phenomena, this analogy draws on the way we speak about music, and tries to make an analogy between the way things look like and the way things sound like. At first, this may make the analogy seem weaker. An analogy between two different sense modalities does not seem as strong as an analogy between two different aspects of the same sense. However, we may consider rhythm. The analogy between the rhythm of the movement of emotionally affected human beings and the rhythm of the music seems more easily applicable to this relationship than to compare the movement of the music in general. Kivy does not spend much time considering rhythm at all in his writings.<sup>45</sup> However, when he does, he notes that he recognizes the importance of rhythm for the analogy between bodily movement and the way the music moves.

The most obvious analogue to bodily movement in music is, of course rhythm. And it is an embarrassing commonplace, but nonetheless true, that in all sorts of ways, the rhythmic movement of the human body in all kinds of emotive expressions is mirrored by and recognized in music. To state the most common of the commonplaces: *of course* funeral marches are slow and measured, as sadness slows and measures our expression of it; *of course* rapid rhythmic pulses in music are suggestive of rapid behaviour under the influence of the lighter emotions; *of course* jagged and halting rhythms have their direct analogue in human expressive behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

I am of the opinion that highlighting the role rhythm plays in the analogy between the way we move, and the way music moves makes the analogy almost as strong as the analogy between the emotionally affected voice and music. Why Kivy does not put more emphasis on this in

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> The only place, other than the citation below, that I could find was in a historical discussion of the importance of rhythm in the theories of the German ethnomusicologist Richard Wallaschek in “Herbert Spencer and a Musical Dispute” in *Music, Language and Cognition*, pp. 21-25. That discussion has no bearing on any of the present concerns.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Kivy, *Sound Sentiment*, p. 55.

his writings, I do not know, but I will bring it along, as I can only see that it makes his position stronger. Together, these two accounts of how music is expressive of emotion are known as the *contour* theory.

The third kind of expressive features are what Kivy calls the “expressive chords”: the major, minor and diminished chords. Kivy thinks that these chords are expressing emotions as simple qualities.<sup>47</sup> “These chords [major, minor, diminished] are generally perceived as cheerful, melancholy and anguished, respectively”.<sup>48</sup> This claim is deeply rooted historically in Western music, and still enjoys widespread acceptance. With the exception of some changes in the perception of the minor chord, and to what degree it is permissible to end a piece on a minor chord, the general notion of what these chords express have remained constant in Western classical music for at least the last few hundred years.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the expressivity of these chords seem to rely in large part on convention. They have been used to this effect for so long, that it (culturally) has become second nature for us to hear them as expressive in this manner. This is Kivy’s *convention* theory of how music is expressive of emotion.

Intuitively, all of these three claims from Kivy are plausible. The prominent voice of the melody easily lends itself to comparison with a human speaking. Moreover, since the melody is frequently performed by a singer, uttering words along with the melody, the connection seems even closer. The analogy between the emotive tone of a human speaking voice and the emotive tone of a melody seems good. The analogy between how emotionally affected people move and the movement of the music turns out to work as well. Kivy finds support for this analogy in the ways we speak about music, and in the way the music moves. If more emphasis is put on the relation between rhythm and bodily movement, the analogy seems even stronger.

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, composers would invariably end a piece on a major chord, even if the piece were in a minor modality, as the minor chord was not considered restful enough to end on.

The first two claims are analogies between music and parts of human behaviour. If these analogies hold, the question remains; why do we hear these analogies in the music? Kivy does not claim to have a definitive answer to this question, but he gives a tentative one. He draws on the phenomenon that we tend to see living things in inanimate objects, which is often explained evolutionary as a defence mechanism, or “to be on the safe side mechanism”.

When presented with ambiguous figures, we tend to see them as animate rather than inanimate forms: as living rather than non-living entities. We tend to see living forms in clouds, in stains on walls, in the shadowy things lurking in the woods. We see the stick as a snake. Why? Because, perhaps, we are hard-wired by evolution – by natural selection – to do so. Evolution says: ‘Better safe than sorry. Better wrong than eaten.’ Living things can be dangers to you. It is better to see the stick, immediately, incorrectly, as a snake, than to be snake bit, in pondering the question, if it turns out to be a snake after all.<sup>50</sup>

Kivy thinks that since this seems to be the case for sight, it may be the case for hearing as well. Just as we often *see* an ambiguous figure as an animate form, we *hear* ambiguous sounds as animate forms as well. We hear them as expressive of emotion because we are hard-wired to look for signs of life. However, Kivy observes that this tendency is not as strong for hearing as it is for vision. He explains this evolutionarily as well; sight is a *primary* survival sense for humans, while hearing is not.

[I]t is not completely unreasonable, on evolutionary grounds, to think that, while seeing the ambiguous forms as animate remains a conscious phenomenon of human perception, the hearing of sounds that way has sunk back into semi-consciousness as a kind of ‘background noise’.<sup>51</sup>

Kivy suggests this as a plausible account, and later we will see that both Robinson and Young agree with him.

Since both of the first two kinds of expressive properties are complex properties, or emergent qualities, they are a result of structural elements in the music. The expressive chords, on the other side, are according to Kivy, simple properties. This makes it tempting to see these

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 41.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 43.

chords as the emotional building blocks, or the foundation of his system. While this is partly the case, the emergent kinds of music expressiveness emerge from all kinds of musical structural elements, not only the expressive chords. The main difference is therefore that the expressive chords are expressive as simple qualities, we hear the major chord, in general as happy, the minor chord as sad and the diminished chord as a kind of uneasiness. There is nothing else to point to; it is just a description of how these chords (most often) sound.

However, to see these chords as *pure* simple qualities is to exaggerate Kivy's view. While the emotional tone of the above-mentioned chords is generally agreed upon in Western classical music culture, they do not have this quality on their own. They get their emotional expressivity only through being a part of musical syntax.

Take, by way of illustration, the "anguished," "restless" character of the diminished triad. By itself, a diminished triad has no such quality – it stands as an ambiguous cipher. But in its context, during a long period in the history of our musical tradition, it is an "active" chord; it has to go somewhere, lead to something. In this tradition, as a cadential chord, it does not make a well-formed formula, but an incomplete sentence.<sup>52</sup>

Kivy has two suggestions as to how the expressiveness of the expressive chords has arisen. The first suggestion is that the expressiveness can be explained by the fact that the minor chord has a third that is a half-step 'lower' than the major chord, and that this, relatively speaking, gives a notion that the minor chord is 'sinking' or going down, while the major is in a sense uplifting or going up. The diminished chord sounds even more troubling, since *both* the third *and* the fifth are lowered.

The first suggestion is that we hear the vertical structure of the chords as a kind of contour. Compared to the major triad – that is the major three-note chord C–E–G – the minor triad has a lowered third, that is, the E is the third of the C-major chord, the E flat is the third lowered a half step, the smallest interval in the Western harmonic system. (The E is called the 'third' because it is the third note up from the C: that is, C (1), D (2), E (3). The G is called a 'fifth' because it is the fifth note up). Now think of the lowered third, E flat as kind of sagging, or sinking, depressingly from E to E flat. Might that give a depressing, melancholy cast to the C-minor triad? There is a downward tending contour of the C-minor triad, as compared to the C-major one, like the downcast contour of the melancholy speaking voice or posture. And the diminished triad, C–E flat–G flat,

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Kivy, *Sound Sentiment*, p. 80.

is even more depressed: it has both a sinking third *and* a sinking fifth. Pretty far-fetched? Perhaps so.<sup>53</sup>

Kivy does not place too much faith in the above explanation. The second suggestion is that they work within a musical grammatical or syntactical context, in which the diminished chord is very *active* and therefore is very restless, this is less so with minor, while major sounds the most restful. The active nature of the diminished chord, for instance C–E flat–G flat, can be resolved by lowering the G flat to a D flat and raising the C to a D flat; suddenly things feel more at rest.

Might one suggest, then, that what gives the diminished chord its dark, anguished quality [is] its function, in musical structure, as an active, unconsummated, unresolved chord? It is restless, so to say, in its musical function; when it occurs in a compositional structure, at least until fairly recently in the history of the Western harmonic system, it imparts that restlessness to the contour of the melody it accompanies. From its ‘syntactic’ or ‘grammatical’ role in music it gains, by association, as it were, even when alone, its restless, ‘anxious’ emotive tone.<sup>54</sup>

Here we are back to the conventional explanation. Because of the highly active role the diminished chord has in the syntactical structure of music, it is expressive of restlessness when it goes unresolved for too long. This explanation also highlights the dual function that emotional expressivity has for Kivy; the restless nature of the diminished chord is a result of the (convention of) musical structure. But in turn, the restlessness that the diminished chord is expressive of (and the other expressive features of the music), helps constitute the structure of the musical work.

### 2.3 No Meaning in Absolute Music

Kivy is adamant that there is no such thing as *meaning* in music not accompanied by text. However, Kivy’s position is more nuanced than just denying that there is meaning in a broad sense in music. What he denies is that there is linguistic meaning or semantics in music. Further, he thinks that using meaning in other senses than the linguistic or semantic when discussing music are not good uses of the word (even if they can be permissible), and can be

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 45.



changed for other words at an advantage. He believes that the word meaning is often being misused when it is used about music. This is a point worth keeping in mind. When Kivy denies that there is meaning in music, what he denies is that there is meaning there in the specific, linguistic sense of the word, not the general, broader sense of meaning. In this, most philosophers of music follow him. Robinson and Young agree, and Ridley does not directly contradict him. Few people have held that music can express propositions in a linguistic sense; most people would agree that to believe music could do this would be to exaggerate what music can do. When the question of meaning in music is contended, then, it is because other philosophers do not agree with Kivy about the definition of meaning. I will get to his discussion of meaning in a moment, but first we need to have a closer look at his evolutionary argument for why there is no semantics in music.

As we saw earlier, Kivy gave an evolutionary account of how music can be expressive of emotions. In his book *Music Alone*, Kivy gives a similar account of why we frequently can hear emotions in music, but not propositions. Here, this leads into an argument for why music does not have linguistic meaning, or semantics. The starting point is a comparison between the sight and the hearing. He wonders why we have a music of sounds and not a music of sights (auditory music rather than visual music). He believes it is because vision has emerged as the primary survival sense, prompting us to make realistic interpretations of what we see.

[B]ecause we have evolved with the sense of sight paramount in our survival, we have evolved “hard-wired,” to a certain extent, to see “defensively”; which is to say, we are compelled to place “realistic” or “representational” interpretations on visual perceptions. It is a knee-jerk reaction to protect us from potential danger, a phenomenon well known to psychologists through various experiments and, of course, well illustrated in the interpretation of Rorschach blots.<sup>55</sup>

A visual music is therefore difficult to accomplish; whatever we look at, we seek to see it representationally or realistically because we have evolved that way. Assuming that a visual music would be analogous to sonic music, the visual music would have to consist of abstract, moving shapes and forms; much like a kaleidoscope, but composed with intention (not randomly), and more complex. Appreciating these forms in abstract without looking for (and finding) realistic shapes etc., would go against our natural tendency. Overriding this tendency

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 4.

in ourselves is of course possible, but requires a lot of (deliberate) concentration on our part, whereas for normal music, this does not require much effort. Most people have no problem attending a classical concert, listening to the entire performance as intended, even if the concert lasts for more than an hour. It does not seem like the same would be the case for a concert of visual music. Thus, a visual concert would require a lot of work on our part, cognitively, and as such, it would be less enjoyable. The hearing, its survival importance having declined because of the survival primacy of vision, does not as easily hear sounds as representational or real, and is therefore in a better position to appreciate music than the sight would be, Kivy argues.

We do, however, frequently interpret things we hear. This is because language is (originally) an audible phenomenon. Therefore, we often end up looking for meaning in music, rather than representation or mimesis.

One interesting sidelight of this comparison between the eye and the ear is the frequency with which theorists try to make pure music out to be meaningful as opposed to representational. How frequently since the advent of pure instrumental music in the West, have we heard such claims as the following: “[a] piece of music is a communication. And if you are one of those to whom a Beethoven symphony is a lot of meaningless noise, you may say: ‘Tell me what it communicates’ – meaning, of course, ‘Tell me in words.’ What all such claims essentially amount to is the expression of a very strong feeling or impression that musical sounds are meaningful, accompanied by an inevitable recognition that they really are not (the latter signaled by inability to state what their meaning is), decked out as a profundity about their meaning being “nonverbal,” or “special,” or “too precise for mere discursive language to express.”<sup>56</sup> Such perennial attempts to give music meaning suggest we are perfectly right in suspecting a tendency of the ear to interpret sound linguistically when given the least opportunity. And music does, indeed, offer that opportunity. For unlike random noise or even ordered, periodic sound, music is quasi-syntactical; and where we have something like syntax, of course, we have one of the necessary properties of language. That is why music so often gives the strong impression of being meaningful. But in the long run syntax without semantics must completely defeat linguistic interpretation. And although musical meaning may exist as a theory, it does not exist as a reality of listening.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Citation within citation: B. H. Haggin, *The Listener's Musical Companion*, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, pp. 8-9.

This, then, is the main statement of Kivy's view on meaning in music. Music is language-like in having a syntax, or at least something like a syntax. This leads many of us to constantly search for meaning in music, because it strikes us as something that should be there. However, music does not have semantics. This is agreed upon by most people who engage in the philosophy of music, both those who believe that music have meaning, and those who do not. It seems like an almost trivial truth that music is not capable of expressing propositions in the same manner as language. Kivy thinks that this fact alone, that music does not have semantics, should be taken to prove that music does not have meaning.

While Kivy thinks that meaning in a linguistic sense is not possible in music, the likeness of music and language helps facilitate the emotional expressiveness of music.

A second sidelight, already alluded to, can be stated very briefly. If the tendency of the ear to interpret musical sound as meaningful human utterance fails, as it must, what *linguistically* is left? Take the meaning away from the utterance, and one thing you *may* still have (though not necessarily) is the utterance's emotional cast. I can, for example, sometimes tell by tone of voice that someone has said something to me angrily or sadly, even though *what* he or she said may have been lost on the wind. And the musical equivalent of the emotional tone of voice is, I have argued elsewhere, and others have argued before me, a prime mover in the recognition of what emotions music is expressive of. Thus the tendency of the ear to hear sound linguistically lends support to the claim that part of music's expressive quality is due to the analogy of musical sound to passionate human speech. For although the tendency of the ear to hear music linguistically is easily defeated on the semantic level, as we have seen, it may not be so easily defeated at another linguistic level, that of emotional significance, where semantic parameters are not always required. And the evidence bears this suggestion out in the twin observations that we can never say what instrumental music means (in the semantic sense of the word) but frequently can, within certain limits, say what it is expressive of.<sup>58</sup>

We hear from the emotive tone that music is reminiscent of a language, but we are not able to grasp any semantic meaning in it. However, this mode of listening opens us up to listening for the emotive properties that music express.

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 9.

The observations Kivy has made about the difference between vision and hearing, and the likenesses of music and language, leads him to conclude that we are probably evolved to have a music of sounds and not a music of vision, and that the same evolutionary traits makes us hear only emotion in music, and not semantics.

The conclusion of these observations, then, is that although the ear does, like the eye, have a strong tendency to interpret, its tendency is not to interpret sounds as representational or as natural phenomena but to interpret them as meaningful in the full linguistic sense. And since such a tendency is easily defeated by the stringent semantic requirements on successful linguistic interpretation, it puts up no impediment to the appreciation of pure, abstract musical sound while it contributes to the perception of expressive properties. This is not to say, of course, that the ear does not also tend to interpret sound naturalistically. But that tendency, I have argued, has weakened through natural selection, both in man and in other Primates, even as the visual sense has developed to the ascendancy it now enjoys. Thus where the ear tends to hear realistically, the tendency is weak, and its weakness defeats it in the face of pure musical structure. And where it tends to hear linguistically, though the tendency is strong, the stringent requirements of successful semantic interpretation more than compensate for its strength, and defeat easily, in a structure with syntax but no semantics, both the successful outcome and, indeed, the attempt itself. Such, at any rate is my hypothesis.<sup>59</sup>

This is the basis for Kivy's refutation of meaning in music. At the heart lies the claim that the lack of semantics in music implies that music is meaningless; it is deprived of meaning linguistically understood. Since most philosophers of music today agree that music has no semantics, this should mean that most philosophers of music today agree with Kivy that music has no meaning. However, judging from the wide range of papers and books which contain the words *music* and *meaning* in the title (such as the one you are reading now), this is not the case. That must mean that these other philosophers have other conceptions of meaning than Kivy. The disagreement seems to be over whether to use the word meaning for other kinds of meaning than the linguistic one. While this is part of the truth (Robinson and Young both clearly agree with Kivy that music does not have meaning in a linguistic sense, Ridley, if pressed, probably would as well), Kivy does not agree with the kinds of meaning his opponents find in music, even if they used a different word. Young uses the *cognitive significance* in place of meaning, still, his account of the cognitive significance of music would not go down well with Kivy. Hence, we must understand what Kivy think counts as meaning in a musical sense, to understand better why people agree with him that music has no

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, pp. 9-10.

semantics, but disagrees on the fact that it has no meaning. It will also serve to show *why* Kivy thinks that his adversaries will not let go of the term meaning.

## 2.4 Another Go at the Meaning of Music

The article “Another Go at the Meaning of Music” is a response from Kivy, to criticism from Constantijn Koopman and Stephen Davies in their article “Musical Meaning in a Broader Perspective”. Kivy suspects that the disagreement that Koopman and Davies has with him is for the most part a verbal disagreement over the use of the word meaning, and I am inclined to agree with Kivy on this point. Their general approach to the philosophy of music is similar to Kivy’s; their aim in this criticism is just to keep a sense of meaning in there as well. Therefore, I will not go into detail of their criticism here. However, in Kivy’s reply, he has some illuminating things to say about his own views on the use of meaning applied to music.

Kivy starts out by referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* listing for meaning, stating that it

gives ten or more meanings for “meaning”, depending on how carefully you want to count and how fastidious you are about nuances. Given such a superfluity of meanings, it is hardly surprising that music has “meaning”. Indeed, it would be surprising if anything *didn’t*.<sup>60</sup>

Kivy’s problem is that, while all these various kinds of meaning are in different respects correct use of the word “meaning”, this is not what philosophers of music usually are after when they argue that music has meaning. Kivy suggests that what philosophers of music, music critics, etc. are usually after is semantic meaning, and not any of the other kinds. He thinks that this has historical roots.

Music, since the end of the eighteenth century, or the beginning of the nineteenth, depending upon whom you read, has been considered a member of the community of “arts and letters”. That is a community in which one of the busiest and most admired occupations is that of the *interpreter of meaning* (henceforth *interpreter*

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Kivy, “Another Go at the Meaning of Music” in *Music, Language and Cognition*, p. 137.

for short). Literary art works, *belles lettres*, works of the visual arts, works of philosophy and its satellites, are all subjects of intense interpretational scrutiny by a cadre of academics and independent scholars whose task it is to tell us “what it all means”. ... And the content he or she interprets must needs be *semantic* content – “semantic” at least broadly conceived to include the “implied” messages of literary works as well as the representational content of the visual arts.<sup>61</sup>

If this is what one is after in trying to argue for meaning in music, then only semantic meaning will do. Kivy does not deny that music can have meaning in another sense of the word than a strict semantic/linguistic sense of the word; he just does not think meaning in any of these other senses is what his opponents are after. Additionally, he thinks that in several places where the word meaning is used about music, there are other words that better describe the phenomena (i.e., “making sense” or “function”). He expresses a concern that a conflation of the different uses of the word meaning may take place, so that one can spend an entire article arguing that music has meaning in a very specific, non-linguistic sense of the word, only to conclude that semantic meaning in music has been restored.

The main questions arising from this are first, whether Kivy’s assumption about the reasons proponents of meaning in music have for believing that music have meaning are true, and secondly, whether having semantics is the only thing that can make music qualify for interpretation. Robinson, Young and Ridley all believe that music qualifies for interpretation. Robinson and Ridley argue that this is because music has meaning in a different sense than the linguistic one, while Young rather uses the term *cognitive significance*. To avoid conflation between the different shades of meaning of meaning, I will frequently use cognitive significance instead of meaning.

## **2.5 Music Is Just Meaningless Noise – So What?**

Kivy thinks that the exclusion of meaning from music is the main reason why people may want to take a non-formalistic position. The account he gives is roughly that if we remove meaning from music, then music becomes meaningless noise, and most people think

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<sup>61</sup> Peter Kivy, “Another Go at the Meaning of Music” in *Music, Language and Cognition*, pp. 147-148.

meaningless noise sounds like it is worthless. Furthermore, music is humanly construed sound. The only other comparatively structured set of sounds made by humans is language; “It is a human utterance”,<sup>62</sup> and we assume that human utterances have meaning. Lastly, a formalistic account seems to move music away from the humanities; “It seems to be made an occult science, practiced by a secret society, with no attachment at all to the needs and concerns of normal human beings”,<sup>63</sup> and; “[t]he ‘remoteness’ and ‘emptiness’ of musical formalism make these attitudes and practices seem incomprehensible. If formalism is true, what is absolute music to *us*?”<sup>64</sup> Kivy has no qualms about accepting the implication that music without semantics is meaningless. There is no content there to be heard, and there is no reason to spend time looking for it.

In short, absolute music, unlike the representational and narrative arts, can be fully appreciated, and has been since the beginning, by those who hear no content in it. And the content that responsible interpreters ascribe to it, in the form of story or philosophical significance, is of such paucity that it seems to add little or nothing in the way of value or appreciation to what is already there: that is, expressive musical form and structure.<sup>65</sup>

To Kivy, the expressive form and structure alone is enough to warrant our listening to music. We do not need to add meaning to it to find pleasure or significance in it. In the last chapter of *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, he even tips his hat to Schopenhauer, claiming that music can have a liberating power, courtesy of being non-representational and meaningless.<sup>66</sup> Most other forms of art are about our world, or at least problems or ideas similar to those found in our world. Therefore, these other kinds of art, be it literature, poetry, painting or drama, do not liberate us from our everyday struggle; rather, they invite us to reflect upon it. Music, since it has no content, is free of this, therefore listening to music can be a truly liberating experience.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 137.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 138.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 158.

<sup>66</sup> That is, the part about music being liberating, not the part about music being non-representational and meaningless.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 260-261.

In short then, Kivy argues that music does not have semantics, and by implication no meaning, in the sense that would be interesting to philosophers of music and the like. Moreover, he argues, we do not *need* there to be meaning in music, because people who do not perceive meaning in music appreciate it nonetheless. In fact, he even argues that the lack of meaning in music may be a positive, that it gives music a kind of liberating power that the other arts do not share.

So far, enhanced formalism stands well up to scrutiny. Some of its claims sound shocking or counter-intuitive at first, but in many cases it can be written down to the technical use of words being confused with the natural use (such as the word meaning denoting only semantic/linguistic meaning). However, the core of Kivy's formalism does still not sit right with me. Though the notion of meaning for Kivy is restricted to the semantic notion, he also denies that music is capable of representing and arousing aesthetically significant emotion. These are concepts I think are at least partly responsible for musical meaning, conceived of in a non-semantic sense. His account does not just disallow the *word* meaning, it disallows kinds of content or significance that others would describe as meaningful (in another sense than the linguistic one). For instance, neither Robinson's narrativism nor Young's musical representation, which will be discussed in the next chapter, would be allowed by Kivy. They all agree that music does not have semantics, and that music probably can be said to have meaning in one of the other senses of the word. Still, the meaning that Robinson and (the cognitive significance that) Young finds in music, is not there to be found for Kivy, even if a different word than meaning was used.

Kivy, in the end, was sceptical of his own evolutionary arguments. While they are accepted (or at least seen as plausible) by many of his opponents, he himself ended up not committing to them.

The biologist Stephen J. Gould scorns such armchair evolutionary explanations as I have given, labeling them, contemptuously, 'just-so stories,' the point being that a natural selection story, just like Kipling's fanciful 'explanations' for how the leopard got its spots, or the elephant its trunk, can be made up by almost anyone,



including an amateur like myself, for any trait you like. So it is probably wise not to place much faith in these exercises.<sup>68</sup>

In the end, his qualms about these kinds of evolutionary explanations leads him to lay the whole question of *how* we come to hear music as expressive dead, urging us to treat it as a “black box”. “We know what comes in, and what comes out, but what causes what goes in to produce what comes out – of that we are ignorant”.<sup>69</sup> These considerations are expressed after dealing with music’s expressive features, i.e. the analogies to human emotive voice and movement, and the expressive chords (and similar musical features). And it seems perfectly fine for his position to leave the question of *how* these features work unresolved, since there is consensus that music can (at least) be expressive of emotion in this manner. To him, it is enough to give a plausible account *that* it occurs. However, as we will see, his opponents have taken up the theory, and use it to their own aims.

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 48.

### 3 Critique of Kivy's Formalism

As formalism, from the time of Hanslick and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emerged to be one of the prominent positions in the philosophy of music, and influenced the music criticism to be more analytical and more focused on the internal relations of musical works, a counter-reaction was inevitable. Many listeners, musicians and composers feel strongly that music has meaning, be it in a broad or narrow sense of the word. So, while Kivy has argued convincingly that there is no meaning in music in a linguistic sense, and most people follow him in this, there is a motivation for many to hold on to the notion of meaning in music. This is my own view, and it is the view of Robinson and Young as well.

In this chapter, then, I will consider three philosophers with differing accounts of what is meaningful in music. In different respects, they will help me with my aim of challenging Kivy's conception of absolute music. Jenefer Robinson and James O. Young both accept Kivy's claim that music does not have meaning in a linguistic sense. Still, they each hear something in music that is at least akin to meaning (Robinson uses the word, Young does not), although not in the linguistic sense. They both contest Kivy's claims that music does not represent or arouse emotion, and build their respective accounts of music's significance to us on this. Robinson also discusses Kivy's definition and use of the term absolute music, which she thinks accurately describes far fewer works than Kivy holds. Robinson's position is called *narrativist*, narrativism being the other mainstream theory in contemporary analytical philosophy of music. Young simply terms himself as an *anti-formalist*. As can be expected from the term he chooses for his position, his project in the book *Critique of Pure Music* is a mainly negative one, that is, he wants to refute formalism in general and Kivy's formalism specifically. Even so, he constructs an argument that holds that music is *expressive of*, *capable of arousing* and *capable of representing* emotion. As such, the positive conclusions of his arguments are interesting.

Aaron Ridley's criticism of Kivy comes from another route. He disagrees with Kivy's view on language, and as such with his view on linguistic meaning as well. Hence, he does not need to agree with the conclusion that music does not have a semantic dimension. His statement of it is rather tentative, though; he argues that in the analogy between music and language, we should perhaps be a little more confident of our understanding of music, and a little less confident of our understanding of language. With the introduction of Ridley's

notion of *paraphrase*, the focus shifts somewhat. I will argue that if we look at Robinson's and Young's accounts of music not as attempts to say what music *is*, but rather as attempts at paraphrasing the content of music, in an effort to show our understanding of it, they become much stronger.

### **3.1 Jenefer Robinson: Persona Theory, Narrativism and Critique of Absolute Music**

If we want to claim that music *does* indeed have extra-musical content, we need a plausible account of *how* music has this content. In the contemporary debate, the main theory for explaining how musical works have extra-musical content is narrativism. Narrativists believe that we find an overarching narrative in musical works, which is responsible for (at least part of) the meaning we find in it. The terminology is borrowed from literary theory, and among different proponents of narrativism there are smaller or larger degrees of similarities conceived between the way narratives work in music and literature. Since there is broad agreement that music does not have a proper semantic dimension, the narratives are usually considered as *expressive trajectories*, *poetic ideas*, or, as Robinson holds, *plot archetypes* (or just *plots*). What all these kinds of narratives have in common is that they convey meaning or another kind of cognitive significance, without relying on semantics. Furthermore, narrativists do not usually claim that a work of music can tell a specific narrative without the help of words (or other forms of art capable of representing concepts or objects more specifically). In the following section I will discuss the views of Jenefer Robinson, who is a narrativist at heart. In following with one of the themes of my thesis, I will focus on Robinson's critique of Kivy's sharp distinction between absolute and programme music. In her collaboration with Gregory Karl in the articles "Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions", and "Yet Again, 'Between Absolute and Programme Music'" they put forth the central claims of narrativism through analysis of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, and argue that most works of music are not clearly *either* absolute music *or* programme music.

### 3.1.1 The Role of Emotion in Music

To begin with, it seems prudent to clarify in what respects Robinson and Kivy agree, and in what respects they disagree. Both Robinson and Kivy hold that music is capable of expressing emotion. However, Kivy restricts the range of emotion music can express to the garden-variety, which excludes cognitively complex emotions, such as shame or hope. Robinson disagrees on this point. Furthermore, they both agree that music does not have a semantics proper, music alone cannot make propositions or make statements about the world under normal circumstances. Lastly, Kivy does not believe that music arouses (aesthetically significant) emotion in the listener, while Robinson holds that the arousal of emotion is one of the keys to understanding music. Kivy *does* believe that music can arouse a special kind of musical emotion, which he refers to in a range of different ways, as for instance either a kind of excitement, exhilaration or as being moved by music.<sup>70</sup> Robinson agrees that arousal of this kind of appreciative emotion does occur when listening to music, but claims that it does not exhaust the possibilities of arousal of emotions by music.

What I want to suggest is that in addition to the sophisticated emotions of appreciation, which Kivy identifies as “being moved” by certain perceived aspects of the music, there are more primitive emotions aroused by music, perhaps requiring less developed cognitive mediation. There are, after all, moments in music which make us jump or startle us. Similarly, the perception of certain rhythms may be enough – without further cognitive mediation – to evoke tension or relaxation, excitement or calm. If the melodic and harmonic elements in a piece of music affect our emotions, this would seem to require familiarity with the stylistic norms of the piece, but no further cognitions need be required in order for us to feel soothed, unsettled, surprised or excited by developments in the music.<sup>71</sup>

We will call this theory the *direct arousal* of emotion. On this view, there are certain elements in the music, be it minute parts like a progression of chords or part of a theme, or larger structural parts as a whole, that arouse emotions of a primitive kind in us. The arousal of these emotions does not require much from us cognitively. We hear a disturbing passage and we feel disturbed. We hear a surprising chord and we are surprised. To Robinson, the direct

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<sup>70</sup> He has also conceded in later years that music in many circumstances actually does arouse emotion, also of the garden-variety. He held on to the denial, however, that they had any aesthetic significance. More on this in the subchapter “Music Arousing Emotion”.

<sup>71</sup> Jenefer Robinson, “The Expression and Arousal of Emotion in Music”, pp. 18-19.

arousal is a fact of listening, and it informs our understanding of the musical work as a whole. Following Leonard Meyer, she holds that the direct arousal of emotion is a constitutive part of the formal structure of the music.

If we are experienced in the style of the piece, then we have certain expectations about the way the music will develop; in a meaningful piece of music these expectations will be either frustrated or satisfied in unexpected ways. As we listen new expectations are constantly being aroused and we are just as constantly being *surprised* by novel developments, *relieved* by delayed resolutions, made *tense* by the delays etc., etc. In short, understanding musical structure, according to Meyer, is not just a matter of detached analysis; rather, it is impossible without the arousal of feeling in the listener.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, she thinks that direct arousal also plays a role in the expression of emotion. Where Kivy takes contour (the resemblance between music and the way emotionally affected people speak and move) and convention to be the basis for music being expressive of emotion, Robinson believes that we need to add the direct arousal of emotion to the list to get the full picture.

The “direct” arousal of cognitively simple emotions such as being made surprised, disturbed, satisfied, relaxed, etc. is a clue not only to the formal structure of a musical piece, as Meyer showed, but also to its structure of emotional expressiveness.<sup>73</sup>

She agrees, then, with Kivy, insofar as *some* kinds of musical expression are due to contour or convention. But where Kivy’s theory had problems accounting for certain kinds of expressiveness, Robinsons notion of direct arousal can account for these cases.

The kinds of emotion that are aroused directly by music are, according to Robinson, of a simple kind. Crucially they have a limited cognitive content. Feelings such as surprise, unease, tension, relaxation, etc., are immediate reactions to what we hear; we do not need to consciously think about them, and then explicitly consider them.<sup>74</sup> “Music can make me feel

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<sup>72</sup> Jenefer Robinson, “The Expression and Arousal of Emotion in Music”, p. 20.

<sup>73</sup> Jenefer Robinson, “The Expression and Arousal of Emotion in Music”, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Some of these emotions needs there to be a relevant background in place in the listener, in this regard Robinson speaks of *qualified listeners*, someone who has at least a basic conception of the relevant music culture. Emotions such as surprise does not occur if there are no expectations in place.

disturbed or calm just by perceiving it (listening to it). The feeling is a result of a perception and to this degree it has “cognitive content,” but not the full-blown cognitive content required for tragic resolve, angry despair or unrequited passion.”<sup>75</sup> However, working together with other features of the music, such as the expressive and formal structure of a work, these simple, aroused emotions can help to express cognitively complex emotions, such as hope or unrequited passion. Robinson, together with Gregory Karl, argues this point in the article “Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions”. Kivy will allow that music can express emotion, but follows Hanslick in saying that these emotions cannot be *directed* towards something. Music can express some emotions that need not have an aboutness or directedness, for instance sadness, joyfulness or restlessness, since these seem to be expressible without a specific object. Hence, Kivy does not think that music can express cognitively complex emotions, like hope, shame, jealousy etc., since they seem to require an object. To put it with Hanslick: “The feeling of hope cannot be separated from the representation of a future happy state which we compare with the present; melancholy compares past happiness with the present”.<sup>76</sup> Robinson disagrees. She believes that the music’s capability of arousing emotion directly means that music is in fact capable of expressing cognitively complex emotions. Music has this power through our imagining of the structure of a work as a kind of narrative, told (among other things) through the perceived psychological changes in a *musical persona*. In “Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions”, Robinson and Karl go on to show how the attribution of a musical persona to a musical work enables our understanding of it.

Like Cone and Levinson, we think that musical expression can at least sometimes be analyzed as a kind of gestural expression of emotional or other psychological states in a musical persona, whether it be the composer’s or that of some indeterminate character or characters in the music. We would go further than Levinson, however, and argue that the expressive structure of some pieces of music can be interpreted as an unfolding of the psychological experience of the musical persona over time. As the listener experiences such a piece, she imagines of the musical gestures she hears that they are the expression of a series of psychological states in the musical persona, and may sometimes – as Walton suggests – imaginatively experience these states as her own. We cannot hope to defend this thesis in detail here. Instead we will confine our attention to a particular piece of music which we think exemplifies our thesis. As we shall

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<sup>75</sup> Jenefer Robinson, “The Expression and Arousal of Emotion in Music”, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 9.

argue, Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony can be plausibly interpreted as a drama of feeling and impressions ascribed to the works persona. We shall claim that within the work's expressive structure there is a passage of experience of the cognitively complex emotion of hope or hopefulness, and that if we consider the structure of the work as a whole, we can attribute to the musical the complex cognitive states characteristic of hope.<sup>77</sup>

Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, Robinson argues, stands in a tradition that originated in Vienna, called the *Grosse Sinfonie*, in which the works are generally seen as "a progression from dark to light or struggle to victory (adversity to salvation, illness to health, etc.)."<sup>78</sup> Works in this mould usually starts out as dark and turbulent, and ends in a triumphant finale (think of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). Robinson and Karl focus on the passage in the third movement of Shostakovich's Tenth, which begins with a horn call. They claim that through citation of turbulent passages from the first movement, the anticipation of passages in the finale, and the steadfast way that the horn call persists against, and finally triumphs over dissonant figures from the strings, this passage of music is expressing hope. To be able to accurately examine whether this is the case, they start by giving a characterization of hope.

In general, then, if a person P hopes for some state (event, etc.) S, then normally (1) P wishes for S; (2) P conceives of the occurrence of S as a more pleasant outcome than its nonoccurrence; (4) if P is able to, P will try to bring it about that S; and (5) P's focus of attention on or contemplation of S is a source of pleasure – or relief – to P.<sup>79</sup>

Through formal features of the music (citation of earlier passages), the overall expressive features of the work (the relation between the mood of the present passage and the first), and direct emotional arousal (the calmness of the passage, and the steadfastness of the horn call), they argue that the (assumed) musical persona of their focal passage expresses hope in three ways. First, the persona

looks forward to a future state conceived of as more pleasant than the currently prevailing grim state of affairs. F [the focal passage] conveys this part of the cognitive content of hope, because it anticipates the future happy state represented

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<sup>77</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, "Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions", pp. 162-163.

<sup>78</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, "Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions", p. 166.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, "Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions", p. 164.

by the lively theme ... – the only remotely cheery theme in the whole work – while being itself surrounded by the dark reminiscences of [the opening theme].<sup>80</sup>

Second, through the steadfastness of the horn calls, they argue that the musical persona displays both a wish for and a striving to bring about the future state of affairs that is the object of the hope. Third, the calmness of the passage shows the pleasure that lies in hope itself. This is further underlined by the fact that this is the only cheery theme in the work.

Peter Kivy disagrees with this analysis. In his book *Antithetical Arts*, which deals mainly with the relation between music and words (or literature), he devotes an entire chapter to Robinson and Karl's article. The three main arguments that Kivy offer against narrativism are: (1) music has a large degree of repetition, the same amount of repetition is not acceptable in narratives; (2) the plots suggested for the musical works are too banal to explain the greatness or profundity of music; and (3) if music has plot, it must have agents, as plots have agents. If music has agents, they are nameless and featureless. Great literary agents are not nameless and featureless. If music has plot, it is at least not great.

The rebuttal from Robinson and Karl, in their reply to Kivy, "Yet Again, 'Between Absolute and Programme Music'", goes as follows. Against (1), they first point to poetry, highlighting how repetition is a fairly common device in many poetic traditions. On the other hand, even though repetition is a central element in most music, we find that in absolute music, which is almost always implicitly music in the western classical tradition, repetition has become less common and in many cases less literal when it occurs. Needless to say, music is in general still more repetitious than literature, but Robinson and Karl argue that the difference is not as big as Kivy makes it out to be. Especially in works which are traditionally interpreted narratively, such as some of Beethoven's sonata-based works, the traditional patterns of repetition are not strictly adhered to. "For example, in the first movements of his 'Tempest' sonata, the 'Eroica' symphony, the 'Appassionata' sonata, and the string quartet Op. 95, the

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<sup>80</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, "Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions", p. 174.



recapitulations radically transform the material of the exposition”.<sup>81</sup> As such, (1) seems weakened, it is not necessarily true that the amount of repetition found in music would be unacceptable in literature.

Against (2) they argue that Kivy mistakes the plot summary for the actual aesthetic object. Kivy states that

Robinson’s musical persona, and his or her completely empty skeleton of a story – a plot outline, merely, not yet a plot – give us no such fictional materials as can be got from the novels of Austen and Dickens, an must, therefore, leave us profoundly *uninterested* and profoundly *unmoved*.<sup>82</sup>

Robinson and Karl will answer that the descriptions given of musical works are just that, plot outlines or plot summaries. “Plot summaries do not explain the aesthetic value of musical works any more than they do the aesthetic value of novels, dramas or poems”.<sup>83</sup> To elaborate their point; if I tell you a summarized version of the plot of *War and Peace*, and your reply is that you cannot understand how this is taken to be great literature, as it is banal, consisting of “first he did this, then she did that” etc., my answer would be that you do not understand what a plot summary is. Of course, a summarized version of *War and Peace* is going to be banal compared to the original work. The plot summary told in words is the summary, the plot itself is just the music, in the same manner that the plot in a book is told through the book, or the plot in a movie is told in the movie. A summary will necessarily seem unimpressive in comparison (unless the work summarized is *really* bad). The question Kivy must answer is why this should be any different for a plot summary of a musical work. Thus, providing a plot summary for a musical work is more akin to the synopsis of a book than the book itself. I will return briefly to this point after my discussion of Ridley, as his notion of paraphrase may shed some light on it.

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<sup>81</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, “Yet Again, ‘Between Absolute and Programme Music’”, pp. 23-24.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 107.

<sup>83</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, “Yet Again, ‘Between Absolute and Programme Music’”, p. 24.

Kivy's argument (3) is implicitly aimed at the theory of a musical persona. The musical persona theory posits an imagined person, an assumed psychological subject of the music. In many cases this person is taken to be the composer herself, though it need not be so by necessity. The theory has as many different iterations as there are people holding it, what they usually have in common, though, is that we can understand what is expressed by music through empathizing, or in other ways understanding the imagined persona of the work. This can then be taken to account for how emotions are aroused in us by music (we empathize with the musical persona, and have emotions aroused by empathy), and we can hear narratives, told through the psychological states of the persona. Kivy's misgivings with these kinds of theories begin from a subjective phenomenological point of view.

I myself was deeply moved by music long before I was ever introduced to the idea that one can imagine musical works as having personae. I am not aware that, in those days, I ever imagined any such character expressing emotions in the musical works I listened to. Nor do I do it now. As far as I can tell, music moves me deeply without my being aware at all of musical personae expressing their emotive states.<sup>84</sup>

Kivy's experiences should be taken seriously. As will be discussed later, James O. Young, whom has done considerable work collecting empirical data concerning listeners' experiences of music, has found no evidence that people hear a persona in the musical work. I do not, however, think that this fact on its own is enough to reject the persona theory completely. It is possible that this is in fact what happens when people have emotion aroused by music, but that the mechanisms are not available to them before they are told that this is how it works. Since Kivy reports that he does not have his emotions aroused by music, the revelation of these mechanics means nothing to him. He does not have emotion aroused; neither by a musical persona, nor by any other means.

Still, I am inclined to agree with Kivy and Young on this point; I do not believe that most people who have emotions aroused by music are imagining a persona of the work. I certainly do not do it myself. Proponents of the persona theory will say that in many, even most cases, the musical persona is that of the composer. If the persona theory is conceived in this manner, I find it more plausible. It makes sense to hear a musical work as expressing something that

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 115-116.

the composer wants to express. But having to call it an imagined or assumed persona, and opening the possibility for it being another person than the composer, seems excessive.

Back to (3); Kivy thinks that the idea of a musical narrative seems to imply the persona theory, and Robinson agrees. The gist of Kivy's argument is that the agent or character put forward in a musical work does not have names or features, and as such they lack depth and the possibility to move us. And, since great literature moves us, in part through the depth and features of the characters, and music lacks this, then music cannot be great if narrativism is correct. Robinson and Karl's answer is that we do not always know that much about the characters in the great narratives.

Of course, it is quite true that the postulated musical persona in Beethoven's Fifth is not specified in the detailed way that the characters in novels usually are. But notice that the protagonist of a lyric poem such as the 'Ode to a Nightingale' is not usually characterized in any detail either. What do we learn about Keats' protagonist other than that he is a poet who longs for a world of eternal beauty far removed from the miseries of life on earth? As for Oedipus, he is a man who pursues the truth no matter where it takes him. Otherwise we know very little about the personality of Oedipus. Indeed, Aristotle famously used *Oedipus the King* as an example of his view that poetry is more philosophical than history because it is concerned with the universal rather than the particular.<sup>85</sup>

Robinson and Karl think that Kivy misses this point, that a lot of great literature is great because it is general and thus, unspecific. They do not see the lack of background information about the musical persona as a hinderance for music being great, as there are examples of great literature that has comparatively unspecified protagonists. Ultimately, they believe that Kivy misconstrues the view of narrativists.

In general, the problem with Kivy's approach is that he assumes that the narrativists mean to ascribe to apparently absolute music detailed stories with carefully delineated characters such as one finds in a realistic novel or play. But virtually no-one in the musical community interprets apparently pure music in the way he describes. The mainstream narrativists have, by and large, carefully qualified and delimited their comparisons to literature, using their borrowed terms metaphorically to elucidate what they acknowledge to be a form of *intrinsically musical* content.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, "Yet Again, 'Between Absolute and Programme Music'", p. 25.

<sup>86</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, "Yet Again, 'Between Absolute and Programme Music'", p. 26.

Furthermore, where Kivy says that there cannot be a narrative in music because the assumed characters in musical works are not specific enough for a story to be told, Robinson and Karl think they have shown that it does not need to be the case that a character in a literary narrative is specified either. And, since it is possible to have narratives in literature without specified, detailed characters, they hold, it should be possible in music too.

### 3.1.2 Absolute and Programme Music

Having defended narrativism against some of the central complaints from Kivy, Robinson and Karl put forward a complaint against Kivy. They argue that Kivy's distinction between absolute and programme music is altogether too strict; most works do not fall squarely into one or the other of the categories. Kivy's distinction is to some degree mirrored in the debate throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century about *how* music should be composed, i.e., should the composer include a programme or not, also; what status does the music in opera or ballets have, etc. However, since programme music just singles out *one* specific kind of music with added content, I will rather speak here about the distinction between absolute music and non-absolute music, as it will clarify the discussion.

In *Antithetical Arts*, Kivy states that

an attempt to show that any example of [absolute music] *does* have semantic, narrative, or representational content is, so I will argue, best understood as an attempt to show not that that particular example of absolute music *has* semantic, narrative, or representational content, but that that particular example is not an example of absolute music, so defined at all.<sup>87</sup>

A potential problem looms here. Kivy's definition of absolute music has two parts; "It is music, as defined, without text, title, program, dramatic setting, or any other extra-musical apparatus" and "music, as defined, without representational, narrative, semantic, or other extra-musical content".<sup>88</sup> Now, the argument he gives, can make it sound like he makes it

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<sup>87</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 157.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 157.

definitionally true that absolute music does not have extra-musical content. In that case, the argument is at best trivial. Kivy notices, of course, and argues that while it may seem like he makes his argument true by definition, he is in fact just making the argument from the most common definition. To reinforce his point, he claims the authority of the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. “Absolute Music. Music that is free from extramusical implications. The term is used most frequently in contradistinction to program music, which is inspired in part by pictorial or poetic ideas”.<sup>89</sup> This shows, in Kivy’s opinion, that the definition he uses is not one he has tailored himself to suit his argument, rather, he is making his argument from a definition that most people accept.

Given this definition of absolute music, which is I note again not some idiosyncratic definition tailored for an argument, but the well-established meaning of “absolute music,” any “successful” demonstration that some work of “absolute music” is *not* free of “extramusical implications” (as the *Harvard Dictionary* puts it) *must* be understood as a demonstration that, contrary to what we thought, the work is *not* “absolute music” properly so-called.<sup>90</sup>

Kivy argues, then, that while there still may be some works that we believe are examples of absolute music that turn out to be non-absolute music, most works of absolute music, *are* proper examples of it. Furthermore, he thinks that if anyone wants to challenge this, they would be wise not to say that absolute music can have narrative, semantic or representational content, but rather that there are no true examples of absolute music. Kivy believes that this is an extreme position. However, we could criticize the strict division of music as *either* absolute *or* non-absolute music. Something along these lines is what Robinson and Karl argue in “Yet Again, ‘Between Absolute and Programme Music’”. They want to contest the claim that there is a clear distinction between absolute music and non-absolute (or programme) music, saying, “much music falls between absolute and programme music”.<sup>91</sup> In analysing Shostakovich’s Tenth, as well as some discussion of other works in the *Grosse Sinfonie* tradition, they believe to have shown that many works that are described as, or even seen as paradigm cases of absolute music are still not completely devoid of content. This is not necessarily due to some hidden programme, so that the piece is secretly programme music. Rather, it cannot be absolute music, as Kivy defines it, because it has content. Robinson and

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<sup>89</sup> Don Michael Randel (ed.), *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, pp. 171-172.

<sup>91</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, “Yet Again, ‘Between Absolute and Programme Music’”, p. 19.

Karl hold that “Much of the argument in *Antithetical Arts* is designed to show that where narrative interpretations of a piece of apparently absolute music seem most plausible, it is because the music is in fact programme music”.<sup>92</sup> The threat of non-falsifiability persists in Kivy’s account. He has argued that we do not need to worry about this, as his definition of absolute music reflects the common way of understanding the term. To this end he appeals to the authority of the Harvard Dictionary. However, what constitutes absolute music is still contested philosophically. The appeal to a dictionary does not change this. I would argue that a better descriptive definition of absolute music would consist of just the first part of Kivy’s definition; “It is music, as defined, without text, title, program, dramatic setting, or any other extra-musical apparatus”.<sup>93</sup> This way, the definition of absolute music does not make claims about issues which are philosophically contended.

Robinson and Karl have a more nuanced approach. They seem to believe that there may exist at least *some* works of absolute music. However, they conceive of the sharp divide between absolute and non-absolute music as false. Works of music are typically not *either* completely devoid of extra-musical content *or* described in detail in a programme or some other manner. Rather, works of seemingly absolute music can have a narrative structure without an accompanying text.

the symphonies that we have been discussing cannot be analysed simply as sound structures with expressive properties, as Kivy thinks. Nor are they examples of literalist programme music. They are embedded in the history of expressive genres, and cannot be fully understood unless this history is taken into account.<sup>94</sup>

As will be argued by Young and Ridley as well; to understand music we need to take its history and tradition into account. When we do, Robinson and Karl conclude that absolute and programme music are not two incomparable sizes; rather they are at the opposite ends of a continuum. Kivy shows throughout his works that he is excellently historically informed. As such, it may be a mistake to accuse him of not taking history or tradition into account, since he frequently does. What Robinson and Karl probably mean by this then, is not that Kivy has

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<sup>92</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, “Yet Again, ‘Between Absolute and Programme Music’”, p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 157.

<sup>94</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, “Yet Again, ‘Between Absolute and Programme Music’”, p. 37.

not considered history and tradition (as he demonstrably has), but that he does not let history and tradition play a part in determining the content of music.

Robinson's critique of Kivy has shown that he is wrong in dismissing extra-musical content in absolute music, or, if one accepts his definition, that far fewer works than what he grants are actually absolute music. Furthermore, she advances an interesting theory about how there can be extra-musical content in so-called absolute music, and capably defends it from the main objections from Kivy. I believe that narrativism is a good theory of meaning in music, with its flaws. I am sceptical of the persona theory that underlies it, to the degree that the persona considered is another than that of the composer. Furthermore, I believe that we should not consider what occurs in music as a narrative in a literal sense.<sup>95</sup> However, if we consider a narrative description of a musical work as a paraphrase in the sense Ridley understands it, I think we are closing in on a strong theory of meaning in music.

Robinson has another advantage over Kivy, on which I have not yet gone into detail: the available empirical evidence seem to favour her account over that of Kivy. Robinson puts forward much of this evidence in her book *Deeper Than Reason*. I will discuss much of the data provided by Robinson, together with more up to date research on music appreciation and perception in the next section on Young, as his work is more recent, and his conclusions rest more heavily on said data.

### **3.2 James O. Young: Critique of Pure Music**

The criticism against Kivy that comes from James O. Young is similar to that from Robinson in at least two respects; both of them discuss more or less within the framework that Kivy has established, and both hold that music has cognitive content, due to the fact that music can arouse emotion in the listener. As mentioned earlier, Young terms himself an *anti-formalist*.

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<sup>95</sup> Both meanings of the word literal are applicable here.

However, he follows Kivy in being sceptical about the use of the term meaning in connection with music. Young believes that music does not have meaning, as he prefers to use the term meaning in the Fregean sense.

The cognitive significance of a semantic representation, of a sentence, is its meaning. The meaning of a sentence is given, many philosophers of language agree, by its truth-conditions. Some philosophers of music speak of the ‘meaning of music’, but this is to use the word meaning imprecisely. I prefer to use the word ‘meaning’ in its Fregean sense. Works of music are not sentences, and they are not composed of sentences. Works of music do not have truth-conditions and they do not have meanings in Frege’s sense. Meaning is, however, only one sort of significance. Works of music have a different sort of cognitive significance.<sup>96</sup>

He still believes that music has content or cognitive significance of a kind that many other philosophers of music are tempted to call meaning. This content can be of an extra-musical kind, i.e., about something other than itself, and as such, it poses a challenge to the formalist. His argument for this view is structured in three parts. He agrees with Kivy that music is *expressive of* emotion. However, he departs from Kivy in arguing that music’s capability of being *expressive of* emotion leads to music being capable of *arousing* emotion. In turn, this leads to the view that music *represents* emotion. And if music represents, then music has content or cognitive significance.

A central hypothesis for this essay is that music has features that make its description in emotional terms non-arbitrary. When we apply emotion terms to music, we are doing so in a way that is related to the prior application of such terms to people and their mental states. ... When listeners make an emotional statement about music they have detected a property of the music that is closely related to properties detected in other contexts in which they use emotion predicates.<sup>97</sup>

If Young is successful in what he aims to do in this essay, he will have presented a strong case against formalism. In addition, he will have presented an interesting alternative. Therefore, I will spend a good while discussing his arguments to the end that music is capable of (non-trivial) representation.

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<sup>96</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 91.

<sup>97</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 5.



### 3.2.1 Music as Expressive of Emotion

Young starts off with arguing that his view resonates with the normal way in which we speak of the phenomenon in question. We often describe music in emotional terms, and when we do this, what we mean is that music is expressive of these emotions. Hence, the attribution of emotions to music is usually elliptical.

A statement such as ‘The symphony is sorrowful and grieving’ is a shorthand, or elliptical, way of saying ‘The symphony is expressive of sorrow and grief’. Such a statement will be true if, as a matter of empirical fact, the symphony relevantly resembles human expressive behaviour.<sup>98</sup>

Young calls his theory (and related theories) of how music can be *expressive of emotion resemblance theory*. At its core, it is more or less the same theory that Peter Kivy used to advocate (which he referred to as the *contour theory*). The central idea is, as described in the explication of Kivy’s theories, that music is expressive of emotion due to the resemblance between the way people sound and behave when expressing emotion, and the way expressive music sounds. As we saw earlier, Kivy does not advocate this theory anymore, yet he has not replaced it with another theory of how music can be expressive of emotion, either. He argues that we for the time being should look past this question, and treat the mechanism of *how* music is expressive of emotion as a black box.

We know what comes in, and what comes out, but what causes what goes in to produce what comes out – of that we are ignorant. With regard to how music comes to exhibit the garden-variety emotions as perceptual qualities, it is to us a black box. We know what goes in: the musical features that, for three centuries, have been associated with the particular emotions music is expressive of. And we know what comes out: the expressive qualities the music is heard to be expressive of.<sup>99</sup>

Kivy found that the arguments he had offered in defence of the contour theory were not convincing to him. He is sceptical of both kinds of analogies from a phenomenological viewpoint, it seems; especially the resemblance between the way emotionally affected people move and the *contour* of the music. He sees the crossing of sense-modalities involved in hearing something as analogous to the way something looks as problematic.

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<sup>98</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 48.

Does it make any sense at all to say that a passage of music is melancholy in virtue of sounding the way a human being gestures or movies when he or she is melancholy? Can music *sound* like a gesture or bodily pose? Can sense modalities be crossed that way? There is certainly plenty of room for doubt about it.<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, he is sceptical to his own evolutionary explanations, referring to them as what the biologist Stephen J. Gould has called “just so stories”.<sup>101</sup> In the end, he thinks the theory has its attraction, but no longer advocates it, arguing that for the time being we just do not have a good explanation of how music can be expressive of emotion. It just is.

Young thinks, however, that the theory is still plausible. Furthermore, he holds that if it is true, the consequence is that music is capable of both arousing and representing emotion. Young’s argument for the resemblance theory is in large part an empirical one. He refers to a wide array of psychological experiments which all seem to indicate that the similarity between people expressing emotion (through voice or behaviour) and music expressing emotion is widely experienced. The similarities between the voice and music is, not surprisingly, the best documented one.

The empirical evidence for resemblance between music and vocal expression is marshalled in a review article by Patrik N. Juslin and Petri Laukka. These authors reviewed 140 studies of the human ability to ‘decode’ the expression of emotion in vocal expression and in musical performance. The first conclusion to be drawn from these studies (one that some formalists would likely not challenge) is that people are nearly equally good at determining the emotion expressed in a musical performance as they are at discerning what emotion is expressed in spoken words. ... Even more strikingly, a good deal of evidence suggests that people pick up on the same features of speech and music when they judge that either is expressive of a given emotion.<sup>102</sup>

He goes on to point to some of the features of music and vocal expression that are heard as similar between music and speech; the tempo (beats per minute/words per minute), rising or falling pitch contour, they can both be loud or soft, varied or constant dynamics, timbre and attack. “These features, which appear in both speech and music, are the features that people

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<sup>100</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 46.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 46-48.

<sup>102</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 15.

detect when they discern the expressive content of utterances and music”.<sup>103</sup> When these features appear in speech and music respectively, the emotions we perceive them as expressive of are the same; i.e., a soft, halting tone of voice is associated with negative emotion; the same is the case in music. Young concludes that the empirical evidence implies that there is a strong connection between the expressivity of human utterance and the expressivity of music.

As for the resemblance between the bodily expression of emotion and the musical expression of emotion, Kivy expressed concerns about making analogies between different sense-modalities. This is one of the reasons why he left the contour theory behind. Young says that there is now theoretical framework in place to facilitate this kind of cross-domain comparison. “The theoretical basis for thinking about parallels between different sensory modalities is also now available, particularly in the work of Mark Johnson”.<sup>104</sup> Johnson has done work on the relation between the way we perceive of music and the way we experience bodies in motion.

Mark Johnson focuses on three fundamental ways in which we experience motion: (1) we see objects move; (2) we move our bodies; and (3) we feel our bodies moved by forces. He argues that these three fundamental experiences of motion lead us to develop three fundamental ways of conceiving of music.<sup>105</sup>

These three ways of experiencing motion accords with three ways of perceiving music as moving, as in its tempo increasing or slowing down, as moving through a terrain (we come to a place in the music, something is ahead of us or behind us etc.) or as carrying us along, transporting us, or lifting our spirits. This alone does not give Young all that he wants. So far, he has only established that we *speak* about music in terms of motion, which does not necessarily make for a strong analogy. However, he thinks he finds the evidence he needs in an experiment by Manfred Clynes and Nigel Nettheim.<sup>106</sup>

The experimenters began by determining the contours of motion associated with seven emotions: anger, hate, grief, love, sexual attraction, joy, and reverence. This

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<sup>103</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 15.

<sup>105</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> Manfred Clynes and Nigel Nettheim, “The Living Quality of Music: Neurobiologic Basis of Communicating Feeling”, in Manfred Clynes (ed.), *Music, Mind, and Brain: The Neuropsychology of Music*, pp. 47-82.

was done by measuring patterns of finger pressure and asking which patterns of finger pressure were associated with each emotion. Anger, for example, was characterized by a strong, abrupt spike in pressure followed by an equally abrupt release of pressure. Grief is associated with a gradual decline in finger pressure, and so on. The researchers then generated patterns of sound with the same contours as the patterns of finger pressure. So, for example, it was hypothesized that an abrupt upward jump of a minor sixth would be heard as expressive of anger, while a gradual decline of about four semi-tones would be experienced as expressive of grief. And so it proved. Recordings were made of simple melodies with abrupt leaps, gradually falling pitch and so on. Test subjects were reliably able to determine, on the basis of contour, the emotion that a recording expressed. There was some confusion between love and reverence, as well as between anger and hate, but overall subjects were able to discern the emotion each recording expressed.<sup>107</sup>

This experiment is closer to giving Young what he wants. It establishes a connection between the experienced contour of a feeling, and similar heard contours in music. Hence, some of the cross-domain comparison is in place. Still, we are not all the way there; remember that the conclusion Young wants is that “music is expressive of emotion because it resembles motions of our bodies that express emotions”.<sup>108</sup> The last piece of the puzzle comes in the form of an experiment by Annabel J. Cohen.<sup>109</sup>

In this experiment, test subjects were provided with both visual and auditory stimuli. The visual stimuli consisted of an animated ball bouncing up and down on a screen. The tempo and height of the bounce was varied. Subjects reported that the higher the ball bounced and the faster it bounced, the more the ball was expressive of happiness. The auditory stimuli consisted of a single repeated note. The pitch height and the tempo of the note were varied. Subjects reported that the higher the pitch and the faster the tempo, the more the music was expressive of happiness.<sup>110</sup>

Young calls these cross-domain parallels striking, saying “It seems likely that the perception of expressiveness of the auditory stimuli is linked to the expressiveness of certain sorts of bodily movement”.<sup>111</sup> There is one caveat, though. While this experiment may indicate that there are cross-domain similarities in the way we perceive movement and music as being

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<sup>107</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 21.

<sup>108</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 20.

<sup>109</sup> Annabel J. Cohen, “How Music Influences the Interpretation of Film and Video: Approaches from Experimental Psychology”, in Roger A. Kendall and Roger W. H. Savage (eds.), *Perspectives in Systematic Musicology*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>110</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>111</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 22.

expressive of emotion, it does not necessarily follow. The height of the ball bounce and the (so-called) height of the pitch of the note is not the same kind of height. However, we need not be sceptics. The resemblance theory seems intuitive enough, and even though the use of 'height' may differ between the two sense modalities, the tempo is still the same kind of quality if it is perceived visually or auditory. Furthermore, even if the notion of height used about the bouncing of a ball is not the same notion that is used about pitch in music, for the results of a psychological experiment, it is perhaps significant enough that we use the same word between the sense modalities. Young concludes that the evidence for the resemblance between the way emotionally affected people move and the way music is perceived of as moving, seems weaker than the evidence for the resemblance between the way emotionally affected people sound, and the way music sounds. Still, if we, as Mark Johnson suggests, can perceive music in terms of movement, then it seems that music, in some cases, can be expressive of emotions in the same way that emotionally affected people move. Sad people tend to move slowly, haltingly, dragging along; the same words accurately describe sad music. Moreover, I find that in explicitly considering rhythm in this regard, the analogy between emotive movement and music is almost just as strong as the analogy between emotive speech and music.

With all of this brought together, Young believes that Kivy should not have abandoned the resemblance theory of musical expression, and that Kivy makes conventions of musical expression do too much work. A lot of what Kivy thinks is conventional is in fact, according to Young, just hard-wired. Having grounded the resemblance theory of musical expression in empirical data, Young now wants to go on to build upon it a theory of musical arousal, before he will use this to argue that absolute music has cognitively significant content, that music alone can say something about something other than itself.

### **3.2.2 Music Arousing Emotion**

Having established that music is expressive of emotion, Young now turns to show how this means that music is capable of arousing emotion as well. The standard position for the formalist is that music does not arouse emotion. Indeed, for many this is taken to be the core

claim of formalism. As we saw, this was certainly the case for Hanslick; and while he had to cede some ground in his later years, this was for the most part of his career the position of Kivy as well.

Broadly speaking, we have two sides in the debate of whether music arouses emotion or not, the arousalists, and the non-arousalists. What is striking is that experiments indicate that music arouses emotion in some listeners, while not in others. And frequently those who are in favour of arousalism report that music arouses emotion in them, while those who are against report that music arouses no emotion in them, or at least not of the garden-variety.

The reasonable position to take is that both formalists and arousalists sincerely and, for the most part, accurately report the effects that music has on them. The experimental evidence supports this conclusion. Music seems to have different physiological effects on different listeners. This suggests that its emotional effects also vary from listener to listener.<sup>112</sup>

A possible conclusion from this is that the opposing theories regarding whether music arouses emotion in the listener is the result of physiological, rather than intellectual differences between their respective proponents. Kivy may just not be susceptible to having emotion aroused in him by music, and similarly, Robinson and Young probably do not have emotion aroused in them by choice. Ultimately, this helps Young more than Kivy. Young only needs there to be *some* listeners to have emotion aroused by music, as he only claims that it is possible. Kivy, on the other hand, needs to explain away these results, arguing that the emotions that listeners report having aroused by music are mistaken.

Young finds three different arguments against music arousing emotion, the first two he attributes to Kivy, the last one to Hanslick (a similar point is made by Kivy as well). Young recreates the first argument against music arousing emotion from Kivy's work, which Kivy thinks is "convincing, if not absolutely conclusive".<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 47.

<sup>113</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 150.

- (1) If music arouses emotion, then this arousal has a commonsense explanation (since it is an everyday affair).
  - (2) There is no commonsensical explanation of the arousal of emotion by music.
- ∴(C) Music does not arouse emotion.<sup>114</sup>

Kivy argues this from the fact that the common arousal of emotion, for instance if his Uncle Charlie told lies about his Aunt Bella, it would be straightforwardly understandable to everyone why he got angry. He got angry with Charlie because he told lies about Bella. We may go into deeper psychological detail to explain the mechanisms and further reasons for him being angry with Uncle Charlie, but we do not *need* to. There is no real mystery about why Kivy is angry with Charlie. With music however, we do not have this kind of straightforward explanation. Kivy does not believe that there is a folk-psychological way of explaining the arousal of emotion by music. And since we encounter music as often as we do, such a folk-psychological explanation should exist, if it was actually the case that music arouses emotion. This leads Kivy to suspect that music does not arouse emotion in the listener.

According to Young, the first premise seem to rely on us accepting the following principle:

(P) Any commonplace event has a commonsense explanation.<sup>115</sup>

This principle does not seem to be absolutely true. Young would see it rather as expressing a high probability.

(P') Any commonplace event *likely* has a commonsense explanation.<sup>116</sup>

However, since there are a lot of commonplace events in the natural world that require quite difficult explanations, Young thinks it will be even more charitable to read it as:

(P'') Any ordinary mental event *likely* has a commonsense explanation.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 37.

<sup>115</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 38.

<sup>116</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 38. My italics.

<sup>117</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 38.

But even stated like this, we can see that this premise does not hold. There are, for instance, no commonsense explanations for the way our will interacts with our bodies, and this seems like one of the most ordinary of ordinary events. There may be a commonsense explanation for *why* Kivy gets angry with his Uncle Charlie. But if Kivy decided to speak up to his uncle, and tell him off for telling self-serving lies, then there is not really a folk-psychological explanation for how he got from making the decision to tell Charlie off, to actually make an utterance. Still, that there is no everyday-explanation of it does not seem to astonish Aunt Bella, or any of the others present. This is likely because Kivy's premise that ordinary events have commonsense explanations is wrong. Of course, some ordinary events do. But clearly, not all of them. Even if the premise held, though, we may point out that large numbers of people *do* experience that their emotions *are* aroused by music. After all, composers have, for a long time, employed different compositional techniques just to this effect. And people untrained in music theory describe music, and the way music makes them feel, in emotional terms, seemingly without a sense of bafflement. If it was not commonly held that music sometimes aroused emotion in the listener, people would probably find themselves shocked when moved to tears by a piece of music. It seems then, that our understanding of the phenomenon of music arousing emotion in the listener is not any worse off than many other completely ordinary phenomena, such as how our will can affect our bodies. Hence, we can safely disregard this argument from Kivy.

The second of Kivy's arguments against music arousing emotion is that we do not react to emotions the way we usually do when we (supposedly) have emotions aroused in us by music. The arousal of emotion in everyday life is usually accompanied by behaviour typical for the emotion we are feeling. This does not seem to be the case when we (supposedly) have emotions aroused by music. For instance, if I listen to scary music, it does not cause me to be frightened, at least not so much that I flee from the concert hall. In general, we do not respond to music with behaviour characteristic of any emotion.<sup>118</sup> This leads Kivy to conclude that music does not arouse emotion. Young answers that, first, Kivy allows that literature can

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<sup>118</sup> Remember that we are still discussing absolute music, thus, music one would typically attend to sitting on a chair in a concert hall. Dance music, popular music, and a vast array of other kinds of music are, of course, completely different cases.



arouse emotion. Still, we typically do not react by running around, and screaming, having read a horror novel.<sup>119</sup> Literature arouses emotion in the reader, but we do not take what we read literally. Thus, our behavioural responses to literature are different to our behavioural responses to everyday emotions. Young concludes from this that it seems possible to feel the garden-variety emotions, without displaying the associated behaviour. If we can feel emotion without necessarily displaying the associated behaviour, then it seems like Kivy's argument fails. Second, Young thinks that we actually *do* have behavioural responses to music. "When we hear certain forms of music we are moved to dance for joy or to play air guitar. If we happen to be in a concert hall, we will be discrete and quietly tap our toes or nod our heads".<sup>120</sup> The behaviour displayed may not be of the same kind as if we felt the emotions in daily life, but this should probably be expected. When the stimuli responsible for the emotion is not of the same kind, it is not surprising that the reaction is not the same.

The third argument, traced back to Hanslick, springs out of the cognitive theory of emotion. Crudely stated, the cognitive theory of emotion holds that "several conditions must be met in order for someone to be in an emotional state. Most importantly, in order to be in an emotional state, a person must have certain beliefs about some object".<sup>121</sup> Hence, in addition to the phenomenal aspect of fearfulness or sadness, I must believe that I am in danger to feel fear, or believe that something bad has occurred to feel sad, etc. Music can perhaps arouse these phenomenal aspects of emotion in us, but it cannot cause us to have the relevant beliefs.

Part and parcel of this position is the view that emotions are more than phenomenological states and emotions cannot be distinguished by reference to their phenomenological characters alone. The distinction between, for example, sadness and tenderness lies not in the 'feel' of the emotional state, but in the object towards which it is directed and the beliefs the agent has about that object.<sup>122</sup>

Young does not meet this argument head on, saying that he does not want to be drawn into a discussion of theories of emotion. He mentions only in passing that the cognitive theory of

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<sup>119</sup> Peter Kivy, *Sound Sentiment*, p. 214.

<sup>120</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 40.

<sup>121</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 41.

<sup>122</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 41.

emotion is not universally accepted. Crucially, this argument will depend upon whether the cognitive theory of emotion is true or not. Young can be seen to start at the other end, though; instead of discussing the cognitive theory of emotion, he goes on to discuss the empirical evidence supporting that music does arouse emotion. And, if music in fact arouses emotion, it is a chance that it is because the cognitive theory of emotion does not hold (the alternative being that it is because music is the kind of objects we *can* form relevant beliefs about).

Peter Kivy has put forward a theory of emotion similar to the cognitive theory. In his version, he is careful to stress that this is the way emotions *often* work and that his theory as such does not claim generality.

[I]n many of the ordinary cases of having an emotion, there is an *object* of the emotion, a *belief* or set of *beliefs* that causes the emotion, and causes it to have the object it does, and a certain *feeling* aroused in the one experiencing the emotion. This is not to say that there cannot be cases where emotion has no apparent object, or no apparent belief associated causally with it. The word 'emotion' covers a lot of ground.<sup>123</sup>

Kivy calls this the *object-belief-feeling* analysis of emotion. At heart it is the cognitive theory of emotion, but by only claiming that this is how emotions work most of the time, he is able to hold that object- and belief-less emotions are possible. It means that Kivy cannot use the above argument against the arousalist, but it may be a better fit with how we experience the world than the cognitive theory. It seems like object- and/or belief-less emotions are possible.<sup>124</sup>

Young goes on to point to empirical evidence that seem to indicate that music does arouse emotion. He stresses that we do not need to know *how* music arouses emotion, to know *that* music arouses emotion. Furthermore, he thinks that proving *that* music arouses emotion in

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<sup>123</sup> Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, p. 126.

<sup>124</sup> In *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, Kivy argues from this theory that the specifically musical emotion that he feels, has the emotion that music is expressive of as its object. Hence, he speaks of music arousing quasi-emotions, or something emotion-like. However, he still holds that music does not arouse the garden-variety emotions. Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 132-133. See also note 127 below.

listeners is straightforward; it can be settled by self-reporting. So, we just need to ask people whether they have emotion aroused by music, and we should be able to trust the answer they give. And people have been asked, and a significant amount (though not everyone), have reported that they have emotions aroused by music.<sup>125</sup> Young concludes from the available evidence that music arouses emotion, at least in some listeners.<sup>126</sup> And this is all that the arousalist needs. If some listeners have emotion aroused by music, then it is not true that music cannot arouse emotion. In turn, this emotional arousal becomes the foundation on which he builds the representational aspect of music.

Peter Kivy gradually moved away from his strong anti-arousalist viewpoint. In the end, he accepted that music arouses emotion in some cases, however, when it does, it is not aesthetically relevant.<sup>127</sup>

In his most recent writings, Kivy holds that music arouses emotion in some listeners but not in others. People who listen to music as an aesthetic object do not have emotions aroused. He holds that such people are the ‘informed’ and ‘devoted’ music lovers. Music arouses emotion in people who listen to it in another way. It may, for example, arouse emotion in a child whose mother sings to it in a soothing tone of voice. Perhaps music arouses emotion in dancers. In neither case is music arousing emotions in listeners who are paying close attention to it as an aesthetic object and nothing else.<sup>128</sup>

This, which Young refers to as a last ditch effort from Kivy to hold that music does not (need to) arouse emotion in the listener, seems to bring Kivy back to Kant (or a possible reading of Kant at any rate). Music conceived as an aesthetic object in the manner Kivy does above, seems to presuppose a kind of disinterestedness in the object. Young has two responses to this

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<sup>125</sup> Kivy distrusted both psychological and anecdotal evidence on this matter, citing the problems of self-reports, and some misgivings about the methodology of the psychological experiments. While some improvements always can be made to experimental methodology, it seems a little too harsh to mistrust the self-reporting of emotion of a large number of people. If I cannot report on my emotions, then it seems like no one can.

<sup>126</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, pp. 58-66.

<sup>127</sup> In addition to the “mundane” arousal of emotion described here, Kivy also believes that music can arouse a “specifically musical” emotion, a kind of exhilaration or eagerness, as a result of listening to music that is great. This is unfortunately not something I have the space to discuss in this thesis. See for instance: Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, pp. 130-132.

<sup>128</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 77.

position. First, it comes very close to being tautological; “Kivy seems to be saying that listening that does not arouse emotion does not arouse emotion [Sic]. That is certainly true, but completely uninformative”.<sup>129</sup> Second, we may try to listen to a work of music in a manner that does not arouse emotion, and to some degree be successful. To Young, however, and I think to many others of us as well, it seems like listening to music in this manner is overlooking part of what is great about music. The emotions aroused by music, in addition to actually happening, contrary to Kivy’s beliefs, also seem to be the source of part of the pleasure many people take in listening to music. An understanding of music that completely disregards one of the parts that regularly is cited as part of what is enjoyable about music, seems to be an understanding that is lacking.

We can try to give Kivy a Kantian line of defence here. We remember that for Kant we need to disregard the colour and tone, and recognise the form of the object in order to make a pure aesthetic judgment of it. For Kivy, conceding that music under some circumstances *can* arouse emotion, either by convention or the “colour” or sentimentality of the tone (or timbre, etc.), may not be a big defeat at all. As Young points out, people who have emotions aroused by music may simply not be attending to it correctly as an aesthetic object. The feeling of *exhilaration*, or *excitement*, i.e., what Kivy calls the specifically musical feeling, may be seen to be the pleasure we feel in judging an object as beautiful. Kivy’s resulting position may be a little demanding on the listener, as the listener would be required to have a basic knowledge of structural conventions in music, but only to the degree that one would need to learn some music theory to fully appreciate music as an aesthetic object. And that requirement may perhaps not be any more demanding than requiring people to be able to read, and understand some basic conventions of literature, to fully aesthetically appreciate a novel. Young says that Kivy is missing something in not taking the arousal of emotion into account when listening to music, that he does not get the whole picture. But against this background, the Kantian Kivy seems to be able to reply that the true enjoyment comes from attending correctly to music as an aesthetic object, not merely by getting swayed by the sentimentality and charm of the tones.

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<sup>129</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 77.

It seems, then, that Kivy could have mustered another line of defence against these arguments from Young. Ultimately, though, it comes back to the observation Young makes on the back of the psychological research that indicates that some people just have emotion aroused by music, while others just do not. The argument between these two sides are based on fundamentally different experiences of music. These two sides can never fully understand each other, as it would require them to experience the world in another way than they do. Kivy and Hanslick (and other formalists) do not have garden-variety emotions aroused by music. Young and Robinson (and other arousalists) do. Theoretically speaking, however, the arousalists have the upper hand here, as they only require that the arousal of emotion by music is possible. So, if *some* people actually have emotion aroused by music, then Young can go on with his project, to show that music can be representative as well. And, the evidence seems to imply that emotional arousal by music *does* occur, at least for some. Hence, we can move on to Young's account of musical representation.

### 3.2.3 Music as Representation

For Young, the crucial difference between the formalist and the anti-formalist, is that the anti-formalist thinks that music can be a source of knowledge about something extra-musical. As we have already seen, Young does not want to speak of meaning in connection with music, as he wants to reserve that term for a specifically linguistic context. The term he ends up with is representation, as representations can have cognitive significance, and thus be a source of knowledge, without having to be either true or false. Young holds that if music is capable of representation, then it has content. And, if music has content, then formalism is false.

Furthermore, he believes that if music is capable of arousing and being expressive of emotion as he has shown, then, music necessarily also must be capable of representing. Young thinks that musical works can represent *both* the expression of emotion *and* the arousal of emotion. He notes that the kind of representation he is discussing here is *external representation*, not *mental representation*. The representations he discusses then, are things made by humans, not *vorstellungen* (or *forestillinger*) of a mental kind. He gives a list of conditions that must be fulfilled in order for something to be a representation:

- (I) The content condition: if *R* is a representation, then one can acquire knowledge from *R* about the object it represents.
- (II) The intentionality condition: if *R* is a representation, then someone intends that it have cognitive significance.
- (III) The accessibility condition: audience members who are distinct from the person who intended that *R* be a representation, must be able to recognize the cognitive significance of *R*.<sup>130</sup>

Young then makes a further division of the external representation into *semantic representation* and *illustrative representation*. Semantic representation is found in language.

True sentences are the most familiar examples of semantic representation. For example, ‘Mozart had blue eyes’ is a semantic representation. Speakers can intend to use it to convey the knowledge that Mozart had blue eyes. Such a representation depends on semantic conventions that assign specific referents to a finite set of words and which specify rules for generating semantic representations.<sup>131</sup>

Semantic representations are what, in Young’s opinion, can convey meaning. Semantic representations have truth values, they can be true or false, and Young, in a Fregean spirit, thinks that this is what constitutes *meaning* proper. Therefore, he argues, music cannot have meaning, as music does not do semantic representation. The relevant kind of representation for music then is the other kind, illustrative representation.<sup>132</sup>

Illustrations convey information since experiences of them are relevantly similar to the object they represent. A swatch of fabric is an illustrative representation. ... It represents the rest of the cloth in the bolt because experience of the swatch is similar to experience of the rest of the cloth. Pictures are also examples of illustrations. A painting illustrates Mozart only if experience of the painting is relevantly similar to experience of the composer. Crucially, the sort of representation found in music is illustration.<sup>133</sup>

Musical illustration of sounds is uncontroversial. Music can illustratively represent birdsong, church bells, trains and a variety of other sounds. In most of these cases, though, the illustration of sound is trivial. This is especially the case if one, like Kivy, thinks that this is the only kind of representation music is capable of. Yes, the sounds point to something extra-musical, but we do not learn anything new about birds or churches or trains from the

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<sup>130</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 89.

<sup>131</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 91.

<sup>132</sup> I follow Young, and use illustration and illustrative representation interchangeably.

<sup>133</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, pp. 91-92.

illustration. Young holds, though, that music can also illustrate how emotions feel; thus, we can learn something about emotions from listening to music, because the experience of music is relevantly similar to experience of emotion.

Music, then, can represent emotion in two ways, either representing the expression of emotion or represent emotion by arousing emotion. In the first, and according to Young least interesting manner, music represents emotion by being expressive of emotion.

- (1) Some works of music are intended by their composers to be heard as expressive of emotion.
- (2) Some works of music are heard by qualified listeners as expressive of emotion.
- (3) A work of music heard as expressive of emotion has cognitive significance.
- (4) If some works of music are intended by their composers to be heard as expressive of emotion, these works of music are heard by qualified listeners as expressive of emotion and these works of music heard as expressive of emotion has cognitive significance, then works of music represent the expression of emotion.

∴(C)Works of music represent the expression of emotion.<sup>134</sup>

This argument is intended to show a way in which some music satisfies the three conditions for representation. Through (1) it satisfies the intention condition, through (2) it satisfies the accessibility condition, and through (3) it satisfies the knowledge condition, since things that have cognitive significance can be a source of knowledge to us. (4) expresses that some music satisfies all the conditions for being representational, which leads to the conclusion that some works of music represent the expression of emotion. However, Young thinks that the knowledge we can gain from the representation of expression of emotion is rather trivial. “We can learn that sadness is expressed by slow, plodding motion, and that joy is expressed by quick, bouncing motion. We can learn that a high, piercing note expresses fear and anguish. In short, listeners can learn about the expression of emotion”.<sup>135</sup> If this were all that were to be gained from representation in music, the anti-formalist would not seem to have an advantage over the formalist, as it does not seem that there is much more to learn from representation of this kind, than what we could learn from music representing sounds.

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<sup>134</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 98.

<sup>135</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 104.

More interestingly, though, Young believes that music can also represent the arousal of emotion.

- (1) Some works of music are intended by composers to arouse emotion.
- (2) These works of music arouse in qualified listeners the emotions that composers intend to arouse.
- (3) By arousing emotion, these works of music have cognitive significance.
- (4) If composers intend their works to arouse emotion in listeners, the works arouse in listeners the emotions that composers intend, and by arousing emotions the works of music have cognitive significance, then some works of music represent emotion.

∴(C) Some works of music represent emotion.<sup>136</sup>

Again, the premises are intended to show a way that some music satisfies the conditions for representation. In this case, it is the arousal of emotion that does the job. The reason that Young finds this kind of musical representation more interesting than music representing the expression of emotion is that music representing the arousal of emotion opens up the possibility that listening to music can give us knowledge of our emotions, both ones we have already felt, new shades of already experienced emotions, and new ones altogether, which many claim is the kind of content music has. In his description of this kind of content he is echoing Mendelssohn's words, that what is expressed in music is not too *indefinite* for words, but rather too *definite*.

The content or cognitive significance of a work of music lies, in large part, in knowledge of the precise shades of emotion that it arouses. Hearing a piece of music, listeners come to know what experience of certain emotions are like by feeling those emotions. Listeners can also come to have knowledge about what it is like to experience certain patterns of emotion. By representing patterns of emotion, music can also represent character.<sup>137</sup>

The suggestion that music can represent character may make his position seem like it is approaching the persona theory, and thus, narrativism. Young himself is adamant that this is not the case. He does not find the idea of hearing a persona expressing emotions in a work of music intuitively convincing, and furthermore

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<sup>136</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 106.

<sup>137</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 109.



I know of no empirical evidence that this is true. The empirical evidence strongly suggests that listeners feel joy, melancholy, and a variety of other emotions as they listen to music. This evidence does not also indicate that listeners experience the joy or melancholy as the joy or melancholy of anyone in particular.<sup>138</sup>

If there is no persona, narrativism fails. Narration requires an agent in order for there to be a story at all. Music becomes more like still-life paintings or lyric poems in Young's view; it represents something, but it is not telling a story. Without text, music can only represent a series of emotions in general, not the emotions of a particular person.

Young, then, disagrees strongly with the formalist claim that absolute music is "instrumental music without text, title, programme or any other semantic, narrative or representational content".<sup>139</sup> He believes that music has content through the representation of emotion. His view is similar to many others who claim that music has meaning, but Young is reluctant to use the word meaning in connection with other phenomena than language. In this regard, he follows Kivy.

While music has content, it does not have meaning; that is, it has no semantic content. Such content depends on the existence of semantic conventions and these do not exist in the case of music. In the absence of semantic conventions in music, the representation in music cannot be semantic representation. Works of music cannot make statements whose meanings can be understood.<sup>140</sup>

The content, or cognitive significance that music can have, then, according to Young, is that music can represent the arousal of emotion, from which we can learn something about emotions. We can learn about emotions that we have already experienced, and we can possibly learn something about new emotions as well. Music can even represent character, insofar as character can be represented as a succession of emotions. For instance, he holds that Liszt's Faust Symphony sketches the characters of Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles.<sup>141</sup> In the end, then, Young believes that he has thoroughly rebutted formalism. If he in fact has shown beyond doubt that music is capable of representing emotion, and thus has cognitive content, then this is most certainly true. As he writes in the

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<sup>138</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 111.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 168.

<sup>140</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 109.

<sup>141</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 179.

envoi, Young believes that this conclusion is important for music. Formalism potentially reduces music to intellectual puzzles, or something that pleases the sensations. Rebutting formalism and showing that music can provide a deeper, more meaningful experience than the perfumer or creator of chess problems can (i.e., neither purely sensual nor purely intellectual), seems like a service to music.<sup>142</sup>

There are some potential problems in Young's account, however. Even though he has shown that music *does* arouse emotion in the listener, he does not show that it is aesthetically relevant. Both Hanslick and Kivy are willing to concede that music under certain circumstances can arouse emotion in the listener, but they hold that this has no bearing on music as an aesthetic object. In fact, both Robinson and Kivy seem to be able to account for the connection between emotion and the aesthetic value better than Young does, as they both stress the fundamental structural role emotion play in music. Another potential problem for Young may be that, if psychological insight of the kind he is describing is the main significance we can draw from music, then the majority of musical works may be left without cognitive significance. As Theodore Gracyk notes in his review of the book:

...Young's explanation of this kind of insight is tied to a handful of works in the classical tradition. I can find nothing here to block the conclusion that most music does not provide a high degree of psychological insight and so, on his account, most music is of limited cognitive and aesthetical value.<sup>143</sup>

This is indeed not a welcome conclusion from a work that tries to show the cognitive significance music can have.

The main thing I draw from Young's work is the empirical evidence that he amasses against formalism. The evidence suggests strongly that music is capable of arousing emotion. The burden, then, is placed on the formalist to show either; that people are wrong in their reports, or, that the emotions aroused are not aesthetically relevant. Both Young and Robinson give plausible accounts of how emotion can have aesthetic relevance, though Robinson's account

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<sup>142</sup> James O. Young, *Critique of Pure Music*, p. 182.

<sup>143</sup> Theodore Gracyk, "Critique of Pure Music, by James O. Young", p. 404.

on this point seems stronger. Young's notion of music being illustratively representative is interesting, but it may account for just a small number of works.

Robinson's narrativism emerges as the strongest alternative so far. My problem with her theory is that I do not think that what we *hear* in the music, is not a narrative in a literal sense. If we, however, construe this narrative less literally, her account matches better with at least my own experience of listening to music. This can be done, I believe, by seeing narratives in light of Aaron Ridley's use of the Wittgensteinian notion of paraphrase.

### 3.3 Aaron Ridley: Paraphrase

There are two main points I want to draw out of Aaron Ridley's work. First, his discussion of music as absolute or pure, directly contends with Kivy's idea of absolute music, and will serve to clarify some further problems of Kivy's conception of absolute music. Second, his thoughts on understanding music in light of the term *paraphrase*, will help us understand Robinson's and Young's attempts to explicate what can be considered meaning or cognitive significance in music. Ridley calls the paraphraseable and non-paraphraseable aspects of understanding the *external understanding* and *internal understanding*. What he wants to show is merely that external understanding is possible. Ridley does not, however, want to deny that we understand music internally as well. I have, in the end, some misgivings about his views, but his analysis of how the paraphraseable and the non-paraphraseable uses of words together makes up our understanding will be important for my own view on meaning in music.

Robinson and Young accept Kivy's conclusion that music does not have meaning, since it does not have a semantic dimension. Ridley does not address the question directly, rather, he challenges what he sees as the common view of language among philosophers of music, *meaning atomism*. Instead of saying straight out that music can have a semantic dimension, he follows Wittgenstein in saying that understanding music and language is much more akin than we normally believe.

### 3.3.1 Absolute Music as a Pure Isotope

As we have seen, absolute music is usually used as the paradigm case in contemporary discussions in the philosophy of music. The tendency to isolate the purely musical for study, has its roots in Hanslick.

If some general definition of music be sought, something by which to characterize its essence and its nature, to establish its boundaries and purpose, we are entitled to confine ourselves to instrumental music. Of what *instrumental music* cannot do, it ought never be said that music can do, because only instrumental music is music purely and absolutely.<sup>144</sup>

Eduard Hanslick wrote this well over a hundred years ago, and up until recently it has been the prevailing view in the philosophy of music. The idea is simple and efficient. We want to know what powers music has *qua* music. Therefore, we remove everything that is not music, and analyse it. What we find, then, is what powers music has *on its own*. In many cases, this is a perfectly valid way of proceeding. If we want to know whether there is semantic meaning in music, for example, it would be hard to tell if we listen to a musical work with lyrics or with an attached programme. The work could be a treasure trove of semantic meaning, but we could not know what came from the music, and what came from the words. After all, even if music had its own semantics, the semantics of regular language is so much clearer that it would probably overshadow whatever the musical semantics said. So, we focus on instrumental, non-programmatic works instead. In the specific case of whether music has semantics, this kind of approach seems to make sense.

Ridley sees this approach to understanding music as being modelled on the proceedings of the natural sciences. Music is made into an object of study, and, where it is not pure enough, we disregard whatever extra-musical implications may be there. Ridley criticises this route of trying to gain knowledge about music. While he does not have any misgivings with a scientific study of music, or trying to gain (in some sense) objective knowledge about music,

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<sup>144</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, pp. 14-15.

he believes that the way music theorists, philosophers of music, etc. has gone about to this end has been *scientistic*, rather than scientific.

He argues that philosophers of music, like Kivy, have tried to find a pure isotope of music to be studied, in the same manner that we would use distilled water in experiments to find the pressure levels in boiling water. The problem is not the scientific approach to isolate the relevant elements of music, but the fact that we isolate the wrong parts, or too much. Hence, a good deal of philosophers of music look past the historical and cultural aspects of music, to be able to study it in its *pure* form. They disregard programmes, titles and biographical information, or the reception history of the work. Thus, Ridley thinks that the pure music they end up with is, in a sense, too pure. While they are trying to study music objectively, they are in fact misconstruing the object.

Objectivity is a matter of getting the object right. If the object of enquiry is historically constituted, as for instance nationalism is, then objectivity depends on not ruling out the vagaries of time and place. If the object is culturally constituted, as to different degrees sex and cookery are, objectivity requires the human element. The error of scientism is to imagine that because water, say, lacks a history or a culture in the relevant sense, and because science attempts to factor such things out accordingly, objectivity must by its very nature be ahistorical and acultural. But that is to mistake one injunction for another. One should exclude the irrelevant, by all means; but one shouldn't therefore exclude it by irrelevant standards of relevance.<sup>145</sup>

The notion of absolute music seems to be of this kind. When Kivy construes music as a “quasi-syntactical structure of sound understandable solely in musical terms”,<sup>146</sup> Ridley will argue that he is excluding relevant parts of music. Works that are understandable *only* in terms of internal relations in the music are few. In most cases, historical and cultural factors are important as well. The prominent place absolute music has in the debates of the philosophy of music overestimates how widespread it is. It may also lead us to consider as absolute music many works which are not.

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<sup>145</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 6.

<sup>146</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 202.

### 3.3.2 Meaning Atomism

It is a widely accepted view that music, even though it bears some resemblance to language, is indeed *not* a language. This, in turn, has led to scepticism regarding *any* comparison between music and language. Ridley believes that this is one step too far, that there is something to learn from this kind of comparison, both about music and about language.

Wittgenstein once remarked, although not in the hearing of most philosophers of music, that ‘understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think’; and the corollary of this, if it’s true, is that understanding a theme in music may be much more akin to understanding a sentence than most philosophers of music, at any rate, have been willing to concede.<sup>147</sup>

The problem from the perspective of the philosophers of music, he believes, is that they often seem to be overly confident that they have a proper grasp on what language is, and furthermore, often seems to presuppose what Ridley refers to as *meaning atomism*.

Thus, on this conception, the meaning of the sentence ‘The chair is blue’ is simply an additive function of the meanings of the words ‘the’, ‘chair’, ‘is’ and ‘blue’. The words themselves are basic units, or ‘atoms’, of meaning, while sentences and other complex expressions mean what they mean in virtue of the atoms arranged within them. According to meaning-atomism, then, understanding a sentence is a matter of analysing it into and understanding its constituent parts.<sup>148</sup>

What seems worth noting here is that what Ridley refers to as *meaning atomism*, looks a lot like what is commonly referred to in the philosophy of language as *The Principle of Compositionality* (PC), which is widely held today. That a Wittgensteinian account of language is critical of meaning atomism is not surprising, but Ridley does not give a good argument for why meaning atomism fails. Thus, I will have to give an example of a possible argument against meaning atomism, to be able to continue the reasoning here. One objection could be that meaning atomism requires that all words have a fixed meaning.<sup>149</sup> Even though virtually no one would deny that context is important in determining the meaning of a sentence, one could object that the meaning atomist would require that each separate word of

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<sup>147</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 22.

<sup>148</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 23.

<sup>149</sup> Note that this does not go for the PC. Over all, PC seems like an evolved, more moderate version of meaning atomism.

a sentence have a sort of basic or minimal meaning that is not context dependent. However, we can make a word mean almost anything that we want to (through for instance stipulative acts). Hence, meaning atomism cannot hold, as words themselves seem to be radically context dependent. Whether it is an argument along these lines Ridley has in mind, I do not know, but it will allow us to continue with the present discussion.<sup>150</sup>

### 3.3.3 Showing Understanding: Paraphrasing Music

To Ridley, *paraphrase* is a constituent part of understanding. To be able to express our understanding of something, is to be able to paraphrase it. In order to understand how paraphrase applies to music, Ridley first elaborates on how paraphrase works as applied to language. “Wittgenstein’s claim, in a nutshell, is that the concept of ‘understanding’, as it applies to language, is made up of two aspects: one having to do with the paraphraseable, the other with the non-paraphraseable, uses of words”.<sup>151</sup> The range of what counts as paraphrase is wide in Ridley’s view.

At the extremely minimal end of the range, one might describe as paraphrase the substitution of a word by a synonym (e.g., of ‘feline’ by ‘cat-like’). Or, more elaborately, a paraphrase might involve someone stating a point he has stated before, but now from a quite different perspective. And more elaborately still, a paraphrase might consist in something like a full-blown analysis or explanation, as when someone attempts to produce an exegesis or a commentary upon a complicated text or position.<sup>152</sup>

Furthermore, he holds that the more elaborate forms of paraphrase depend on the less elaborate, and as such, a discussion of the minimal forms of paraphrase, as substitution, will suffice to get a grasp on the term. Ridley’s minimal conception of paraphrase is that it is built around the idea of instrumental intersubstitutability. On this view we use language as a tool to

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<sup>150</sup> The meaning atomist, or proponent of PC would probably answer to this objection that there are no problems with seeing words as having a minimal, fixed meaning, and that the context dependency comes in at the level of pragmatics, not at the level of semantics. Whether Ridley is correct in his criticism of meaning atomism is not something I believe will have a bearing on the conclusions of my thesis, thus I will not discuss this any further.

<sup>151</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 26.

<sup>152</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, pp. 26-27.

achieve something (broadly speaking), hence it is instrumental. Intersubstitutability describes our ability to state the same thing with different words. If I know that you have back problems, and want to caution you before you lift a heavy chair, I can say that “That chair is heavy”, but the phrase “That piece of furniture is relatively weighty” might as well do the trick. And if you (for some strange reason) do not understand what I mean by any of these two phrases, I can come up with a third one (“That thing you are about to lift up is not at all light”) which expresses the same end that I want to achieve. “The paraphraseable use, then, suggests words wielded like tools, and wielded in that way when the context they’re used in is already understood *instrumentally*”.<sup>153</sup> This may be close to a trivial point; if I want something done, it does not matter which words I use to get them done, as long as the words can do the job. In this sense, my aim is specifiable independently of the means I use to bring it about.

Ridley identifies a potential problem with this notion of paraphrase; it seems circular. What I want to achieve is specifiable independently of the words I use. This is the instrumental part of instrumental intersubstitutability. However, any attempt I make specifying my aims in other words than those I used, turns out to be paraphrase (which is instrumental intersubstitutability). If I say, “That chair is heavy”, and you ask me to explain what I mean, I will paraphrase, saying, “That piece of furniture is relatively weighty”. These two sentences say the same thing in different ways. But if you ask me, subsequently, what it is that both sentences say, I cannot tell you that without saying it in a third manner, paraphrasing again. And were you to ask me again, “what is the thing that the third sentence is saying that the first two are also saying”, I would have to come up with a fourth way of saying it, and so on, and so on *ad infinitum*. “So it would seem that the analysis of paraphrase in terms of instrumental intersubstitutability is circular: paraphrase presupposes instrumentality, the analysis suggests, but then instrumentality turns out to presuppose paraphrase”.<sup>154</sup> However, Ridley believes that this should not lead us to believe that the whole idea of paraphrase is incoherent. On his view, the idea of paraphrase is a constitutive part of what it is to understand something. That the concepts of instrumentality and paraphrase presuppose each other should not be surprising. If

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<sup>153</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 27.

<sup>154</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 28.



we see the paraphrase as language used as a tool (hence instrumentally), and recognise that instrumentality is the means to an end, Ridley thinks it is obvious that these concepts rest upon each other. “[F]or the very idea of an ‘end’ to be achieved through the use of ‘means’ would be unintelligible, in any intelligible instance of tool-use, were the ends not conceived at least partly as the product of end-producing means. That we can use tools at all depends on this”.<sup>155</sup> What he seems to say, then, is that the aim of knocking some nails into a plank is specifiable independently of a hammer. First, we could use other tools (a nail gun, or the heel of a shoe). Second, our aim of having some nails in a plank does not require us imagining a hammer; we know what we want to do first, then we try to choose the right tool for the job. In this sense, the end is specifiable independently from the tool. However, we cannot see our fulfilment of this end completely independent of the use of tools. When we reach our goal, it is as a result of tool-use. Hence, the end, when attained, has to be understood partly as the product of end-producing means. The nails in the plank are, partly, the product of the hammer. Again, this may seem trivial, but it has a bearing on Ridley’s notion of paraphrase.

In the end, though, paraphrase is not enough to constitute understanding on its own. As we have seen above, there is a possibility of an endless stream of deferred paraphrases in trying to understand something. At some point something needs to fall into place, if we are ever going to have any kind of understanding. If you do not understand “That chair is heavy”, or “That piece of furniture is relatively weighty”, or “That thing you are about to lift up is not at all light”, I just have to be creative and keep going with the paraphrases. Suddenly, though, I say “No feather, that rocker”, and something clicks into place in you. You understand what this phrase means. This, in turn, enables you to understand what the other phrases I used meant as well.

Meaning has here been earthed, and the circle of deferral broken. This second aspect of the concept ‘understanding’, then, the aspect relevant to the non-paraphraseable use of words, turns out to be essential to the understanding of paraphrase as well. If all understanding were merely understanding of paraphraseable content, after all, understanding itself could never begin: there would be no way to break into the endless circle of deferral. But once earthed, in the non-periphrastic grasp of a particular expression, understanding becomes possible – and so as a corollary, does paraphrase. If you’ve understood ‘No

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<sup>155</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 29.

feather, that rocker' you'll now be able to offer paraphrases of it, to say the same thing in different ways.<sup>156</sup>

Ridley does not try to explain *how* we come to understanding in this manner; rather, he seems to count on our experience of coming to an understanding in the way described. To show that we have understood something, we employ the paraphraseable use of words. But to be able to paraphrase we must have understood what at least one instance of the paraphrases means. That is the non-paraphraseable use of words in play. The words mean just what they mean.<sup>157</sup>

For the present purposes, I can accept Ridley's notion of the non-paraphraseable use of words, on grounds of my experience. It is not an account of *how* we come to have an understanding founded in the sentence; rather, it just states *that* it occurs. The non-paraphraseable use of words turns out to be important in the aesthetic, and looking into the way non-paraphraseability works in the arts will make the concept somewhat easier to understand. In poetry, for instance, there is a sense in which the specific words that are used, and what position they are in, seem intrinsically connected to what the poem expresses. There is no completely accurate way to paraphrase a poem, as it seems that we cannot change the words and still convey the same thing. "[W]e understand the words not as instrumentally intersubstitutable for others, or not primarily, but simply as saying what they say".<sup>158</sup> A work of art does not try to communicate anything other than itself. This is not meant in the sense that a work of art cannot have content that has something relevant to say about the world. The point is that a work of art has to express what it does express in exactly that manner, and, it is understood in this way. If I read a poem with a political slant, and subsequently tell the poet that, "you could have far more efficiently expressed the point you tried to make by writing a

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<sup>156</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 30.

<sup>157</sup> Ridley does not go into detail on how we come to a non-paraphraseable understanding of a sentence. I must admit that to me, the puzzlement regarding how we come to the non-paraphraseable understanding of a sentence is akin to the puzzlement regarding how we know what the atoms in meaning atomism mean. Which is meant as a careful way of suggesting that (at least one of) the problems Ridley sees in meaning atomism may be problematic for him as well.

<sup>158</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 30.

pamphlet”, I would have misunderstood the poem. What I said may well be true, of course, but I would still display a total lack of understanding of what a poem is.

In the aesthetic sphere, then, it seems like the aspect of paraphrase in understanding becomes second in importance to the aspect of non-paraphraseable use of words. We can, of course paraphrase a poem in order to show that we have understood it, but the paraphrase would not work in the same manner that it would in the case of the instrumental use of language. When we paraphrase a poem, we are not saying *the same thing* in different words, but we can express our *understanding* of it with different words than the ones used in the poem. Or rather, even if our paraphrase captures the semantic meaning of the poem, we would argue that some of the meaning would still be lost. Ultimately, both notions of understanding are needed to make up the full concept, according to Ridley. Therefore, we should not see the paraphraseable and the non-paraphraseable notions of understanding as separate concepts, but, rather, as two constituent parts of the full concept of understanding. To Ridley, we cannot have one and not the other; they are interdependent.

Ridley believes that this view of understanding applies not only to understanding language, but also to understanding as such, and that usually context dictates which aspect of understanding is to do the heavy lifting. Having prepared the ground with an analysis of language and then other kinds of art, he is now ready to apply this view of understanding to music. His hope seems to be that a better understanding of language (one that is not meaning-atomistic) will facilitate our understanding of Wittgenstein’s remark that understanding a sentence should be thought of as understanding a musical phrase, and as such, also the other way around. For this purpose, he introduces the terminology *internal* for the non-paraphraseable use (expressed only by these words in this position) and *external* for the paraphraseable use (can be replaced by another sentence that says the same).<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, pp. 32-33.

Understanding music in the internal sense is relatively straightforward; it can be seen as the formal analysis of music, the discussion of the internal, structural relations of music. There is no controversy in claiming that music can be understood internally, as it is the most common way of describing and trying to understand music at present. Questions of why this key is chosen here instead of that key, why the pattern of the bass stands in this or that relation to the melody, etc., are answered by reference to the rest of the work. The internal understanding is also an understanding that the theme of a work has to be exactly that theme, in order for the work to be the work that it is. This is the non-paraphraseable notion of meaning at work.

This kind of point is ... precisely the kind that philosophers of music have always wanted to make, and they have made it well and persuasively. Of interest to me here, though, is the way in which the work that has been done on musical understanding has also tended to take its purview – which is to say, internal understanding – to be the whole vista. One does not, after all, have to deny flatly that an external understanding of something is possible in order to show that an internal understanding is possible too, and is possibly more important. Yet such a denial is quite standard.<sup>160</sup>

Art is in general difficult to paraphrase, music even more so. Therefore, it may be understandable that we see the external aspect of meaning in music as less relevant than the internal. However, just as we can express our understanding of a poem by paraphrasing it, recognising that we do not say *the same thing* that the poem says, and not in the same manner, we can express our understanding of a musical work by describing it in, for instance, either emotional or music-analytical terms. “[I]n offering to paraphrase the poem, one is not offering to replace it with something just as good, or even with something of the same sort. One is offering merely to express one’s understanding of what the poem says by saying it in a different way”.<sup>161</sup>

If we were presented with two different musical works that both express the quality of sadness, we could not change the main themes between them and expect the result to be the same. If the transposition was done well, they may still both express sadness, but they would

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<sup>160</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 33.

<sup>161</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 34.

be different works nonetheless.<sup>162</sup> Paraphrase would not work in *this* manner in music. The fact that we can describe both of the works as sad, though, shows us how an external understanding may have a place in music. There is something in common between the two themes, even though they are not interchangeable. And to express this is to express an (external) understanding of music.

In offering descriptions of pieces of music, we highlight qualities in them that other pieces of music might share (qualities such as being blithe, or in D major, or jig-worthy). We do not suppose that such descriptions can capture or exhaust what we have understood internally, any more than we ought to suppose that a paraphrase of a poem can exhaust or capture that. But we do suppose that our descriptions, the ones we are happy with at least, say something apt and true about the music in question; and in supposing this we acknowledge both the fact of our external understanding and its role in our understanding of the pieces of music we say we understand.<sup>163</sup>

For Ridley, then, the understanding of music must, as any kind of understanding, be of both kinds, internal and external. In the case of music, the internal part is probably more important than the external, however, the external understanding is both possible and important, as long as the external understanding is grounded in the internal.

However, it does not seem like Kivy necessarily would have to disagree with this. Kivy's notion of music being *expressive of* emotion can be seen as a kind of external understanding of music. That we hear analogies between the emotive tone of voice or emotive movement and music seems to be facilitated by a kind of external understanding. And, for Kivy, this kind of external understanding is, in fact, grounded in the internal, as he sees the expressive properties of music as *emerging* from the structural properties. As such, if Ridley's seeing understanding as both external and internal is motivated by wanting to show that the work of Kivy (and other philosophers of a similar mould) is exclusively internal, it seems like it fails. I believe that the problem here is that Kivy will not fall squarely into any of these categories. Ridley conceive of him as expressing merely internal understanding, but from what I can

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<sup>162</sup> Arguably, the two main themes would express different nuances or shades of sadness to begin with, these differences would probably carry over to some degree with the switch of themes between works.

<sup>163</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 35.

understand, Kivy's contour theory is to some degree, at least, also an expression of external understanding.

In the end, Ridley is not denying that an internal understanding of music is possible, nor even that it is in most cases the best route for understanding music. His point is that the internal understanding *cannot* do work on its own. Understanding anything has two aspects, thus understanding music must have two aspects as well. That is all he wants, and as far as the theory goes, all he needs. He is not after a reversal in the roles between the two aspects of understanding in music, just a recognition that external understanding plays a role as well as the internal. He concludes:

...a deafness to Wittgenstein's remark about themes and sentences has often led philosophers of music to conclude that music, if it is meaningful at all, must be meaningful in some purely musical way. But this, we can now see, is either trivial or false. It is trivial if it shadows the claim that language, understood internally, is meaningful in some purely linguistic way: everything understandable is meaningful in that sense (tools toolishly, pictures pictorially – etc.). And it is false if it depends on the view that, unlike linguistic understanding, musical understanding is internal through and through. ... We need to be less confident of our theoretical grasp of language, in other words, and more – that is, duly – confident of our understanding of music.<sup>164</sup>

Contrary to many other contemporary philosophers of music, then, Ridley is eager to make the comparison between music and language. Where others do it reluctantly, he does it happily. This is because he thinks that if we leave the meaning-atomistic view that (he thinks) is prevalent in the philosophy of music today, not only can an analysis of language cast light on music, but an analysis of music might cast light on language.

Ultimately, I have my doubts about Ridley's views. In an analytical setting, many of his arguments are too vague to facilitate a proper discussion with the other interlocutors. When I have chosen to include him it is because I think that his discussion of absolute music shows us a deficiency in how the term is conceived of and used, and because his notion of paraphrase helps me explain how the different accounts of musical meaning are related to music. I am

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<sup>164</sup> Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, p. 44.

ready to accept his discussion of paraphrase on grounds of my own experience of coming to understand something. Even if it is not stringently argued for, it resonates with me.

### 3.3.4 Robinson and Paraphrase

With Ridley's notion of paraphrase now thoroughly explained I can make good on the promise to return to Robinson. There are two points from Robinson I want to look at in light of paraphrase, one is regarding plot summaries, and the other my own estimation of narrativism. The reasons for why a plot summary is nothing like the aesthetic object itself should be even more clear after the discussion of the paraphraseable and the non-paraphraseable understanding of meaning. Just as a poem is intrinsically non-paraphrasable, a musical work is too. Still, to express understanding of a poem, we allow paraphrase, often in the form of something like a plot summary. In the case of music, then, a plot summary should be no more mysterious. It is not claimed that in paraphrasing the work, retelling the plot in words, or in giving a plot summary, we are repeating exactly what the musical work expresses. At its core, the musical work is non-paraphraseable. What a plot or a plot summary should be seen as doing then, is to try to express understanding of the musical work.

With regards to my own estimation of narrativism, I think it appears stronger if seen in light of Ridley's discussion of paraphrase. Saying that a musical work in some way *consists of* a plot, or that it is narrative in nature, seems to me not to capture the nature of a musical work. But seeing narratives as the best way of paraphrasing (with words) the content of a musical work seems more plausible. Since describing is usually done with words, and since music is more akin to literature than to science, using literary analogies to paraphrase music is probably more correct than using scientific analogies. This account seems to let music keep its intrinsic non-paraphraseability, while allowing attempts to try and paraphrase nonetheless.

## Conclusion

As laid out at the start, my aim in this thesis has been fourfold. The main aim was to refute claims from Peter Kivy that so-called ““Absolute music,” then, as defined, is pure instrumental music without text, title, program, dramatic setting, or any other extra-musical apparatus. It is music, as defined, without representational, narrative, semantic or other extra-musical content”.<sup>165</sup> Or, that music is a “quasi-syntactical structure of sound understandable solely in musical terms and having no semantic or representational content, no meaning, making reference to nothing beyond itself”.<sup>166</sup> The second aim was to question the viability of the term absolute music. The third aim was to examine the connection between music and the emotions, to see if meaning in music and emotions are connected, and what aesthetic relevance (if any) emotions have in music. The final aim was to say something positive about what meaning in music is.

First, a general remark; while formalism has been the dominant position, especially in music criticism through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seems that the tide is about to turn. This may be due in large part to the empirical evidence that indicates that music does in fact arouse emotion in listeners. It may of course be the case that the experiments are badly carried out, or that the emotion aroused is of no aesthetic significance, but results of that kind will no doubt encourage philosophers of music to continue exploring the arousal of emotion by music.

The above claims from Kivy deny that music has meaning, not only in a linguistic sense, but in many other significant senses of the word meaning as well. I have shown in this thesis that the claim that music has no semantic meaning holds. This is the only sense that Kivy allows for meaning in connection with music. Stated like this, I have to agree that there is no meaning in music. However, I have shown as well that music alone, absolute music, so conceived, still in many cases is capable of making reference to something beyond itself. Works of pure music can, through the arousal of emotion, give us psychological insights, as

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<sup>165</sup> Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, p. 157.

<sup>166</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, p. 202.



argued by Young. He also shows that music is capable of illustrative representation. Robinson can, with the help of Ridley, show how works of music can plausibly be conceived of as narratives. Thus, I have argued that both of Kivy's definitions of absolute music are wrong, since music is capable of representation and can be heard as narratives.

Furthermore, I have pointed out that the widespread use of absolute music as examples in the philosophy of music is troublesome. Ridley has shown that the notion of absolute music seems like a theoretical construct that is not capable of capturing the nature of music. While it works for the specific aim of showing that music does not convey linguistic meaning, it overlooks relevant parts of what music is. Kivy's definition stipulates that absolute music does not have narrative, representational or semantic content. This is more than a descriptive definition. While he claims this is the common understanding of absolute music, his adversaries do not agree. I agree that there *are* works of music that can be considered absolute as per Kivy's definition, however, these are few; far fewer than Kivy believes. A better, descriptive understanding of the term would be just the first half of his definition, that absolute music is music without extra-musical apparatus.

There is broad agreement that there is a connection between music and emotions. Kivy believes that the only connection between music and emotions that can be heard *in* music is music being *expressive of* emotion, like a St. Bernard being expressive of sadness. I have shown that the connection goes deeper than this. Surveys of empirical evidence made by Young reveal that music reliably arouses emotion in the listener. Both Young and Robinson base parts of their accounts of musical meaning on this fact. Hence, at least some of the meaning we find in music is due to the connection between music and the emotions. When it comes to the aesthetic relevance of the emotions, the picture is a little less clear. Kivy has an interesting view, in that the only emotion he believes music is capable of arousing, comes as a result if correctly attending to great music as an aesthetic object. As such, the only role aroused emotion plays in music is of aesthetic relevance. However, his failure to consider the wide range of emotion experienced by listeners makes this conclusion weaker. Young is unable to sufficiently account for how emotions are relevant to our enjoyment of music, and the psychological insight he believes we gain from music may only be attainable from a small

range of works. Robinson believes that the arousal of both primitive emotions and cognitively complex emotions play a part in us hearing musical works as narratives. In contributing to the overall (narrative) structure of the work, emotions are relevant to our aesthetic enjoyment of music.

Lastly, I wanted to point in the direction of a theory of meaning in music. I hope that this picture has become clear in the course of the thesis.

The three differing accounts of what is meaningful in music centres around three different kinds of analogies. Robinson makes an analogy between music and narratives, Young between music and illustration and Ridley between music and language. If we make a return to Hanslick, we may understand why they all speak in analogies when trying to show what meaning in music is like.

Accordingly, by contrast with arabesque, music is actually a picture, but one whose subject we cannot grasp in words and subsume under concepts. Music has sense and logic – but musical sense and logic. It is a kind of language which we speak and understand, yet cannot translate. It is due to a kind of subconscious recognition that we speak of musical “thoughts”, and, as in the case of speech, the trained judgement easily distinguishes between genuine thoughts and empty phrases. In the same way, we recognize the rational coherence of a group of tones and call it a sentence, exactly as with every logical proposition we have a sense of where it comes to an end, although what we might mean by “truth” in the two cases is not at all the same thing.<sup>167</sup>

Or, we can look back to Mendelssohn.

There is so much talk about music, and yet so little really said. For my part I believe that words do not suffice for such a purpose, and if I found they did suffice, then I certainly would have nothing more to do with music. People often complain that music is ambiguous, that their ideas on the subject always seem so vague, whereas every one understands words; with me it is exactly the reverse; not merely with regard to entire sentences, but also as to individual words; these, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so unintelligible when compared with genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. What the music I love expresses to me, is not thought too *indefinite* to be put into words, but, on the contrary, too *definite*.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 30.

<sup>168</sup> Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, “Letter to Marc-André Souchay” in *Mendelssohn’s Letters*, pp. 298-300.

What Hanslick and Mendelssohn are, from very different perspectives, highlighting here, is that any attempt to try and cash out the meaning of music in words or pictures is futile. We simply do not get exactly the same. This is why I think that the notion of paraphrase can help us understand what meaning in music is. We must see these accounts of musical meaning more as paraphrases, as attempts to offer an understanding of music, rather than explanations of what musical meaning *is*. If we understand that Robinson does not think that music *is* narration, or that Young does not believe that music *is* an illustration, I think their views make more sense. Some of these paraphrases will, no doubt be better than others. What I hope to have argued convincingly, then, is that at least one kind of meaning in music is best captured in words, by making narrative paraphrases of musical works.

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# Reading List

**Reading List, Master Thesis in Philosophy  
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Fall, 2017**

- Bowie, Andrew. "Introduction" and "1: Form, Feeling Metaphysics and Music" in *Music, Philosophy and Modernity*, pp. 1-45. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. (45 pages).
- Hanslick, Eduard. *On the Musically Beautiful*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986. (83 pages).
- Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. (263 pages).
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- \_\_\_\_\_. "Another Go at Musical Meaning" in *Music, Language and Cognition*, pp. 137-153. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. (17 pages).
- Ridley, Aaron. "Introduction: Music from Mars" and "Chapter 1: Understanding" in *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*, pp. 1-44. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. (44 pages).
- Young, James O. *Critique of Pure Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. (183 pages).

Total: 778 pages.