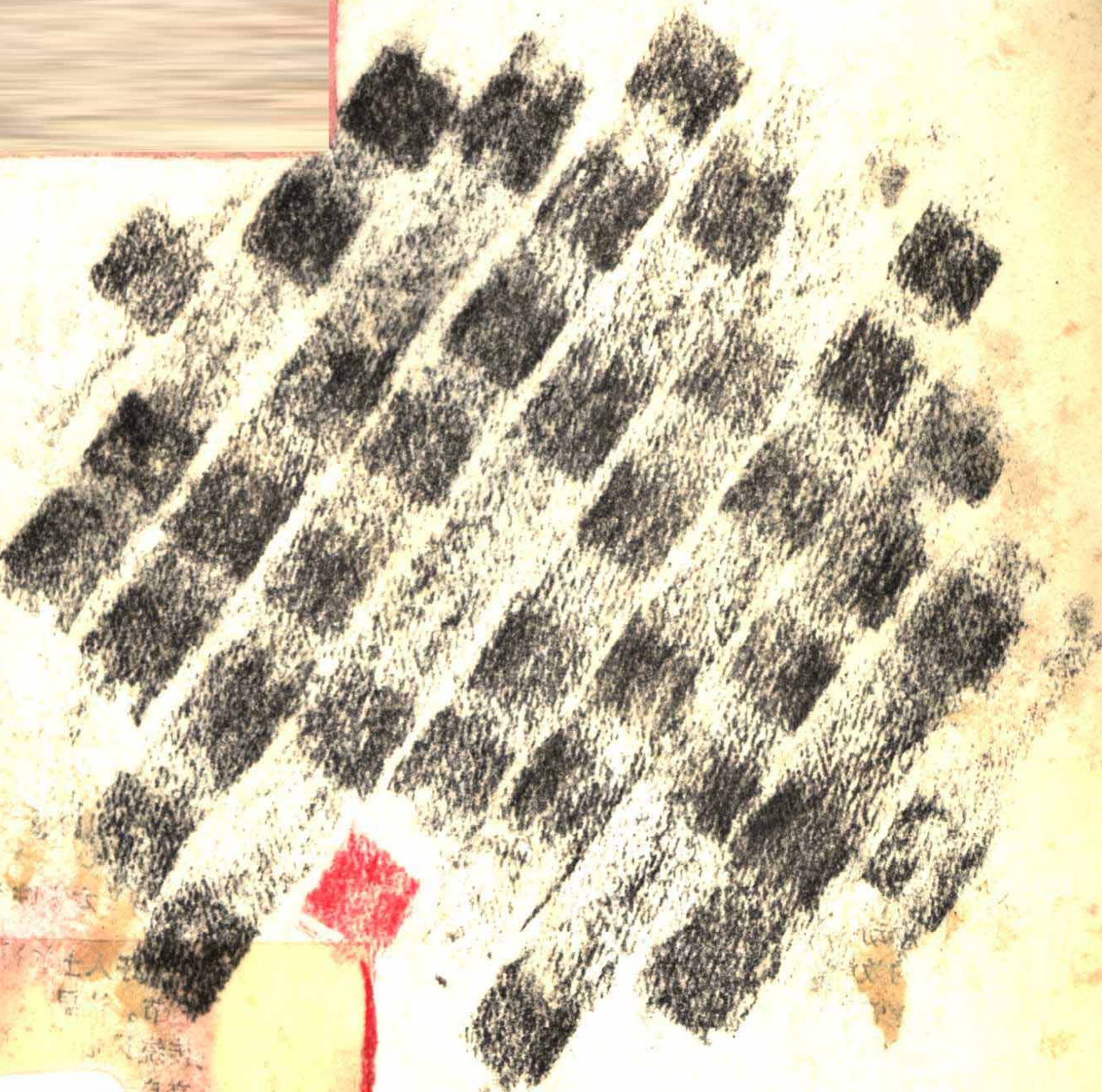


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AARON COPLAND

Music and Imagination



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MUSIC AND IMAGINATION

By Aaron Copland

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Preface

THE PAGES THAT FOLLOW comprise the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures delivered at Harvard University during the academic year 1951-1952. They appear here in substantially the same form in which they were read to the students and general public at Cambridge. The six talks were not intended to be closely reasoned arguments on a single subject, but rather a free improvisation on the general theme of the role imagination plays in the art of music. The first half of the book treats of the musical mind at work in its different capacities as listener, interpreter, or creator. The second half discusses more specifically recent manifestations of the imaginative mind in the music of Europe and the Americas.

The lectures were followed in each instance by short concerts made possible by the generosity of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in the Library of Congress and the Norton Professorship Committee of Harvard University. It is a pleasure to be able to record here my thanks for their coöperation. I am deeply appreciative also to the many fine artists who took part in these concerts. Their names will be found listed at the back of this book.

Grateful acknowledgment is due the Norton Professorship Committee for their cordial reception during my stay in Cambridge, and especially to its literary and musical representatives, Professors Archibald MacLeish and A. Tillman Merritt, friends of long standing, who were ready at all times with helpful guidance.

A word of thanks is also due to Miss Eleanor Bates of the editorial staff of the Harvard University Press for her keen and cogent criticism during the preparation of the manuscript for publication.

A. C.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
May 1952

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Introduction

IT PLEASES ME to think that Charles Eliot Norton might have approved the appointment, in 1951 for the first time, of a native-born composer to the Poetry Chair established in his memory a quarter of a century ago. The thought that it was I myself who had been entrusted with this high responsibility made me sensibly less happy. To address the student body at Harvard in the tradition of the learned scholars and poets and composers who had preceded me as incumbents of the Norton Chair was not an easy task. Fortunately, this same tradition sanctioned a free interpretation of my title as poetry professor, so that I was able to discuss the one thing I profess to know something about: the art of music.

Perhaps I had better begin by frankly admitting that when I was a younger man I used to harbor a secret feeling of commiseration for poets. To my mind poets were men who were trying to make music with nothing but words at their command. I suppose there exist at all times some few men who have that much magic in them, but words at best will always seem to a composer a poor substitute for tones — if you want to make music, that is. Later on, after I had had some slight reading acquaintance with the poetry of Hart Crane and Gerard Manley Hopkins, I came gradually to see that music and poetry were perhaps closer kin than I had at first realized. I came gradually to see that beyond the music of both arts there is an essence that joins them — an area where the meanings behind the notes and the meaning beyond the words spring from some common source.

If that is true, if poets and composers take flight from a similar impulse, then perhaps I am more of a poetry professor than I had

thought. The music of poetry must forever escape me, no doubt, but the poetry of music is always with me. It signifies that largest part of our emotive life — the part that *sings*. Purposeful singing is what concerns most composers most of their lives. Purposeful singing to me signifies that a composer has come into possession of musical materials of related orders of experience; given these, the composer's problem then is to shape them coherently so that they are intelligible in themselves, and hence, communicable to an audience. In music the process does not stop there. The musical work must be reinterpreted, or better still, re-created in the mind of the performer or group of performers. Finally the message, so to speak, reaches the ear of the listener, who must then relive in his own mind the completed revelation of the composer's thought.

This very familiar recital of the musical experience suddenly takes on, as I tell it, the aspect of a very hazardous undertaking. It is hazardous because at so many points it can break down; at no point can you seize the musical experience and hold it. Unlike that moment in a film when a still shot suddenly immobilizes a complete scene, a single musical moment immobilized makes audible only one chord, which in itself is comparatively meaningless. This never-ending flow of music *forces* us to use our imaginations, for music is in a continual state of becoming. Wystan Auden, who knows a great deal about verse and song, recently made this distinction between the two. "A verbal art like poetry," he wrote, "is reflective; it stops to think. Music is immediate; it goes on to become." This elusive quality of music, its imagined existence in time, is made the climax of Jean Paul Sartre's treatise on *L'Imaginaire*. Sartre, in a well-known passage on Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, very nearly succeeds in convincing us that the Seventh isn't really there at all. It's not on the page, for no music can be said to exist on the silent page, and it's not in any one performance, for they are all different and not one can be said to be *the* definitive version. The Seventh, Sartre says, can only be said to live, if it does live, in the unreal

world of our imagination. Whatever one may think of Sartre's theory, it dramatizes one of the basic facts in music — a fact to which we shall return more than once in these pages.

What I have set down here I have learned from my own experience in the writing of music and in considering the music of other composers. These reflections, I should add, are not meant to be a contribution to knowledge: the typical artist cannot be said to function on the level of knowledge. (I use the word in its usual meaning of learning and scholarship.) I can only hope to speak to you on the plane of intuitional perception — the plane of immediate or sensitive knowledge — perceptual knowledge, if you like. This is an important distinction — at least for me it is — because it makes clear that those of us who are doers rather than knowers expect others to deduce knowledge from the testimony we bear. This is not to say, as sometimes is said, that a composer describing a musical state of affairs is doing nothing more than describing his own musical tastes. A composer's apperceptions need not necessarily be so circumscribed as that. A well-known conductor once confided to me that he invariably learned something from watching a composer conduct his own composition, despite possible technical shortcomings in conducting, for something essential about the nature of the piece was likely to be revealed. I should like to think that an analogous situation obtains when a composer articulates as best he can the ideas and conceptions that underlie his writing or his listening to music. If my conductor friend was right, the composer ought to bring an awareness and insight to the understanding of music that critics, musicologists, and music historians might put to good use, thereby enriching the whole field of musical investigations.

Thus it is primarily as a composer — a musically observant composer, posing temporarily in the guise of a professor of poetry — that I have chosen to consider the general topic of the relation of the imaginative mind to different aspects of the art of music.

Part One

***MUSIC AND THE
IMAGINATIVE MIND***

CHAPTER ONE

The Gifted Listener

THE MORE I LIVE the life of music the more I am convinced that it is the freely imaginative mind that is at the core of all vital music making and music listening. When Coleridge put down his famous phrase, "the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of the imagination," he was referring, of course, to the musical delights of poetry. But it seems to me even more true when applied to the musical delights of music. An imaginative mind is essential to the creation of art in any medium, but it is even more essential in music precisely because music provides the broadest possible vista for the imagination since it is the freest, the most abstract, the least fettered of all the arts: no story content, no pictorial representation, no regularity of meter, no strict limitation of frame need hamper the intuitive functioning of the imaginative mind. In saying this I am not forgetting that music has its disciplines: its strict forms and regular rhythms, and even in some cases its programmatic content. Music as mathematics, music as architecture or as image, music in any static, seizable form has always held fascination for the lay mind. But as a musician, what fascinates me is the thought that by its very nature music invites imaginative treatment, and that the facts of music, so called, are only meaningful insofar as the imagination is given free play. It is for this reason that I wish to consider especially those facets of music that are open to the creative influences of the imagination.

Imagination in the listener — in the gifted listener — is what concerns us here. It is so often assumed that music's principal stumbling block is the backward listener that it might be instructive to contemplate for a change the qualities of the sensitive listener.

Listening is a talent, and like any other talent or gift, we possess it in varying degrees. I have found among music-lovers a marked tendency to underestimate and mistrust this talent, rather than to overestimate it. The reason for these feelings of inferiority are difficult to determine. Since there is no reliable way of measuring the gift for listening, there is no reliable way of reassuring those who misjudge themselves. I should say that there are two principal requisites for talented listening: first, the ability to open oneself up to musical experience; and secondly, the ability to evaluate critically that experience. Neither of these is possible without a certain native gift. Listening implies an inborn talent of some degree, which, again like any other talent, can be trained and developed. This talent has a certain "purity" about it. We exercise it, so to speak, for ourselves alone; there is nothing to be gained from it in a material sense. Listening is its own reward; there are no prizes to be won, no contests of creative listening. But I hold that person fortunate who has the gift, for there are few pleasures in art greater than the secure sense that one can recognize beauty when one comes upon it.

When I speak of the gifted listener I am thinking of the nonmusician primarily, of the listener who intends to retain his amateur status. It is the thought of just such a listener that excites the composer in me. I know, or I think I know, how the professional musician will react to music. But with the amateur it is different; one never can be sure how he will react. Nothing really tells him what he should be hearing, no treatise or chart or guide can ever sufficiently pull together the various strands of a complex piece of music — only the intrushing floodlight of one's own imagination can do that. Recognizing the beautiful in an abstract art like music partakes

somewhat of a minor miracle; each time it happens I remain slightly incredulous.

The situation of the professional musician as listener, especially of the composer, is rather different. He is an initiate. Like the minister before the altar his contact with the Source gives him an inner understanding of music's mysteries, and a greater familiarity in their presence. He possesses a dual awareness: on the one hand of the inscrutable mystery that gives certain common tones meaning; on the other of the human travail that enters into every creation. It is an awareness that no layman can hope to share. There is a nicety of balance in the musician's awareness that escapes the musical amateur. The amateur may be either too reverent or too carried away; too much in love with the separate section or too limited in his enthusiasm for a single school or composer. Mere professionalism, however, is not at all a guarantee of intelligent listening. Executant ability, even of the highest order, is no guarantee of instinct in judgment. The sensitive amateur, just because he lacks the prejudices and preconceptions of the professional musician, is sometimes a surer guide to the true quality of a piece of music. The ideal listener, it seems to me, would combine the preparation of the trained professional with the innocence of the intuitive amateur.

All musicians, creators and performers alike, think of the gifted listener as a key figure in the musical universe. I should like, if I can, to track down the source of this gift, and to consider the type of musical experience which is most characteristically his.

The ideal listener, above all else, possesses the ability to lend himself to the power of music. The power of music to move us is something quite special as an artistic phenomenon. My intention is not to delve into its basis in physics — my scientific equipment is much too rudimentary — but rather to concentrate on its emotional overtones. Contrary to what you might expect, I do not hold that music has the power to move us beyond any of the other arts. To me the

theater has this power in a more naked form, a power that is almost too great. The sense of being overwhelmed by the events that occur on a stage sometimes brings with it a kind of resentment at the ease with which the dramatist plays upon my emotions. I feel like a keyboard on which he can improvise any tune he pleases. There is no resisting, my emotions have the upper hand, but my mind keeps protesting: by what right does the playwright do this to me? Not infrequently I have been moved to tears in the theater; never at music. Why never at music? Because there is something about music that keeps its distance even at the moment that it engulfs us. It is at the same time outside and away from us and inside and part of us. In one sense it dwarfs us, and in another we master it. We are led on and on, and yet in some strange way we never lose control. It is the very nature of music to give us the distillation of sentiments, the essence of experience transfused and heightened and expressed in such fashion that we may contemplate it at the same instant that we are swayed by it. When the gifted listener lends himself to the power of music, he gets both the "event" and the idealization of the "event"; he is inside the "event," so to speak, even though the music keeps what Edward Bullough rightly terms its "psychical distance."

What another layman, Paul Claudel, wrote about the listener seems to me to have been well observed. "We absorb him into the concert," Claudel says. "He is no longer anything but expectation and attention . . ." I like that, because expectancy denotes the ability to lend oneself, to lend oneself eagerly to the thing heard, while attention bespeaks an interest in the thing said, a preoccupation with an understanding of what is being heard. I've watched the absorbed listener in the concert hall numerous times, half absorbed myself in trying to fathom the exact nature of his response. This is an especially fascinating pastime when the listener happens to be listening to one's own music. At such times I am concerned not so much with

whatever pleasure the music may be giving, but rather with the question whether I am being understood.

Parenthetically, I should like to call attention to a curious bit of artist psychology: the thought that my music might, or might not give pleasure to a considerable number of music-lovers has never particularly stirred me. At times I have been vigorously hissed, at other times as vigorously applauded; in both circumstances I remain comparatively unmoved. Why should that be? Probably because I feel in some way detached from the end result. The writing of it gives me pleasure, especially when it seems to come off; but once out of my hands the work takes on a life of its own. In a similar way I can imagine a father who takes no personal credit for the beauty of a much admired daughter. This must mean that the artist (or father) considers himself an unwitting instrument whose satisfaction is not to produce beauty, but simply to produce.

But to return to my absorbed listener. The interesting question, then, is not whether he is deriving pleasure, but rather, whether he is understanding the import of the music. And if he has understood, then I must ask: *what* has he understood?

As you see, I am warily approaching one of the thorniest problems in aesthetics, namely, the meaning of music. The semanticist who investigates the meaning of words, or even the meaning of meaning, has an easy time of it by comparison with the hardy soul who ventures forth in quest of music's meaning. A composer might easily side-step the issue; aesthetics is not his province. His gift is one of expression, not of theoretic speculation. Still the problem persists, and the musical practitioner ought to have something to say that would be of interest to the mind that philosophizes about art.

I have seldom read a statement about the meaning of music, if seriously expressed, that did not seem to me to have some basis in truth. From this I conclude that music is many-sided and can be approached from many different angles. Basically, however, two

opposing theories have been advanced by the aestheticians as to music's significance. One is that the meaning of music, if there is any meaning, must be sought in the music itself, for music has no extramusical connotation; and the other is that music is a language without a dictionary whose symbols are interpreted by the listener according to some unwritten esperanto of the emotions. The more I consider these two theories the more it seems to me that they are bound together more closely than is generally supposed, and for this reason: music as a symbolic language of psychological and expressive value can only be made evident through "music itself," while music which is said to mean only itself sets up patterns of sound which inevitably suggest some kind of connotation in the mind of the listener, even if only to connote the joy of music making for its own sake. Whichever it may be, pure or impure, an object or a language, I cannot get it out of my head that all composers derive their impulse from a similar drive. I cannot be persuaded that Bach, when he penned the *Orgelbüchlein*, thought he was creating an object of "just notes," or that Tchaikovsky in composing *Swan Lake* was wallowing in nothing but uncontrolled emotion. Notes can be manipulated as if they were objects, certainly — they can be made to do exercises, like a dancer. But it is only when these exerciselike patterns of sound take on meaning that they become music. There is historical justification for the weighted emphasis sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other, of this controversy. During periods when music became too cool and detached, too scholastically conventionalized, composers were enjoined to remember its origin as a language of the emotions, and when, during the last century, it became overly symptomatic of the inner *Sturm und Drang* of personalized emotion, composers were cautioned not to forget that music is a pure art of a self-contained beauty. This perennial dichotomy was neatly summarized by Eduard Hanslick, standard bearer for the "pure music" defenders of the nineteenth century, when he wrote that "an inward singing, and not an inward feeling, prompts