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ABSTRACT

The discussion regarding the meaning of music might, in a way or another, have come across anyone of us. For example, what does this music mean? What does it mean to me? Is it something different from you? Is there a social message in it?

Moreover, there are also many practical impacts that can be identified. For example, the impacts on the practice (e.g. what should be taught in the music classroom) and on the functions of music (e.g. personal, social-cultural or psychological functions).

Recently, this discussion in the musical studies has been dominated by the absolutist view: the musical meaning is within the musical work itself. After a brief introduction, we discuss this position. Firstly presenting its main arguments and taking into account its founding father, Hanslick, and then the modern absolutist versions and its impact on music education. Subsequently we critically discuss the absolutist view, presenting an alternative, mainly based on Meyer's work. Finally, we present the conclusions.

Keywords: Music; meaning; absolutism; referentialism; formalism; expressionism; education

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1. Introduction

The discussion regarding the meaning of music is essential to the musical studies; i.e. a debate about the nature and the value of music. The philosophers of music have been concerned with the general questions about the nature of musical meaning and music theorists and musicologists have been particularly interested in understanding particular pieces through its interpretation. Thus, they are studying the same issue but stressing different aspects.

In a way or another, anyone of us might have come across this question. For example, we can pose the question in the following terms: what does this music mean? What does it mean to me? Is it something different from you? Is there a social message in it?

There are also many practical impacts that can be identified. By determining the meaning of music, its purpose might be better understood. For example, the impacts on the practice of music (e.g. what should be taught in the music classroom) and on the functions of music (e.g. personal, social-cultural or psychological functions).

Recently, this discussion has been dominated by the absolutist¹ view not only in the philosophy of music but also in composition and music theory. The defenders of this classical philosophical aesthetic view believe that the musical meaning is within the musical work itself. We discuss this position, firstly presenting its main arguments and taking into account its founding father, Hanslick, and then the modern absolutist versions and its impact on music education. Subsequently we critically discuss the absolutist view, presenting an alternative, mainly based on Meyer's work. Finally, we present the conclusions.

¹ It has also been called formalist view/formalism. We will keep the concept 'absolutism' for clarity.



2. Absolutism

As mentioned before, absolutism suggests that the meaning of absolute music (i.e. instrumental music²) is in the music piece itself, namely its formal aspects.

2.1. Hanslick's Legacy

It would be unfair, if not a mistake, to discuss absolutism without referencing Eduard Hanslick's legacy. The Viennese music critic published “Vom Musikalishen Schönen” in 1854, whose importance and influence is still present today by inspiring some authors with some of his ideas expressed in the book. Apart from his work, there are many volumes written about his theory. For the purpose of this discussion, we are focusing on two main ideas of his book. Firstly, his idea of musical meaning. Hanslick considers that the content of music is “tonend bewegte Formen” (tonally moving forms) that must be considered as a group of tones with a “specifically musical kind of beauty”. This means that musical beauty is composed by the tones in their relations according to purely musical compositional principles, which consequently explains the relevance of the composition activity: “the composed piece, regardless of whether it is performed or not, is the completed artwork” (Hanslick, 1986: 48). Moreover, Hanslick distinguishes nature sounds from the musically beauty to state that in nature we can only find noise whether in music there are human spirit creations, namely melody and harmony.

² The concept of absolute music is always implicit in the discussion along this paper. The importance of this concept is especially remarkable in the controversy between Hanslick and Richard Wagner who were icons of two different attitudes to music. Hanslick highlights the autonomy of the musical world that has nothing to do with the extra-musical world. It is an objective structure of forms that gives music meaning. Otherwise, Wagner, through his operas, in which music and words are inseparable, believes that music can express the profoundest human thoughts and feelings.



By considering that musical beauty is an end in itself, Hanslick argues that it is also ahistorical, independent from any event or conditions and “non-partisan”, i.e. can exist in any musical style.

Secondly, Hanslick criticizes the widespread emotional view of music; in other words, the idea that music should be primarily understood in emotionalist terms. Although he agrees with the causal theorists and believes that music may arise feelings and moods in the listener, he does not consider it relevant to the meaning of music. He also recognizes that the composer might have strong feelings when writing a piece of music that even if detectable by the listener are irrelevant to the meaning of the work. Furthermore, he also attacks the representational version of the emotional music view, which claims that music can represent diverse feelings. According to Hanslick, music only presents purely musical ideas, i.e. successions of musical sounds. These musical ideas have dynamical qualities (e.g. speeding up here, slowing down there) that can be associated with similar emotions that generally people can agree with. However, the representation of a feeling is something else. It implies having a particular set of concepts and judgments that music, as purely musical sounds, cannot offer.

2.2. Absolutism in modern times

Although Monroe Beardsley, Roger Scruton and Malcolm Budd are some of Hanslick's modern descendants, it is Susanne Langer and Peter Kivy who join Hanslick to frame the three landmarks of the absolutist tradition broadly considered (Alperson, 2003).

Their views' nuances are worth of a brief overview to set up the discussion in more clear terms. In fact, Langer and Kivy tried to move away from Hanslick's notion of musical form, too much focused on technical aspects of music, to a view that includes expressive properties as part of the music experience³.

³ This move is called Enhanced Formalism. Once Kivy disagrees with Alperson's definition of the term, even though he uses the same term but with another definition, we prefer not using any term and solely explain what is at stake (see Kivy, 1997 and Alperson, 2003).



One of the issues that must be raised is how can absolutism integrate the expression in music and that is directly reflected in Susanne Langer's work (1957). She alleges that music expression is neither related with the composer's emotions, else he would be the only one able to judge it, nor is the music expression the evocation of psychological states in the listener. Therefore, she proposes a theory of signs: music presents the “forms of feeling” (e.g. tensions, ambiguities, contrasts, conflicts) and refers to ideas about the life of feeling. Thus, it is a cognitivist theory in the sense that the similarity between music and the emotive life has implicit a relation of reference, in which music can offer the knowledge about the inner life; and then, music is not only appreciation of the musical form. Music also awakens the desire for self-knowledge.

Alike Susanne Langer, Peter Kivy (1997) also wants to contribute to the explanation of the musical expression in a piece of music. He considers that there are many properties of absolute music that is interesting or valuable to the listener and these should be explained by a detailed study of music. Still, he admits that there must be something else: how can music touch so many of us? Kivy notes that “our thought processes, at least ideally, are at play in the world of the work alone. That, it appears to me, is music's blessing and *difference*” (Kivy, 1997: 208). This implies that there is a musical thought that enables the listener to have that world of the work.

Kivy admits the complexity involved in the discussion about the appreciation and enjoyment of music. Still, he insists on the idea of music being an intentional object of the mind. Thus, the pleasure is also of the mind and irrespective of the musical expertise of the listener. The peculiarity of this pleasure lies on the freedom it gives us from our work world and possible problems, allowing our thoughts to “wander in worlds that are completely self-sufficient” (Kivy, 1997: 209). Ultimately, Kivy emphasizes that this liberation is one in many values to enjoy in music.

2.3. Absolutist Musical Meaning and impact on education

Philosophy of Music Education” (1970), assumes that the nature and value of music education are determined by the nature and value of the art of music itself. He believes that “The deepest value of music education is the same as the deepest value of all



aesthetic education: the enrichment of the quality of people's lives through enriching their insights into the nature of human feeling” (Reimer, 1970: 39). Thus, he further argues, music contributes to the larger mission of education, namely to help people learn to share meanings of the world.

From the absolutist authors presented before, prominence has to be given to Susanne Langer. By identifying the experience of music with a deeper level of life's experience - the inner's life - she helps Reimer finding a philosophical understanding to the role of music educators, namely to teach the aesthetic perception, especially through listening, encouraging pupils to engage creatively with what is being perceived. Thus, composition and performance are less important and complementary activities (Metcalf, 1987). But her influence did not stop here because nine years later Keith Swanwick (1979) further developed some of these ideas. He distinguishes between two types of meanings. One is 'the meaning to', i.e. the meaning of understanding what is being said and that can be taught through the same activities that Reimer proposed. The other meaning - 'the meaning for' - involves being moved by that understanding. So, it is largely dependent on the individual feelings and not on a learning process facilitated by a teacher.

Moreover, Kivy also notes another practical impact on education, namely that when identifying music only with technical and purely formal music features, those without technical training are excluded from the musical community (Alperson, 2003)⁴.

It seems to us that it might give rise to elitist selecting schemes since students would probably be evaluated solely on purely technical abilities. It is known today that there are many factors to take into account while measuring the musical potential, namely sustained interest, self-discipline and personal qualities, such as motivation, personal expression, commitment and metacognition (Haroutinian, Hallam and Prince and Hallam and Shaw – see McPherson and Hallam, 2009).

⁴ Langer (1957) also notes that “great art is not a direct sensuous pleasure. If it were, it would appeal—like cake or cocktails—to the untutored as well as to the cultured taste.” (p. 166).



Concluding, absolutists defend that music meaning lies exclusively within the work, either through its purely formal features or, according to some modern authors, having also in consideration its expressive features. Consequently, these views can support the philosophical understanding of music education and then impacting on education, namely in the content of music classes, and in social aspects such as the selection schemes involved in music schools and the access to music in general terms, formal and informal contexts.

3. Critical Discussion

3.1. General terms

Before going into the details of this discussion we will briefly outline its framework. Absolutism is usually challenged by the opposing view - referentialism - which claims that the meaning refers to extramusical aspects of the work. We do not believe that this classic dichotomy can help improve this discussion about the meaning of music, especially when each position insists on staying closed in their mindset, mainly opposing to each other, instead of finding a more fruitful dialogue. After reading some authors⁵ of both these views, the subtleties within each of them and its critics, we realized that the supposed opposite views indeed do not have to be mutually exclusive. So, logical compatibility between both is what we believe being the framework of this discussion, as defended by Leonard Meyer (1956). In the book “Emotion and Meaning in Music”, Meyer brings psychological insights, which is something new to this (aesthetic) discussion, and at the same time he goes into the theoretical perspective of the discussion as well. We reckon that the interdisciplinary approach can lead us much further in the debate of ideas. In this case it seems a very logical and benefiting subject interaction that is explained by Meyer's premise that musical experience is a species of

⁵ The references and further bibliography can be found in the end of this paper.



human psychology. As Tyler (1957) writes in a review to this book, “His occupational label is musician rather than psychologist, but he is familiar with a considerable portion of the psychological writing on aesthetics, and he produces generalizations that are not in conflict with known facts based on research” (abstract).

If there is a possible compatibility between opposing views, it is now the time to present them in more clear terms. To the classic dichotomy mentioned before, absolutism versus the referentialism, Meyer adds another one, the formalist versus the expressionist position. The former concerns the understanding of musical relationships and considers the meaning of music primarily intellectual. The latter is interested in the relationships that evoke feelings and emotions.

Meyer focus his analysis on the absolutist meaning of music, “which lie within the closed context of the musical work itself “ (Meyer, 1956: 1) but does not reject other kinds of meanings. So, he is saying that absolutism and referentialism are not mutually exclusive. Still, maintains that the extra-musical meaning (designative meaning) is not the most important for the music meaning but rather the “embodied meaning” (i.e. the one that concerns the non-designative meaning-emotion). He also accepts that this absolutist meaning does not preclude feelings and emotions in the listener (expressionism). Thus, it is clear that expressionism is something quite different from referentialism: the emotions do not primarily arise, at least exclusively and primarily, from extra-musical meaning.

In the past, those who advocated the absolutist expressionism view had difficulties explaining how the perceived sound patterns could be experienced as emotions. Thereby Meyer suggests that musical stimuli point to other musical events that are about to happen. Consequently, for absolutists, one musical event has meaning “because it points to and makes us expect another musical event ” (Meyer, 1956: 35). Lastly, he also bridges the gap between emotional and intellectual responses to music. These are different manifestations of a solely psychological process. Consequently formalism and expressionism complement each other. Concluding, as an alternative to the classical dichotomies, Meyer admits that the absolute expressionists and the formalists can live together while considering the same musical processes and human experiences.



We believe that absolutism makes a good point when finding the meaning of music within itself because when listening to music we are stimulated by the musical sounds and its combinations, which might be partly regarded as solely tones⁶. However, we cannot think of music without feeling an 'intrinsic' emotion. So, it seems a *practical contradiction*⁷ that absolutists may reject the emotional view. On the one hand, we identify the effort of Langer to consider the affective side of the music experience. However, we think that she is too constrained in her absolutists view while using the formal analogy of musical structures and the patterns of sentient life to support her theory of musical expressiveness. On the other hand, Kivy emphasizes the idea of music being an intellectual activity to highlight that the relevant aspect when listening to music is understand the music alone. Therefore, neither of them takes the holistic approach that Meyer proposes, which, to us, takes in consideration the different aspects of musical experience: mind and heart.

3.2. Musical meaning and impact on education

Reimer also recognizes Meyer's contribution to the music education debate, namely through his definition of greatness of music: “a quality of experience which transcends the syntactical” (Meyer 1959: 498). There are uncertainties that saturate man's existence and which great music made us conscious of. This self-awareness emerges from the interaction between syntactical relationships and the associative facet of music, which in turn cause a profound wonderment into the mystery of existence. By feeling this wonderment, one gets into a higher level of consciousness. Therefore, uncertainty does not have to mean suffering but rather a means to an end.

⁶ Although we are here considering our own experience, it is also based on the theoretical knowledge described along this chapter.

⁷ We are borrowing this term from Kivy (2001) who uses this inconsistency concept to criticize Hanslick's theory and practice: “in theory Hanslick sees emotive descriptions as similes, but in practice uses them in a way incompatible with their *being* similes” (p. 43).



According to Reimer, Meyer considers that music education aims to provide the means to get musical excellence largely through music syntactical learning. At the same time, Meyer's analysis is also taking this idea further when identifying that greatness of music is something more than just syntax. It should also consider the content of music, which includes carrying the listener into the realm of human values; to individualize the self. It is mainly this idea of self-realization that should be always considered in the music education debate because that is one of the most extraordinary music potentials. It seems to us that it is this premise that makes music education available to a larger community, namely in comparison with that identified by Langer and Kivy and that was discussed in the previous chapter.

Finally, we must say that we agree with Meyer (1956) when he states that how we experience music is shaped by our beliefs. Thus, for example, one who has been taught to have a primarily emotional musical experience will probably respond affectively while one with a more technical understanding of music will more likely process music as an object of conscious consideration.

4. Conclusion

The discussion about music and meaning is not new. Hopefully there is a balance between old subjects and new ones. Whilst there is a renewed interest among contemporary philosophers in the ancient link between music and morality that goes back to Confucius, Plato, the interest in different genres of music (e.g. experimental, electronic, popular music, rock, jazz, improvised music, and music from non-western culture) has increased. Moreover, the discussion has also been considering current events, such as the impact of recording and compositional technologies; music's social and political context, for example the state of the art of mass art music and questions regarding the appropriation of music within a culture by people outside the culture (Alperson, 2003).

We learnt that absolutism advocates that the meaning of music is in itself and referentialism considers that the meaning refers to extramusical aspects of the work. So,



this latter theoretical perspective emerged in reaction and in complete opposition to absolutism, setting up dichotomies that are not necessarily needed.

We presented the main arguments of absolutism and its modern nuances and came to the conclusion that sometimes they were too constrained and closed in the way they approached some of their ideas. For instance, some dichotomies are recurrent: intra-musical meaning versus extra-musical meaning and intellectual versus emotion. This is why we presented Meyer's work as an alternative. The new framework he offers is, to us, the starting point of this discussion.

We believe that this is a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach that is currently needed, especially because the philosophical understandings of music have an impact on educational, social-cultural and psychological aspects. For instance, what is the audience in a concert listening to; what is the pianist performing; what is the intention of a jazz improvisation; how do Westerns listen to the Eastern?

Notwithstanding all other questions that may arise from this debate, we propose the following description to finalize. We believe that it reflects a more or less common experience:

“We sit side by side in the same hall listening to the same music as a single audience. We do not know quite how to explain that, but the inexplicability is not disturbing because it is the basic condition of human social existence: strangers from different backgrounds understand and misunderstand each other, and we cannot articulate or hope to unravel this fact because it comprises the entire substance of our knowledge of social reality and is therefore not to be reduced to anything simpler (and therefore less substantial)”. (Sparshott, 1994: 85-86)



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