

Newnham College Essay Competition

Music - Question 2

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The following essay discusses the statement written in *The Beautiful in Music* (1854): “A musical idea... is not only an object of intrinsic beauty but also an end in itself, and not a means of representing feelings and thoughts. The essence of music is sound and motion”⁴ - Eduard Hanslick. Due to the many approaches one may take when dissecting this quote, the discussion should first begin by an attempt to define the crux of Hanslick’s notion in further detail. In essence, Hanslick’s argument seems to value the idea of pure analysis against and above the notion of music being discussed in terms of it representing feelings and thoughts. However, he does emphasise that, although written analysis is a better alternative, it is far from an adequate vehicle with which to describe music. He wrote that “It is a language we speak and understand, but which we are unable to translate.” In this, he was highlighting the inadequacies of verbal and written language as only being capable of “dry, technical terms, or in the language of poetic fiction.” The latter he found particularly unacceptable. His writings are considered the foundations of modern musical criticism and inspired many new questions to be considered regarding musical autonomy. He wanted musicologists to fully focus on the music within the context of itself, rather than attempting to describe it, as for him these descriptions were not comparable or applicable to the ephemeral and intangible phenomena of music.

A definition of useful terms is perhaps necessary as a recognition of the opposing concepts of subjectivity and objectivity when appreciating music in reaction to Hanslick’s quote. I am using the term ‘*extramusical*’ to summate anything that could be considered “Extrinsic to a piece of music”¹; this could include thoughts or feelings that are prompted when listening to a piece, or the ability of music to represent feelings or narratives. For example, we hear the oscillating semitones played by the cellos, double basses, bassoons and contrabassoon in the opening of John Williams’ film score for *Jaws* as a warning of danger, unease and tension. Furthermore, this music also has a cultural imprint, as it is now constantly associated with shark attacks. In opposition to this, I would like to use the term ‘*intramusical*’ in order to summate the inner mechanics of music; what one can ascertain from a pure analysis. For example, in the right-hand melody of bar 1 of Prelude in D♭ by Chopin, there is a descending three-note motif that outlines the tonic triad. This type of analysis is simply a technical description of what exists within the musical fabric of a piece, with no reference to its effect.

To understand Hanslick’s viewpoint, it is crucial to recognise the context in which he was working. Hanslick wrote this piece in 1854: in reaction to the height of

the programmatic composition era, in which composers wrote to represent extramusical meaning and narrative. Berlioz, for example, was writing symphonies with a wholly programmatic approach. His *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830) is a famed example of a programmatic piece. Movement IV so clearly portrays the March to the Scaffold, with the chop of the head captured in the first beat of bar 169, followed by pizzicato strings representing a head bouncing down the steps. This is the very premise to which Hanslick was so vociferously reacting. It is within this part of his essay that he so clearly opposes the extramusical; calling on musicologists to simply view music as autonomous “sound and motion”. He writes: “the origin of the first germ cannot be explained, but must be simply accepted as fact.” He also argues that viewing music through human emotion is not only the wrong way to compose, but is a disgrace to the art form.

Another important point that runs throughout Hanslick’s text is his references to both the faults of the listener as they try to append extramusical concepts to a piece, and the composer for having extramusical intentions behind their creative drive - this is also an issue that I aim to address within my writing. Naturally, I recognise the long debate surrounding the complexity of the respective roles of, and relationships between, the composer and listener, however, for the sake of my word count, I will be referring to them in isolation. Having considered Hanslick’s writing, I find myself considering two questions, which will be the main focus of my essay henceforth: firstly, is it even possible for a listener to perceive art forms in isolation of any extramusical meaning? Secondly, is it valid to discredit the creative intentions behind a musical work? Both of these questions concern the idea of subjectivity in music and therefore I will discuss them from within my own subjective context of the current musical landscape rather than the mid-Romantic era from which the quote was born.

Hanslick refers to the “primordial law of harmonic progression”⁴ as the reason that intramusical organisation is capable of providing the listener with a “feeling of satisfaction.”⁴ As with our own written language, pitch organised in the conventions of the Western Classical Tradition has a syntax and hierarchy that inherently suggests meaning, such as the opinion that a perfect cadence has a feeling of ending. However, what happens to Hanslick’s argument in the context of the rise of atonality in the 20th century? Schoenberg destroyed the traditional harmonic hierarchy and designed a new system based on timbre and chromatic equality. His system was to order all 12 notes and split them randomly into primary and secondary hexachords. Just because the harmonic laws Hanslick so valued are absent, does not mean that the listener is left unaffected by the music. Schoenberg’s *Peripetie* (1909) for example, had drastic contrasts in texture, from the opening brass hexachords to the solo lyrical clarinet *Hauptstimme*. This very accurately echoes the title’s translation, “a sudden change of fortune” and surely was scored as such to

provoke an emotional reaction from the listener. Of course, you can discuss this piece from the side of the intramusical, but when its main focus was Klangfarbenmelodie and therefore timbre, surely Schoenberg was leading the listener to acknowledge the power of sound itself, and its ability to affect the listener emotionally due to it being at the fore of the composition's focus: personally, this is a sound example of the intramusical and extramusical working symbiotically, in one of their most influential settings. In summary, each aspect of music - the timbre, pitch, rhythm, dynamics etc. - affects the listener in a specific way. Furthermore, what happens to Hanslick's argument in the context of music that is now being written with the absence of defined pitches? Electroacoustic composition, which is still sound and motion as he defines it, is a fascinating case in point. Synergy (2012) by Mantas Savickis is made of electronically fabricated timbres with no defined pitches. In fact, this genre could be considered a continuation of Klangfarbenmelodie, but the question arises to me that Hanslick may have argued its status as music. Once we are totally devoid of pitch, as listeners we are often left to describe it using only subjective extramusical language and as can be seen in current electroacoustic musicology, through the discussion of its production, processes, diffusion and aesthetic intent. Again, surely these composers choose this medium for a reason – because they value the ability to paint with sound, using the broad brush strokes of timbre. As the music lacks formal syntax in a Classical sense, it is a challenge to analyse intramusically at all. With Hanslick's approach, this surely means this type of music cannot be appreciated on any level, yet it is flourishing in today's climate.

Another interesting case with which to discuss Hanslick's ideas is in music and media. The entire genre of music for screen exists as it recognises music's ability to enhance the extramusical. Film music is subservient to visual narrative, and composers purposely manipulate the intramusical facets to exploit their extramusical potential. We see this in the common technique of omitting the 3rd in triads. This takes advantage of our cultural conditioning in response to the syntax of music, as the absence of a defining minor or major interval leaves the listener feeling uneasy. It could be argued that if Hanslick's ideas were indeed true, a whole genre of music would not exist. Within the context of media, music is only a single element surrounded by a host of other components such as scenery or lighting. Hanslick so firmly tells us that when we appreciate music we should do it in isolation, but if music is written with such an approach, is it possible for us to divorce the extramusical from its intramusical counterpart when screen and score go hand in hand? Furthermore, as humans we cannot divorce one sense from another; we must listen in tandem with seeing, sensing and being. Music and media (whether film, opera, installation work) as a genre surely utilises the way in which we perceive music in the most natural, true sense of all.

Whilst Hanslick wanted pure objectivity in his approach to music, my argument is centred around the point that the human condition (and all the art forms for which it is responsible) is formed and rooted within our own subjectivity. In many ways, I would align myself more with the viewpoints of writers such as the pioneering semiologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez. He, like Hanslick, does recognise the “lamentations of analytical discourse in comparison to the ‘real’ music that we all love,”⁵ but goes on to tell us that the real analysis is in dissecting the musical “creation, interpretation and perception.” Indeed, why would music be in creation if it wasn’t to be listened to, interpreted and perceived; all of these acts must be done in our inherently subjective human state. As people, we are all subjected to different education, culture and experience, thus creating a world in which the extramusical side of music can be very different for all. The 18th-century German philosopher Kant raised the question of “Ding an sich,” meaning “thing-in-itself,” which I think is very much appropriate in this discussion. The capability of the human condition to view art without our subconscious prejudices is, in my opinion, unattainable, therefore I feel that Hanslick is asking the impossible of us. It could be argued that the appreciation of music purely through the analysis of the intramusical is not something that the human condition is capable of. It could also be considered an elitist stance, as the everyday listener with no musical training can still appreciate music’s beauty without understanding the mechanics.

In closing, there are countless case studies to backup all approaches to this topic, however from my research I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible as humans to appreciate any art without the subjectivity of our human condition interfering - in this case with the extramusical interpretation. Objectivity versus subjectivity can be debated endlessly; however, if these two approaches can only coexist, we should view them as very much connected, rather than totally separate entities, as Hanslick did. The American philosopher Goodman (1906-1998) coined the term “the innocent eye,” which I find most applicable to bring this discussion to a close, the idea being that the innocent eye is when one approaches art with a completely pure mind, untampered with by our past experiences and cultural upbringing. Goodman argued that this was a “myth,” and that all art is subjective due to our past experiences; this is the argument that I support: that extra and intra musicality must exist symbiotically as it is bound by the condition of our own humanity.

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