THE PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

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To Michael

Preface

It is more or less impossible, once one has finished something like this, to work out quite how much one owes, for what, and to whom. But I am wholly certain that the following people have all, in one way or another, contributed significantly to whatever virtues the present book has: Maria Alvarez, Nick Cook, Peter Lamarque, Jerry Levinson, Denis McManus, Alex Neill, David Owen, Tony Palmer and David Pugmire; I am especially grateful to Alex Neill and David Owen, both of whom gave me constant and invaluable help throughout. Any imperfections that remain are, of course, attributable to bad advice from the same people. I must also acknowledge the Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding the period of research leave during which the book was completed, and the proprietors and staff of the Avenue Bar in Padwell Road for (again) providing the environment in which the vast majority of the work was actually done. At Edinburgh University Press I would like to thank Jane Feore, who commissioned the book, and Jackie Jones, Carol Macdonald, Mareike Weber and Nicola Wood for their patience and professionalism in seeing the project through. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Ann, for recreating the half-remembered – or perhaps just imagined – painting by Feininger that appears on the front cover, as well as for letting me run off with her original for my office wall.

Some of the material in this book has previously been published elsewhere: versions of parts of Chapter 3 in M. Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and the *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* (2002); a short version of Chapter 4 in *The Journal of Philosophy* (2003); and an ancestral version of some pages of Chapter 5 in the now defunct first edition of A. Neill and A. Ridley (eds), *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates* (McGraw-Hill, 1995). My thanks

to those concerned for permission to make use of the relevant material here.

Aaron Ridley
Southampton, 2003

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or at Yankee Stadium. Conceptions of music change: we have had Pythagorean metaphysics, the harmony of the spheres, devotional music, music as ornament, music as high art, *volkisch* music, protest music, commodity music. The point of music, what has counted as music and how it has been heard and thought about – all these have changed; which means that if the music and musical experiences we have now are to be understood, they will have to be understood, at least in part, historically – as the complex products of accretion, assimilation, atrophy and decay. Its historicity dovetails with another of music's life-like traits: its embeddedness. In common with everything else, music occupies a conceptual space, not in a vacuum, but at the interstices of an indefinitely large and shifting set of other concerns, each of which it conditions and is conditioned by. Thus, through dance, music is tied reciprocally to sex and sociality; through hymns and chants to the health of the soul; through nursery rhymes to play; through marches to the army; through anthems to solidarity; through proportion to mathematics; through the *chantier* to work; through dirges to death; and so on. It is this embeddedness that gives music much of its richness, as well as accounting, through the fluctuating composition of its conceptual environment, for all of its history. I am convinced that any attempt to understand music which tries to suppress this about it – the fact that it is embedded and historical – will be thin and unsatisfactory at best, and almost certainly worse than that. Hence my insistence, with apologies duly offered, that music is part of life.

I

No one, I think, would disagree with any of what I've just said. Indeed, it was pretty well continuously platitudinous. But one's practice can be out of kilter, to various degrees and in various ways, with what one would, at some level anyway, concede to be obviously true. And I think that the way that much recent philosophy of music has been done is out of kilter with precisely the platitudes that I have mentioned. I know from my own case that this fact can be quite hard to spot. But I used to think, at clear variance with the banalities set out above, although not obviously at variance with prevailing philosophical practice, that the best way to get at the truth about music must, in effect, be to separate it off as much as possible from everything else and to investigate it in what might be called its 'pure' state. Music needed to be disembedded, I thought, and approached *for itself*; it needed to be taken in isolation from what, a moment ago, I called its 'conceptual environment'. And this

determination – to achieve for music a state of maximal purity – extended even into the issue of what *sort* of music I should investigate. The following remarks from Eduard Hanslick's seminal book of 1854, *On the Musically Beautiful*, struck me as self-evident: 'If some general definition of music be sought,' said Hanslick, 'something by which to characterise its essence and its nature, to establish its boundaries and purpose, we are entitled to confine ouselves to instrumental music. Of what *instrumental music* cannot do, it ought never be said that *music* can do it, because only instrumental music is music purely and absolutely.'[1] So I determined not only to divide music off from the rest of the world, but to divide it off, too, from singing and dancing, and from marching and from anything else that could not be described as 'music purely and absolutely'. In this way, I confidently expected, music – freed from every contaminating influence – would yield up its secrets. The fact that it never did, particularly, I was willing to attribute to my own incompetence. More disturbing was the fact that I didn't find very believable some of the things that other people were coming up with, either. And once I'd noticed and been bothered by this, the whole approach started to seem problematic. There is something very odd, after all, about the way in which so much philosophy of music has so often been done. To try to isolate music entirely, to try to leech or prise out of it its context-laden character, and indeed the very nature of one's own context-laden engagement with it, is rather like trying to pretend that music had come from Mars – that it had suddenly appeared on one's desk from nowhere, a perfectly formed but wholly mysterious phenomenon of which one knew precisely nothing. Which, as I say, is odd, given how far from the truth that picture is.

That philosophers of music have carried on with this exact assumption in mind is, of course, an overstatement. But I shall persist with the overstatement for the moment. It captures something that has been true of much recent philosophical practice, and by overstating it I hope to be able to make clear, albeit in exaggerated form, what the motivations for it might be and what the effects of it threaten to be, and in fact often have been.

Why, then, has the picture I've mentioned been found even slightly seductive? I think I can answer this, schematically at least. Reflection on my own prior (if thoughtless) attachment to it suggests that the picture owes its appeal to two factors, one methodological, the other theoretical. They're complementary, but I'll take them in turn. The methodological attraction derives from a particular way of taking a particular model of intellectual enquiry, and hence from a particular conception of objectivity.

The model itself is broadly scientific. Suppose you want to find out about the effects of pressure on the boiling point of water. You make sure your water's as pure as it can be – you distil it. You make sure your temperature and pressure gauges are operating to suitable standards. You conduct your experiments using a variety of different sorts of container. You make every effort to collect and to interpret your results without prejudice. In short, you do whatever you can to isolate the phenomenon you're interested in from external interference – from impurities in the water, from eccentric thermometers, from expanding vessels, from bias. Only thus can you hope your findings to be *about* the effects of pressure on the boiling point of water (and not, say, about dodgy thermometers or about your own private expectations). Accept this for a moment as a fair, if skimpy, sketch of one aspect of scientific method. The conception of the object of enquiry it presupposes is evident: the object is conceived of as isolable, as ideally (if never in practice) instantiating a closed system, as insulated entirely from extraneous influence. In the relevant sense, then, the object is conceived of as Martian; and scientific objectivity consists in finding out things about objects from Mars. A scientifically objective finding is thus one that is maximally independent of the vagaries of time and place, of equipment and methods and, above all, of what one might term the human element – prejudices, feelings, wants, needs. And this is just as it should be. My sketch of scientific method has been a caricature, but not a hostile one; for it is precisely these ways of thinking that have underwritten the phenomenal success of science in the modern age. But the conception of objects and of objectivity it presupposes has snares in it nonetheless.

There is an entirely harmless way in which the model I've described can be applied to non-scientific forms of intellectual enquiry. If construed simply as an injunction to exclude the irrelevant, to ensure that one's attention really is focused on the object that interests one, then the model is not merely harmless but indispensable to any form of enquiry worth the name. But, construed thus, the issue of what is and what is not irrelevant in any particular case is left open. The vagaries of time and place may be irrelevant to the physicist investigating liquids, for instance, but they certainly won't be to the cultural historian with an interest in, say, nationalism. The cultural historian will exclude certain sorts of factor as irrelevant, the physicist will exclude others. The snares only begin to tighten when the model itself is construed more tightly – specifically, when it is taken as an injunction to rule out not merely the irrelevant, whatever in a particular case that might happen to be, but to rule out precisely the factors that natural science rules out. When the

model is construed in this way, the result is scientism – the belief that the standards appropriate to the natural sciences are equally appropriate to every other type of enquiry.[2] And this belief is just false. Science, as I've mentioned, standardly and properly attempts to exclude the human element, things like feelings, wants and needs. But if what I want to find out is how to make a good tzatziki, the subtle inter-relations between my cucumber, garlic, olive oil and yoghurt and questions of human preference and response are central. I could, to be sure, rule them out: in which case I might hope to discover something about the chemistry of Greek food. But if I do do this, I certainly won't find out what I wanted to know about tzatziki – which is why cookery isn't a branch of science.

Or take an example discussed by Roger Scruton. Sex, he notes, became discussable only once an overtly science-like approach to it was adopted, with the result that:

> modern discussions of [sex] have been conducted in a 'scientized' idiom which, by its very nature, removes sex from the sphere of interpersonal relations ... Freud's shocking revelations, introduced as neutral, 'scientific' truths about the human condition, were phrased in the terms which are now more or less standard. According to Freud, the aim of sexual desire is 'union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of sexual instinct – a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger.' This scientistic image of sexual desire ... seems to me ... entirely false, and could become true only by so affecting our sexual emotions, as to change them into emotions of another kind.[3]

By adopting such language, sex is presented as 'a relation between aliens' and in 'redescribing the human world in this way, we also change it'. The world we concoct instead has no place in it for such commonplace observations as that:

> sexual behaviour has to do with courtship, desire, love, jealousy, marriage, grief, joy and intrigue. Such excitement as occurs is excitement of the whole person. As for the sexual organs, they can be as 'excited' (if that is the word) by a bus journey as by the object of desire ... [Thus scientistic] language is opaque to *what is wanted* in sexual desire; it reduces the other person to an instrument of pleasure, a means of obtaining something that could have been provided equally by another person, by an animal, by a rubber doll or a piece of Kleenex.[4]

What Scruton says here is surely precisely right. One need do no more than reflect for a moment on the dreadful scientised language of the Kinsey report, for instance, to realise that nothing said in it could possibly have any bearing on the topic alleged to be at issue.

The problem in the sexual case is the same as in the cookery case. By importing a narrowly scientistic model of enquiry into an area where it has no place, the object of enquiry is falsified and the 'objectivity' thereby secured is entirely spurious. A good meal is not a piece of complex chemistry – indeed it is not *that* sort of object at all. It is, rather, a balance of tastes and textures, properly pitched to the occasion and pleasing to the eye; it is a product of skill and care offered by host to guest – entertainment as much as nutrition, an expression of culture as much as of hunger. This is the sort of complex object that any real enquiry into cookery would have to focus on; and its results would be objective precisely to the extent that it did not disregard the kinds of factor that would be irrelevant to the natural sciences. And the same with sex. The object descried by scientism would be recognisable as human sex only to a sociopath and its findings thought 'objective' only by someone who didn't know what that word meant.

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.

Thus the scientistic misunderstanding of the scientific model of enquiry confuses objectivity with scientific objectivity, and supposes the latter to exhaust the former. In doing so, it fosters a false conception of the sorts of object that can be investigated objectively. Such objects, scientism suggests, are stripped to their bare essentials: they are divested of every contingency, plucked free of history and culture, disentangled from any merely human concern and polished up to a state of immaculate purity. But of course these sorts of objects are the proper objects of science, not of intellectual enquiry as such. Polish up sex or cookery in this way and you've nothing recognisable left. They are not merely 'entangled' in history, culture and the rest of it, they are partly made up

of those things and their 'bare essentials' include them. Cookery without culture is no more cookery than water without hydrogen is water. The urge, then, to construe any proper object of enquiry as a Martian object of immaculate 'purity' is a more or less inevitable corollary of bad methodology, of taking a method proper to one sort of enquiry for the essence of good method everywhere. The mistake here is obvious, even banal. But it is very easy to make all the same, particularly given the deservedly high regard in which science is held, and it would be a brave person who, hand on heart, could swear that philosophers, for instance, have been immune to its charms. Certainly I don't think that philosophers of music have been immune.

So part of the explanation of why the music-from-Mars picture should have been found even slightly tempting lies, I'm sure, in doubtful methodology: the (perhaps half- or un-conscious) misapplication of scientific criteria of relevance and a correspondingly partial conception of objectivity together issue in a way of thinking about objects which is liable to misrepresent (at least some of) them systematically. Of course, it *may* be true that music is best investigated when thoroughly disembedded, polished up and isolated. But if so, that is an interesting fact about music; it is not a precondition of objective musical enquiry as such. So one would need other reasons than this to think of music as Martian.

II

This is where the second, theoretical, part of the explanation comes in. A certain picture of music has, as Wittgenstein might have put it, held us captive – or at least it has insofar as we have been analytic aestheticians. The picture or theory of music in question lies behind Walter Pater's famous remark that all art aspires to the condition of music.[5] What Pater meant by this was that the other arts were becoming more and more self-contained. Poetry was becoming more concerned with its own internal qualities than with saying things about the world (e.g. Baudelaire), the novel more bound up with its own language and form than with psychology (e.g. Flaubert), painting more obsessed with its own nature as painted surface than with the things actually depicted there (e.g. Cézanne). It doesn't matter for present purposes whether Pater was right about this (although his view is much what one might expect from someone looking in the second half of the nineteenth century towards France). What matters is the conception of music he presupposes: that music is the self-contained art *par excellence*. Music, one is given to understand, exhibits naturally the qualities to which the other arts aspire.

It doesn't trouble with the world outside itself; it doesn't depict or say things or bother itself with psychology; its proper subject-matter is, simply, itself – and its glories are the glories of form, design and structure, unsullied by any content not wholly its own. Thus for Pater, music is *sui generis*, self-sufficient – in a word, autonomous.

And not only for Pater. The view that music is essentially autonomous has been popular for more than a hundred and fifty years. But it wasn't always so. Lydia Goehr's excellent book, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, shows in detail how it came to enjoy such prominence. Goehr is interested in the emergence (in about 1800) and the effects of what she calls the 'work-concept'. In thinking of pieces of music as 'works', she suggests, we have become accustomed to suppose that 'that the tonal, rhythmic, and instrumental properties of works are constitutive of structurally integrated wholes that are symbolically represented by composers in scores', such 'works' continuing to exist indefinitely after their composition.[6] The work-concept, then, enshrines a way of thinking about pieces of music which conceives of them as stable objects whose essential characteristics are those capable of symbolic representation in musical scores. Such a conception is clearly consonant with the conception of pieces of music as autonomous. If a work is, essentially, the structure of sound notated in a score, then its point or meaning must, essentially, be a function of the properties of the structure notated there: the work must, that is, be autonomous. And, as Goehr shows, these two conceptions did indeed emerge together. Before the late eighteenth century, music had not been grouped with the fine arts at all. It had, rather, been seen as a comparatively lowly activity whose service to political, religious or social ends was performed chiefly with the help of words (i.e. not through its own resources). Thus much of music's 'meaning had come from 'outside' of itself'.[7] But then, for complex reasons, the fine arts themselves began to be reconceived. Rather than seeing the significance of the fine arts as lying in their 'service to particularized goals of a moral or religious sort', Romantic theorists argued that it lay in the ability of the fine arts 'to probe and reveal the higher world of universal, eternal truth. This ability originates, according to Gustav Schilling, in "man's attempt to transcend the sphere of cognition".' Under this conception, music not merely became 'more closely ... allied to the other fine arts', it came to be seen as exemplary of them: for 'instrumental music, without particularized content', that is, without words, seemed:

> the most plausible candidate for being the 'universal language of art'. Such music provides a direct path to the experience of a kind

> of truth that transcends particular natural contingencies and transitory human feelings. Schilling made the point again: 'No aesthetic material is better suited to the expression of the ineffable than is sound.'

Thus the Romantic argument involved a '*transcendent* move from the worldly and particular to the spiritual and universal' and a '*formalist* move which brought meaning from music's outside to its inside.'[8]

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.'[9] 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.

A host of points emerge from Goehr's account, but I'll highlight only two. The first is that there is nothing 'natural' or self-evident about the claim that music is autonomous: there had been music for centuries before anyone got round to having the idea, and there is no reason at all to suppose that every piece of responsible thinking about music must be conducted in its terms. The other is that the concept of musical autonomy became voguish at precisely the point and for many of the reasons that art as a whole was being rethought (i.e. that the fine arts were being romanticised); and this suggests that its prominence may not be due entirely to any insights it embodies about music. What the concept did make possible, however, was the rise of a new, positivist style of musical analysis, one that could 'claim to be 'enlightened' and therefore uninfluenced by 'external' – sociological, political, and historical – considerations'.[10] Once it had been decided that pieces of music were essentially autonomous structures of sound, after all, it seemed evident