The Value of Music

Why should we value music? What is important about it, and what can we hope to get from it? These questions are related but not identical to familiar questions about the nature of music. In this paper I hope to show that an examination of the value of music calls into play certain familiar philosophical issues, but in a context which gives them renewed interest and significance.

In asking about the value of music I shall be concerned both with absolute music and with music which accompanies words, but it is absolute music with which I want to begin, and for the sake of brevity I shall refer to it simply as music.

Let us start with a simple thought. It seems beyond doubt that absolute music can and does give pleasure and can be valued for this reason. Might this not be the sole explanation for its value? Pleasure is a value, and music is pleasurable; what more need we say? But there are difficulties here. If it is beyond doubt that music gives pleasure, it is no less beyond doubt that most musicians and music lovers claim to find much more in music than simple pleasure. For instance, in his well-known book The Language of Music Deryck Cooke says this:

to put it in the contemporary way, [the writer on music] is expected to concentrate entirely on the “form,” which is not regarded as “saying” anything at all. ... Instead of responding to music as what it is—the expression of man’s deepest self—we tend to regard it more and more as a purely decorative art; and by analysing the great works of musical expression purely as pieces of decoration, we misapprehend their true nature, purpose and value. By regarding form as an end in itself, instead of a means of expression, we make evaluations of composers’ achievements which are largely irrelevant and worthless.¹

Of course, Cooke and the many other music theorists who speak in this way could be mistaken. Perhaps the depth they purport to find in music and which they think goes beyond mere pleasure is in fact pleasure of a specially arresting sort or pleasure which can only be enjoyed by those with a very high degree of musical refinement. Certainly it is a marked characteristic of human beings that they tend to objectify and hence elevate to a higher status their personal and their shared preferences. An “error theory”² of this sort does seem to fit attitudes to music. Some items of jazz, for instance, have generally not received the degree of attention that they might warrant and could sustain, partly because those who most go in for the study and analysis of music have a preference for other types of music. But this preference is usually presented in the form of a judgment. A similar fate has befallen the remarkable musicianship that is to be found, occasionally, among Heavy Metal bands; distaste has led to its being discounted. Conversely, minimalist piano music, precisely because it has emerged from the classical tradition, is held in esteem even by those who do not like it, when its merits are often not more obvious than those of good popular percussion.

Still, whatever may be true of a limited number of special cases in which talk of depth and profundity is nothing more than the objectification of specialized preferences, the general view this sort of case might be thought to support—that in music there is nothing more to value than the pleasure we can derive from it—is not really very plausible. To begin with, while it is natural for people to say of almost any concert, whatever kind of music it may have contained, that they “enjoyed it,” it is equally natural for

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them to apply a range of rather different terms when they describe what it was about the music that they enjoyed. And this range of vocabulary, though it commonly includes terms such as "pleasant" and the like, just as commonly goes far beyond them. Music is as easily described as "moving" or "exciting" as it is called pleasurable and probably more often. More strikingly, "pleasant" and "nice" are not infrequently used in a way which contrasts them with terms of praise. To describe a piece of music as "pleasant" can be to damn it with faint praise. Nor, when used in an adulatory way, do these terms readily fit those pieces of music upon which we want to heap the greatest praise. No one would describe Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata or Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor as pleasant.

It might be supposed that, even if true, none of these remarks about ordinary ways of speaking can be made to prove anything about the basis of music's value. In the first place, common practices may be mistaken or misleading, and in the second place, the contrast between "pleasant" and "moving" seems to invoke a false dichotomy—why shouldn't music be pleasurable just because it moves us emotionally? If so, to point out that the vocabulary we use to describe it includes many terms besides "pleasant" shows nothing. We could even allow that music can have features which are properly described in ways that, on the face of it, should be sharply contrasted with pleasure—a melody can be "haunting," for instance—and still persist in the view that we value it for the pleasure it gives us. Human beings, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, can obtain pleasure from activities that at one level are unpleasant—masochism is a familiar if rather rare example, but horror movies are instances of the same phenomenon, as indeed are sad stories (people often "love a good cry"), both of which provide better examples in the present context.

This attempt to combine the pleasure story with a general expressionism has some plausibility. It is certainly true that we can derive pleasure from the emotional impact that works of art have upon us, and it is also true that the differences I have been pointing to between the way we customarily describe music and the nature of our interest in it may be superficial only. Nevertheless, there are marked differences between pieces of music which cannot be accommodated in this way. The first of these is complexity. If we agree, as surely we must, that there is more to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony than there is to Paul McCartney's Blackbird, at least some of the difference must lie with their relative complexity. There is a scope and scale to any of Beethoven's symphonies to which the average popular song does not begin to aspire, however haunting. This sort of difference in scale is plainly of considerable importance in assessing the merits of a piece of music, and yet there does not seem any reason to suppose that greater complexity in a piece of music, in and of itself, leads to greater pleasure on the part of the listener. On the contrary, since a large-scale piece of music demands a great deal from us in the way of concentrated attention, simple harmonies with a catchy tune are usually far easier to enjoy.

What this observation ought to alert us to is a feature of music which focusing upon the pleasure of listening to it leads us to overlook. By locating the principal value of music in the pleasure it gives, we focus attention upon the listener rather than the music itself. By doing so, we naturally come to regard its affective capacity as its most important property. But, of course, music also has a structure. Every piece of music of any sophistication is a construction out of certain variables—harmony, rhythm, timbre, form, and texture chiefly—and a composer is one who, among other things, can combine some or all of these variables in ways which have sufficient novelty and complexity to admit of analysis and understanding.

To see that any assessment of a musical composition must take account of its intrinsic structure as well as its effect upon the listener is at the same time to see how we might make sense of a difference in value between different composers and pieces of music, one which even the most sophisticated account of degrees of pleasure cannot accommodate. A piece of music such as Elgar's Cello Concerto or Brahms's Violin Concerto is not only worth listening to but requires listening to over and over again, and this is in the main because there is more and more to discover in it. It may also be performed over and over again because it allows considerable variety of interpretation. A musician can use an instrument or an orchestra to explore a
piece of music and to reveal the results of that exploration to the audience. From both the point of view of the listener and the performer, then, either of the musical examples just given may be described as richer, in the sense of containing more of interest, than simpler and initially more attractive and indeed more pleasurable pieces. But were we to restrict ourselves to talk of pleasure, or even to degrees of pleasure, we could not capture the relative structural wealth and paucity that people rightly see in different styles and pieces of music and upon which, in part, they base their critical judgments. The tunes that Abba used to produce are to my mind genuinely pleasurable in a way that symphonic music, generally, is not. But this does not make them better music. Boccherini’s Minuet is a very pleasing sound; Brahms’s Violin Concerto is not. Nevertheless, the second is, rather obviously, a superior piece of music. We can only consistently hold both these judgments if we can explain the value of the Brahms without having, openly or surreptitiously, to appeal to “deeper” or “higher” pleasures. The most straightforward way of doing this is to appeal to relative intellectual complexity. Music is not just undifferentiated sound which may or may not please. It has a structure, which lends it interest and consequently value, and great music exploits structural possibilities to a degree that puts it far beyond the level of simple, pleasant melodies. It does not merely have an effect upon us, as the melody does, but provides us with material for our minds.

II

It might be replied that in countering the simple, perhaps naïve view that music is valuable chiefly as a source of pleasure by appealing to structural complexity, I have construed music too abstractly, as a matter chiefly of form and intellect, ignoring altogether its affective properties. To make structure the principal focus of critical attention is to leave out precisely what most people would suppose to be an essential element in music appreciation, namely, the ability to be moved by it. It seems quite possible that someone could analyze the form and structure of a piece of music and at the same time feel no sympathetic response to it. Such a person, it is widely believed, might have some understanding of it as an artificial construct but could not be said to appreciate it as music. Moreover, what is missing from such an analytic understanding is the very thing that most musicians and music lovers hold to be peculiarly valuable in music, namely, its emotional content.

Thus, to reject the pleasure view on the ground that good music offers us a complex construction of which we may hope to attain an intellectual grasp and to argue that the value of much music lies chiefly in this is to make a mistake about where the importance of form and structure lies. It is certainly true that part of the difference in value between, say, a Bruckner Mass and a popular song is the sophistication and complexity of the former. It is also true that the respective value of each is in part due to this difference in complexity. But it is wrong to draw the conclusion that structural complexity in itself is to be valued. Rather, what is valued is what that complexity enables a musician to achieve. By itself, no formal property in music can be held to have value, and, indeed, undue complexity of structure may destroy the very experience aimed at, as, arguably, it does in the music of Telemann.

Now in this line of thought there is plainly something correct. The idea that mere complexity increases value is indeed mistaken (though whether mere complexity is possible in music is arguable), and it is a topic to which we shall have to return. But even if it is true that complexity in music, if it is to be valuable, must serve some further end, it is not at all evident that that end must have something to do with emotion, with affective properties that move us. Or, rather, it is far from clear how construing emotional content as the end at which musical complexity aims could help us to explain wherein the value of great music lies. This is partly for the quite general difficulties about the expression of emotion (is it not plausible to think that the expression of emotion is only as valuable as the emotions expressed?), but a special difficulty arises in the case of music, because it is hard to see how there could be any connection between emotion and music at all.

People often and easily say that music is filled with or expresses or arouses emotion. The main support for speaking in this way lies in the undoubted fact that we can use emotional terms
to describe pieces of music. Indeed, some pieces of music are such that it seems impossible to avoid emotional language if we are to say anything at all about them. Elgar’s Cello Concerto is one particularly marked example. Michael Hurd, Elgar’s biographer, describes it as “filled with sadness and regret” and “shot through with melancholy,” and these are descriptions which anyone who has listened to the piece will find it hard to resist. Conversely, it seems entirely appropriate to describe the Rondo in Mozart’s Fifth Violin Concerto as irrepressibly happy in tone; there is just no better way of describing it.

It is the ability to apply emotional terms to music compositions and performances and the established practice among critics of doing so that inclines people to generalize about music and the expression of emotion. But we should observe that in doing so they move from the level of facts about linguistic behavior to a theory about music, and it is just this move that needs some explanation and defense. Expressionism in music cannot rest its case simply on this fact about linguistic usage, for the philosophical question is what we are to make of it. Does the ease and regularity with which emotional terms are applied to music imply that music can express emotion? There are a number of reasons for thinking that it does not.

To begin with, when asked to specify the emotions with which a piece of music may be filled, or which it may arouse or express, the list turns out to be surprisingly short. Music is quite naturally said to be “sad” or “happy” (or some variation of these general terms—“somber” and “joyful,” for instance), but very few other emotional states or conditions can be ascribed to music without a measure of absurdity creeping in. Perhaps it is right to say that music can arouse or even express fear and pride as well as sadness and happiness, but could a piece of absolute music express shame or embarrassment or envy or hatred or love? In assuming the answer to be “No” I am taking a “narrow” view of the expressive power of music. Others have argued, to the contrary, that the range of emotions expressible in music is broad, or broader than I am supposing. There is not room to consider the matter fully here, but however wide we cast the scope of musical expression, we still have to show that there is reason to regard the expression or arousal of emotion in itself as a good thing, and if, as I think, the “narrow” view is correct, even a positive answer would require us to conclude that the value of music is severely limited.

But there is a further and more damaging point to be made against musical expressionism. The recourse to emotion, it will be recalled, was made in the attempt to escape pure formalism about music and to explain why complexity is to be valued. On the expressionist view, it is to be valued, presumably, because greater complexity of construction facilitates greater emotional expression. But is this true? A simple minor chord repeated in common 4/4 time can effectively evoke sadness, while a complex of melody and harmony with a relatively complicated time signature (Dave Brubeck’s Take Five, for instance) may not clearly express or evoke any emotion at all.

If now we combine these two points—that the range of emotions that it is possible for music to express or evoke is extremely limited and that the ability of music to evoke even this limited range of emotions does not seem to have any obvious connection with complexity—music seems of little real value. That is to say, if what is important about music is its ability to express or arouse emotion, and it is this end that complexity of structure must serve if it is to be valuable, music cannot attain much of importance. And furthermore, music as we know it, we must conclude, contains a great deal of idle complexity.

This is a rather damning conclusion to arrive at. But in arriving at it we have not really abandoned expressionism, for we have been assuming throughout that music can indeed express emotion. This assumption, however, is unwarranted. The mere fact that the same terms are applied to music as are applied to human moods and attitudes does not show that those terms share a meaning in both contexts, that they both describe or point to emotional states. The use of emotion terms may be a case of analogical extension, what Roger Scruton calls “metaphorical transference.” We can see this possibility at work in another range of vocabulary commonly employed. Music, though a strictly aural medium, is often, perhaps surprisingly, described in terms that have their home in strictly visual contexts. Brass may be said to be “bright,” for
example, the stops on an organ may be said to
give its “color,” and a cello or an alto voice may
be said to have “dark” tone. And vice versa—
colors are commonly said to be “loud” or “soft.”
But there is nothing in either fact about language
use which allows us to conclude that the visual
and the aural, despite being wholly different
media, have common properties. On the con-
trary, just because they are wholly different we
have reason to think that the terms do not mean
the same when applied in such different contexts.6

Similarly, though tunes and harmonies are
frequently described in emotional terms—sad,
happy, and so on—there is nothing in this fact
alone which supports the idea that music has
emotional content, and the fact that music and
states of mind are so very different gives us
reason to accept that the use of emotional terms
in music is indeed a case of analogical exten-
sion. In fact, such extension reaches back into
the description of emotional states themselves.
As Arnold Isenberg has pointed out,7 it is often
assumed that the only puzzle arises over whether
“light-hearted,” for instance, can be applied lit-
erally to a piece of music, whereas it is quite
unclear what its literal application to a human
being could be.

Expressionism in music might be rescued and
a firmer connection with emotion established if
we could give an account of emotional impact.
That is to say, so far we have been thinking of
emotion as the content of music, but an alterna-
tive is to think of music as awakening emotions
in those who hear it. To make a success of this,
however, we would need an explanation of how
musical sounds are connected to emotional states
in human beings. And this, as to my mind Mal-
colm Budd has shown, is just what philosophers
and music theorists have consistently failed to
give.8 In the absence of any satisfactory ac-
count of this, however, we have only the facts of
linguistic usage already recorded, and there is
nothing in these alone which would entitle us to
conclude that music expresses emotion.

It might be supposed that I have not been fair
to expressionism. As Peter Kivy stresses in The
Corded Shell, there is an important distinction
to be drawn between “expressing” and “being
expressive of.”9 The capacity of a work of art
to be expressive of something gives it greater
significance than any mere emotional “letting
off steam” would do. Expressiveness, as opposed
to expression, is artistic imagination providing
us with a form of articulation. Now this distinc-
tion does indeed seem important. Part of that
importance, however, is a move away from emo-
tion. What is significant about expressiveness is
not that it has emotional content, because words
and gestures and so on can be expressive of
more than emotion, but that it enhances aware-
ness. In a sense, in fact, it is misleading to use
the term “express” at all, just as it would be
somewhat misleading (as well as odd) to de-
scribe an observational statement as an “expres-
sion of perception.” In appealing to the expres-
siveness of an artistic artifact, we are really
leaving any special concern with emotion be-
hind and drawing attention to one way in which
art can be used to say things. But putting it like
this raises a major difficulty in the case of mu-
sic: Can absolute music say anything?

III

Many people believe that it can. Some of the
most reputable students of music have not hesi-
tated to assert that music is a special sort of
language, one in which composers may tell us
things and in which statements can be made.
Moreover, and this accords with the general tenor
and direction of my argument, some of them
have made this claim expressly in order to es-
ablish the value and importance of music and
to show it to be on a par with other artistic and
intellectual endeavors. The passage from Deryck
Cooke I quoted earlier continues:

[I]f man is ever to fulfil the mission he undertook at
the very start—when he first began to philosophize,
as a Greek, and evolved the slogan “Know thyself”—
he will have to understand his unconscious self; and
the most articulate language of the unconscious is
music. But we musicians, instead of trying to under-
stand this language, preach the virtues of refusing to
consider it a language at all; when we should be
attempting, as literary critics do, to expound and
interpret the great masterpieces of our art for the
benefit of humanity at large, we concern ourselves
more and more with parochial matters—technical
analyses and musicological minutiae—and pride our-
selves on our detached de-humanized approach.10

I am not here concerned with either the justice
of Cooke’s complaint about fellow musicians or
with his view of the unconscious and its language. The point to emphasize here is that his attempt to establish the importance of music consists in allaying it with philosophical reflection and literary criticism, both of which are intellectual endeavors much concerned with meaning and meaningfulness. Nor is he alone in this. Throughout his monumental *Man and his Music*, Wilfrid Mellers consistently tries to establish the relative importance of composers and their work by appeal to what they have to say, the magnificence of their "statements" and "visions." All Haydn's later music, he tells us, reflects the beliefs that had meaning for him—an ethical humanism based upon reason and the love of created nature.11

With equal confidence he asserts that Mozart "transformed the symphony from rococo entertainment into a personal testament."12 In a similar vein Karl Barth is recorded as saying of Mozart that "he causes those who have ears to hear ... the whole context of providence."13

Some commentators have thought that Mellers's ready appeal to this sort of interpretation is excessive, but be this how it may, he merely expresses more clearly than most something that has been a constant theme in the writings of musicians and their interpreters. Asked about the significance of his Cello Concerto, Elgar described it as "a man's attitude to life," and Beethoven himself evidently held a view of this sort when he declared that "music is a greater revelation than the whole of philosophy." Nor is it hard to see just why the thoughts of composers and musicians have moved so easily in this direction. Johann Christian Bach is said to have remarked of his brother C. P. E. Bach, "My brother lives to compose, I compose to live." The remark was intended merely to reflect a difference of attitude toward the relative value of music on the part of each of them, no doubt, but others have been quick to see in it an explanation of the relative merits of the music each composed, Carl Philipp's being of serious interest, Johann Christian's merely light and amusing. To live for the sake of composition, if it is to make sense as a human ideal, requires that what is composed can be properly described in terms like "affirmation" and by adjectives like "profound." Even the exponents of minimalist music, who might be supposed least likely to think in terms of cognitive content, can be found employing the idea in order to justify evaluative judgments.14

The point is that the importance of one piece or type of music over another seems most easily explained by reference to what each has to "say" to us, and no doubt this is why composers have been led to speak in this way. Moreover, their doing so is consonant with a good deal of the language of musical criticism. Critics and interpreters readily speak of musical "statements," of what a piece "expresses" or "conveys," and they pass judgments which would be difficult to understand unless music can be thought of in this way. For instance, Beethoven's music has sometimes been said to be witty rather than funny, Liszt's piano music described as structurally clever but thematically banal, and Bruckner has been accused of long-windedness and inconsequentiality.

In short, both musicians and critics have sought to explain the importance of music in terms of its communicative import, and this implies that music has communicative power. Of course, the fact that critics, and even composers, speak and write in this way is not in itself evidence that music can properly be spoken or thought of as a form of communication. To begin with, we need to allow the possibility here, as much as in the application to music of the language of emotion, that these discursive terms used in connection with music may systematically differ in meaning from that which they have elsewhere, that analogical extension is at work here also. Certainly, it is plausible to think that this is true of the expression "musical statement," because for many writers on music it means nothing more pretentious than a relatively plain rendering of the central motif or melody around which subsequent variations and developments are built.

Still, both composers and interpreters have also striven for more than this and used these communicative terms of music with the intention that they should retain the cognitive import they have in other contexts. In short, they have wanted to say that music is a language. But as Mellers himself says, this raises a fundamental question.

[1] If music "conveys" experience as a language does, what kind of language is it? The language of poetry...
is basically the same as the normal means of communication between human beings. The poet may use words with a precision, a cogency and a range of emotional reference which we do not normally find in a conversation. Yet though the order he achieves from his counters may be more significant than the desultory patterns achieved by Tom, Dick and Harry, at least the counters (words) are the same in both cases. Even with the visual arts there is usually some relationship between the order of forms and colours which the artist achieves and the shapes and colours of the external world. The relation between the formal and the representational elements is extremely complex and not easily susceptible to analysis; but it is at least usually clear that some such relationship exists. With music, the relationship between the forms of art and the phenomena of the external world is much less readily apprehensible.  

**IV**

Sometimes the answer to this problem is thought to lie with the ability of music to represent, because if music can represent it can be used to present to us aspects of nature and human experience. And surely, it might be said, there can be no doubt that music *can* represent—birds’ songs, battles, storms, armies, royal processions, pastoral countryside, as well as a wide range of emotions—grief, jollity, excitement, and so on. Certainly, music sometimes seems to represent; we can say very easily of some point in a piece of music “This is the wind blowing, the storm gathering,” and so on. But it is important to be clear about what is actually going on on such occasions, if we are to be clear about the place of representation in the character and value of music.

The first point to be observed about representation in music is that some of the things that pass for representation are more properly described as imitation or replication. Replication of the sound of a bell is not properly called representation of the bell, at least not in the way that it might be the representation of a summons or a visitor arriving. Similarly, more sophisticated replications and imitations of the sort found in music are not properly described as representations. A bird’s song is an obvious case. A composer may use instruments to imitate the song of a bird and successfully get us to think of birds at that point in the music. But it does not follow that he has represented the bird in any way, still less said anything about it. Indeed, this need not be his purpose. The French composer Olivier Messiaen, for instance, wrote music, much of which consists (he said) in the transcription of birds’ songs, but this is because he regarded the song of the birds as a very pure form of music that human beings can hardly hope to improve upon. Consequently, though his music may rightly be described as imitative of birds and may prompt us to think of birds, there is no foundation for the view that it is representational. This is not to imply, however, that birds can never be represented in music by a replication of their song. Messiaen once traveled to the South Pacific to hear and transcribe the sound of a particular bird because he wanted to represent that bird in his massive opera about Francis of Assisi, and there seems no reason to deny that the music was indeed used to represent that particular bird at that point in the opera (for those who could recognize it). What makes it representation here, however, is context and intention, not the mere fact that the sound of the bird is reproduced. Such cases are rare, in my view, but in any case, the capacity to reproduce sounds for the purposes of representation lends little support to the idea that music has representational power in general, or that it is to be valued for that power, because, of course, the number of things that can be imitated in sound is very limited indeed. In short, most imitation is not representation, and the occasional examples of imitative representation show little promise for music as a representational medium.

This is not as startling or contentious a conclusion as it may appear, because most people who speak of music as representational are not thinking of imitation at all but of representation proper, that is, the use of music not to replicate the sound of something, but to prompt the idea of that thing in the minds of those who listen to the music. The example of the bell illustrates the difference. The sound of a triangle might *imitate* or replicate a bell and thereby *represent* the arrival of a visitor. It is this sort of example and not birds’ songs or the howling of the wind that is under discussion when we speak of representation in music—the grief that is conveyed by a slow rhythm in a minor key, the fury suggested by violins as they rush up a scale, the
regal character of trumpet fanfares, or the melancholy of a solo cello. That composers do use such devices to convey ideas to the minds of their listeners can hardly be denied, given the express intention of many composers, and that they succeed is equally well attested by the recorded reaction of listeners. No one, for instance, has failed to identify some pastoral representations in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony.\(^\text{18}\)

But before going on to attribute the power of communication to music, we must note that there is an important distinction to be drawn between a form of communication and a means of prompting ideas. When I write or speak a natural language, the paradigm case of a form of communication, I am possessed of a means, not merely to prompt or stimulate thoughts and ideas in the minds of others, but to direct and manipulate them. If you understand the words I use, you are, so to speak, compelled to have the thought that I express (though not, of course, to accept it, approve of it, or anything of that sort; if I say, "This is a cup of tea," pointing to a flowerpot, you will have the thought, "This is a cup of tea" but not believe it to be true). A natural language is thus a powerful instrument of communication because it allows us to constrain the thoughts of others; it allows us to make them think things and to do so in a certain way. In this it is to be contrasted with the many other ways in which we can prompt thoughts in others. Of these, the least interesting are contingent ways in which other people are merely caused to have thoughts by chance actions of mine. For instance, I might, by my chance gestures, remind you of your childhood or of a play you once attended. To do so, however, would not properly be described as communicating the idea of these things, since, at the very least, there was nothing intentional in what I did. Of course, I might know that such and such a gesture would cause you to be reminded of an episode in childhood and might intentionally make the gesture precisely in order to do this. It would still not be very plausible to speak of this as a form of communication. A one-off effect, brought about thanks to my knowledge of facts peculiar to you, however regular, does not have the degree of generality which the idea of a form of communication seems to require.

It is not difficult to imagine the same thing extended both in extent and complexity and across individuals. A group of children, for instance, might invent a systems of signs and gestures which they used to convey information and warnings to each other. Such a system need not be deliberately or consciously learned. Other children might simply acquire their knowledge of the system in the course of play and thereby become susceptible to messages received in this form. And if and when this is so, we could say that we have here a form of communication that rests upon widely shared conventions. A similar story might be told for music. Over the years, a shared understanding has arisen among those who compose and listen to music by which it is possible for composers to prompt in the minds of listeners certain ideas, both ideas of objects and of feelings, and in this way, music has become a form of communication in its own right, just as a sign language, like semaphore, is a form of communication.

That the principal basis of musical communication is indeed conventional is borne out by the fact that the music of different parts of the world does not readily transcend the cultures that have grown up there. People sometimes, somewhat romantically, speak of music as a universal language, but it is obvious, I think, that Indian and Arabic music, initially at least, are difficult for those brought up on Western music to understand and appreciate (and vice versa, perhaps). Nor is this hard to explain. Take, for instance, the example of a peal of bells used to convey the idea of a wedding or a tolling bell to convey the idea of death. It is obvious that in both cases the sound of the bell gets its "meaning" from certain social practices at weddings and funerals, and that in the absence of those practices, or in the ears of one unfamiliar with them, the sound of the bell cannot convey those ideas. More telling, there are also important cultural differences within musical sound itself. The Maltese composer Charles Camilleri, for instance, has found it impossible to write down Mediterranean music in the normal Western way and has had to invent an alternative form of notation.

This is not to imply that the resources deployed by music in the conveying of ideas are entirely conventional. There are some what we might call "natural" associations between sounds
and rhythms around which conventions may be built; it is no accident that the ringing of bells at weddings takes the form of a peal—loud and enthusiastic—whereas that for funerals takes the form of a toll—slow and solitary—and each seems “naturally” fitting to the occasion. Sometimes this is disputed, and the claim is made that our understanding of what is “natural” is itself highly conventional. No doubt it is true that the natural and the conventional are so deeply intertwined in this connection that whatever we can say in theory, we cannot in practice distinguish them. This is in part because even when it builds upon a natural basis, convention undoubtedly refines in great measure. Nevertheless, it seems evident that there are some natural associations between sound and rhythms on the one hand and objects and ideas on the other. A rapidly rising sequence of notes has an unmistakable association with physical upward movement, and it seems to have an equally natural association with excitement. Thus almost every setting of the Mass makes the music of the line “Et resurrexit tertiam die” (“and on the third day he rose again”) move vigorously upwards. Similarly with somber moments, with the expression of happiness, and with countless other examples, there appear to be natural associations which composers can exploit. Talk of musical “jokes” is often rather strained, but there is no doubt that there are musical sequences which actually do make people laugh, just as there are musical sequences which make them pensive.

There are, then, a number of resources which composers may use to convey ideas in their music. There are conventional devices embedded in the practice of learning music, socially acquired connotations (such as trumpets with royalty), and natural associations. Taken together they comprise a surprisingly complex and sophisticated set of devices for the stimulation and/or provocation of feelings and ideas. But is all this enough to let us answer the traditional question about music—is it a language?—in the affirmative? To consider this properly we need to return to the distinction I drew between a means of promoting ideas and a form of communication.

I imagined a case in which some chance gesture of mine awakens in you a memory of childhood. That I have caused you to think of your childhood is indubitable, but this does not license the inference that I have conveyed that idea to you. Nor does it become correct to speak in this way if we extend the example and imagine a reasonably complex sequence of gestures on my part which causes you to have a sequence of images or thoughts. Why not? The answer is that by causing this sequence of thoughts in you, I have relied, not upon your understanding, but upon certain contingent connections between my gestures and your early childhood experience. I have not conveyed an idea to you, but merely caused you to have it.

Something of the same sort might now be said about the representational use of music. I might use the sound of a triangle to prompt in you the thought: “A visitor,” but if I succeed, this is not because you have, in any proper sense, understood the sound, as you might a word, but that you have come to associate the sound of a bell with the arrival of visitors. What is missing is the idea that my music has constrained your thoughts. When the bell caused Pavlov’s dogs to salivate, it may not be fanciful to suppose that the idea of meat was prompted in them. But it would be fanciful to suppose that they understood the bell to be saying “meat.”

Consider a parallel with painting. A painter might so arrange abstract colors and shapes on canvas as to cause you to think of a tree that once grew in front of the house in which you lived. This sort of case may usefully be contrasted with one in which the painter reminds you of a tree and a house with which you are familiar, but has so painted them that perspective obliges you to see the tree in front of the house. This capacity to use perspective in painting not merely to prompt but to constrain perception is what makes it a form of communication. The question is: Is there a parallel to perspective in music?

In view of the considerable representational resources of music listed above, it is important here to observe that the distinction I have drawn between a means of communicating thoughts to others, best exemplified in a natural language, and a means of prompting ideas in others (which
for the sake of a label I will call a representational system) allows us to imagine representational systems of great complexity which, however complex they become, never approach the level of language. Their deficiency might be expressed thus: they have a vocabulary but no grammar (though in saying this I do not mean to deny, of course, that there are rules of harmony counterpoint and so on, which are sometimes referred to as “grammar”).

The proposition that music can have a vocabulary is not one I propose to question, if it is taken to mean that we can find a great many simple examples in which a musical phrase can plausibly be said to suggest or even represent some object, emotion, or event. Just how extensive this vocabulary is is a contentious matter and yet obviously important in deciding how powerful a means of communication music might be. This is an issue to which I shall return, but for the moment I want only to make the point that even if we agree that music has a vocabulary and can represent things to us, it is still hard to discern in music any facility for directing our thoughts about what is represented. Whether we consider simple cases—allowing, for example, that the sound of a triangle imitating a bell may be used in a way properly described as conveying the idea of an arriving visitor (notwithstanding earlier reservations) or sophisticated cases such as those that Deryck Cooke offers us, where “the descending minor 5–3–1 progression” is interpreted as the expression of a “falling away from the joy of life” (an example many people would contend), there is an important deficiency in the music considered as a form of expression or communication; it cannot tell us what to think about the object or feelings represented. Thus far described, “Oh good! a visitor” is as suitable an interpretation of the music in the first case as “Oh no! a visitor,” and “Fall away from the joy of life” as good as “Never allow yourself to fall away from the joy of life” in the second. Yet if uncertainty is possible to this degree, the music cannot be considered an effective means of communication at all. It prompts ideas and thoughts but cannot constrain them in any particular direction.

Of course, ambiguities and uncertainties in music are often resolved when the music has some linguistic accompaniment, either in the form of libretto (widely understood) or in the form of dedication or title. It is only because of the title that we can think of Mussorgsky’s composition as a set of Pictures at an Exhibition. Someone who did not know the title would have no reason to describe it in this way. And in Prokofiev’s Peter and the Wolf or Saint-Saëns’s Carnival of the Animals, though the instruments and tunes that represent the different animals are no doubt appropriate in a general way, any one could serve equally well for a number of animals. We know precisely what animals are represented because we are told in words; the music itself is not enough.

This is not to say that the words do all the work. A musical setting can embellish, illustrate, and illuminate words and on occasion transform them almost from banality to sublimity. (Witness parts of Britten’s St. Nicolas.) It can, conversely, reduce them to farce (arguably, this is true of parts of Stainer’s Crucifixion). It can take a thoroughly familiar text and wholly enliven it, indeed give it a definitive interpretation (Handel’s Messiah is perhaps the clearest example of this). But, nevertheless, the relationship between words and music is asymmetrical. Words resolve ambiguities in the “meaning” of the music, but should the words themselves be ambiguous, the music cannot resolve the matter. In short, the music always follows, never leads the words. It lacks the ability to impart a meaning of its own.

This deficiency and the fact that it is a deficiency of the first importance are both illustrated in a well-known example. Against the theme of the finale of his last String Quartet Beethoven wrote “Muss es sein? Es muss sein” (“Must it be? It must”). Most commentators have taken these words as indicative of the meaning of the music and have thus understood the music to be expressing a hard-won mystical or religious acceptance of the human condition which Beethoven only achieved at the end of his life. But Beethoven himself said that the words recorded an exchange between him and his housekeeper who was asking for more money. Of course, this might have been a joke on his part, but equally it might not. Perhaps he wrote these down as a reminder of the mundane need for money which caused him to compose music which he himself regarded as the finest he had ever written. And indeed, such an interpretation need do nothing to diminish the value of the
music. The philosophical point which the example makes, however, is that appeal to the music itself, its tunes and harmonies, cannot settle the matter in favor of either interpretation, since it is consonant with both. But if the music really did communicate the metaphysical or religious ideas that some have found in it, there should be no doubt that Beethoven’s own account of the matter is indeed a joke. Since there is a doubt here, it follows that the music, by itself, cannot direct our thoughts in one way rather than another.

This example is especially telling in the context in which we are discussing the issue. Beethoven’s late quartets are often cited as examples of the most serious and profound music ever written, music which, presumably, we have reason to value more than any other. And the explanation of this profundity is given in terms of the ideas about human life and experience that they express. Yet, as we have seen, the music taken by itself cannot confirm this explanation. We cannot say that the music shows or teaches us anything, because even if we agree that it regularly prompts or stimulates or even expresses a limited range of moods and ideas, there is nothing in the music that constrains us to think about them in one way or another. If something similar were true of a work of philosophy or physical science, we would have no hesitation in concluding that it had failed. An argument, conceptual or empirical, which merely prompts those who follow it to think a wide variety of different and incompatible things about the subject in hand cannot be said to add to our understanding. A philosophical or scientific argument brings us to a conclusion, just as the painting imagined earlier obliges us to see the tree in front of the house.

In short, even if we make large concessions to those who believe that music can be said to have content other than harmonious sound and allow that music may be used systematically for the suggestion of ideas and feelings, we still cannot conclude that it constitutes a form of communication, still less an important one.

The argument so far has shown this: If we value music solely because of the pleasure it gives us, we cannot explain those differences in value between pieces of music which arise from their complexity and sophistication of structure. The sort of music that is described as serious just has more to it, has more worth listening for than music which is light and pleasant. To attach the difference in value solely to the complexity, however, seems to leave out precisely what those most attracted to music seem to find in it, namely its affective content. But if we do suppose that complexity of structure in music is to be valued insofar as it contributes to emotional impact, we are no further forward in explaining its value since, as we saw, the range of emotions that can be expressed or evoked is limited and the value of invoking or expressing them obscure.

It is a desire to explain the difference between serious and light music in the face of the failure of appeals to pleasure and emotion to do so that has led many to the view that music is better thought of as speaking to and out of human experience, that the composer presents us with a view of life and experience. But we have seen, if my arguments have been correct, that though no doubt a measure of representation is possible in music, there is no ground for the more ambitious claim that, in Beethoven’s words, music can give us the sort of revelation philosophy aspires to. Music has a (limited) vocabulary but no grammar. We can call it a language if we will, but on most things it will have little to say, and on nothing will it have anything of any sophistication to say. To put it bluntly, on the best possible showing, the language of music is not much more advanced than a system of monosyllables, with even less conversational power than that of Wittgenstein’s builders.

From some points of view such a conclusion will be regarded as deeply disappointing, but from another it is nothing more than we should expect. This is the point of view that regards music as sui generis, something which has no counterpart elsewhere. If this is so, then any attempt to explain the content or significance of music in non-musical terms must come to grief. We cannot express in words what is expressed in music, any more than we can give the meaning of a poem in music. Music has to be listened to, and nothing can replace this experience of it. Sometimes interpreters speak as though what a piece of music “says” can be explained in other ways. Mellers, for instance,
offers T. S. Eliot’s poetry as an explication of Beethoven’s late quartets. But if such an explanation were successful the music would in a sense be redundant; we could read the poem instead.

That there is something right about insisting upon the irreplaceability of music seems certain to me. All attempts to explicate the character or meaning of music in non-musical terms are doomed to failure, for what we are seeking to explain—music—is unique. In this it differs from other art forms. For instance, it is neither unintelligible nor silly (though it may be wrong) to think that photography could replace painting, or film replace theater (and the novel, perhaps) without loss or remainder, because though we may be uncertain about what exactly it is we get from painting or drama, we are clear enough that the same sort of thing is on offer from photography and film. But what could possibly take the place of music? Those things that we can think of as having a musical dimension of sorts, such as verse, are obviously limited in their “musical” aspects compared to music itself. This peculiar character of music, we might say, makes it incomparable, and its value cannot therefore be compared with that of anything else. “It is impossible to say,” Wittgenstein remarks, “all that music has meant to me,” and I think we should understand this comment literally.

On the other hand, to stress the incomparability of music and insist that its significance and value cannot be spelled out without losing precisely what is uniquely important about music is a strategy that lends itself to abuse and vacuity. The slogan “Music for music’s sake” is open to the same objections as the more general slogan “Art for art’s sake.” It can only convince the converted and obliges us to overlook what plausibly can be said. Faced with the most ordinary of popular tunes played on a pre-programmed keyboard and a double harpsichord concerto, the claim that the superiority of the second can be apprehended but cannot be explained looks like a dogmatic assertion on the part of those whose preferences are for harpsichords. And it gives up the game too quickly, since it leaves out of account all the differences between the two that can be pointed to. What we need, then, is a way of saying something about the value of music, which, while it does not attempt to explicate it in non-musical terms, allows us to consider critically the claims that can be made on music’s behalf.

VII

I have remarked on the uniqueness of music. This is worth exploring further. Sometimes people, even composers, speak as though music is a refinement of things found in nature. They refer us to birds’ songs, the wind in the grass, the sound of the cataract and suggest that all our music is an attempt to provide these things for ourselves. But the truth is (pace Messiaen) that natural sounds are not musical. The chatter of birds, the sound of wind or waterfall have nothing remotely resembling either the purity, the complexity, or the variety of the simplest composition for the smallest orchestra. To pretend otherwise, it seems to me, is nothing more than nature romanticism. The only thing in nature which may be said to be truly musical is the human voice when it sings, and, of course, singing is itself making music, an intentional activity in which human beings uniquely engage.

We cannot find the origins or basis of music in the natural world then. Nor should we be surprised that this is so. Music making is an accomplishment, something which humankind has achieved only after extensive periods of development. This is true even of singing. To hum or sing a series of notes is a very natural activity in human beings, but to turn this series into an extended and developed melody with organized keys and scales is not. Singing, even of a very popular kind, takes us far beyond the ability and inclination of the baby in the pram to make resonant noises.

The point of stressing the non-natural character of music is this: music is not obtainable anywhere else than in the music-making activities of human beings. Why does this matter? One suggestion might be that only in music is beauty of sound to be found, and since beautiful things are valuable, this means that music is uniquely valuable because it is our only source of one kind of beauty. That music is frequently valued for its beauty I do not doubt, but I do not think that this constitutes the real explanation of its value. To begin with the claim that beautiful sound is to be found only in music is too sweeping. It is not altogether easy, of course, to
decide just what counts as “beautiful,” but if (as I think) it is not plausible to argue that a bird’s song is music, it is not implausible to claim that some birds make beautiful noise. Similarly, I may properly describe someone as having a beautiful speaking voice, where the beauty is not attributed to anything recognizably musical but only to the sound of the voice.

These sorts of example are sometimes questioned, it seems to me, because people have so strong a tendency to identify beautiful sound with music, that they are inclined to describe a beautiful speaking voice as “musical” and to call the beautiful cry of a bird “song.” But that there is a marked and unmistakable difference between speaking and singing and that the cry of a bird has no melody and is in no key seems to me important and incontestable facts. Call them what you will, these sounds are to be differentiated from something else which I am calling music. But they are not to be differentiated in terms of beauty, for the whole purpose of denying their musicality is to show that there can be beautiful but non-musical sounds.

Besides, beauty as the source of value in music fares no better than pleasure. The music of a large-scale and complex symphony is no more (and probably less) likely to be thought beautiful than a simple melody for a single violin. We might usefully contrast here Beethoven’s and Bruch’s Violin Concertos. Bruch’s, it seems to me, is the more beautiful, but Beethoven’s is the greater work. Certainly, melodies and harmonies can be extremely beautiful, but there is no reason to think that beauty and harshness exhaust the possibilities for assessing harmonic patterns or explaining what makes them worth listening to. Beethoven’s harmonic structures are more frequently interesting than beautiful, but nonetheless valuable for that. In short, music may be our most familiar source of beautiful sound, but it is not our only source, nor is its being such a source an adequate explanation of the value we attach to it. Nevertheless, there is something right about this general line of thought. Music is the sole source of organized sound, whether or not the net effect of its organization is beauty. What this means is that, uniquely, composers and musicians can create and explore a dimension of human experience—aural experience.

Music is for listening to as nothing else is. Such a conclusion is hardly startling or novel and may even appear a little tame after such a lengthy discussion. But its truistic character is in fact a strength, once we see how it allows us put into place the various features of music to which attention has been drawn in the course of this essay. If music is to be valued chiefly as an extension and exploration of aural experience, we can see how there can be intelligible and demonstrable differences between the creations and explorations of different composers, for it just will be true of some pieces of music that there is more to be heard in them than in others. This “more” is not a simple matter of quantity of notes or instruments. A composer may enable us to discover among the qualities of sound those that we have to describe in metaphorical or analogical language. What is interesting about music that is described as bright or sorrowful or architectonic is not that it is in some odd way connected with lights or emotions or buildings, but that sound, pure sound, can have properties far more sophisticated than simple loud/soft and fast/slow and that these other properties are often most easily described in this way. That any particular piece of music does indeed have such properties, however, is demonstrated not by an analysis of its “meaning” by interpreters or attention to the moods it induces in listeners, but by the composer and the performer in the music. We discover the existence of interesting and unusual properties by listening. Borrowing an expression from literary theory, we could say that music is the “foregrounding” of sound, the bringing to primary attention sound itself in a world where sound is normally merely the instrument of meaning. In music, noise making ceases to be a means of expression or communication, and aural experience becomes the focus of interest in its own right.21

The special character of this can hardly be exaggerated, for it is a unique aspect of the exploration of the contents of the mind. We are inclined to think of the contents of the mind in strongly intellectual ways—the construction and analysis of patterns of thought. But sensuous experience is equally properly described as among the contents of the mind. Yet there are few media in which it can be presented pure, as it were, unmediated and undistorted by the search for representational or expressive meaning. Music is one such medium and one which
admits of a sophistication and complexity of structure which need have nothing to do with propositional “meaning.” Its richness, in this respect, is to be contrasted with the relative poverty of other media. The possibilities, revealed to some degree in abstract art, of focusing non-intellectualized attention on visual experience are severely limited, it seems to me; the representational powers of visual art, though themselves important sources of value, distract from it. Arguably, music is alone among the arts in giving us analytical but non-semantic access to sensual experience in and of itself.

This is not to deny that intellectual reflection can help us discover the properties of a piece of music. Indeed, where the music is of a highly developed sort we may need the vocabulary of technical analysis to isolate and describe and hence experience the structures of sound to be found within it. Nevertheless, if we are to know that these sounds have that property, listening is inescapable. And so it should be, of course. The problem with the explanations of music’s value canvassed up to this point is that, even if they were to work in other respects, they seem to make the music itself redundant. Other pleasures as good as those derived from music are as readily available; emotional buzzes are to be had elsewhere; what the music “says” can be said more intelligibly in words. But once we see the value of music lying in its unique ability to extend and explore aural experience in itself, hearing it takes pride of place. We cannot conduct that exploration non-aurally, and hence the activity of actually listening to music is ineliminable.

A further advantage to understanding music as aural foregrounding is this: We saw earlier that any propositional meanings we are inclined to attach to pieces of absolute music are invariably ambiguous because there appears to be nothing about the music which directs, as opposed to prompts, our thoughts. But now we can see that as the painter directs our visual perceptions, so the composer and performer direct our aural perceptions. Listening to music is not just a matter of sound pouring into a receptor but of the mind being directed through a series of perceptions. We are, so to speak, steered through our experience. It is as though the composer were saying “It must be heard this way” by actually making us hear it that way. An analogy might be this: We enter a series of underground caverns where our journey can take alternative routes through spaces of differing shape, dimension, and atmosphere, lit by different means. Each composer is the guide who decides upon the lighting and directs us through the caverns. The shapes and dimensions of the caves are “there for all to see,” of course, but they only can be seen this way or that, and which way we see them and which ways are especially worth seeing are matters in which we rely upon our guides.

But if the final answer to the question “What is the value of music?” is: through music alone can we explore the dimensions of aural experience, we are left with the question “What is so important about exploring aural experience?” To this question, it seems to me, there is no very simple answer. We can point, as I would, to the fact that aural experience explored for its own sake can be found to supply an astonishing range of interesting, beautiful, and memorable experiences. Moreover, it can evoke wonder by providing the sort of occasion upon which we find reason to delight not in the content of experience but in the fact of experiencing itself, the sort of occasion when, in common parlance, we discover that it is good to be alive, not good for this or that aim or end but for itself. In this way it is not fanciful, in my view, to describe music as transcendent, and if music can turn relatively common or garden aural experience into this sort of experience, it has, in my view, done as much, perhaps, as we can ask of anything.

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3. This is the main point of D. A. Putman’s essay “Why instrumental music has no shame,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (1987).

5. “[T]he ways of hearing sound that we consider to be ways of hearing music, are based on concepts extended by metaphorical transference.” The Aesthetic Understanding (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 79.

6. Peter Kivy argues that terms like “brightness” are univocal when applied to sound and color. I do not think that he is correct in this, but his main concern is in fact to deny that their use in music is to be regarded as secondary or peripheral, and nothing I say on this issue conflicts with this contention. See Sound and Simbolance: Reflections on Musical Representation (Princeton University Press, 1984), chap. IV.


8. See Malcolm Budd, Music and the Emotions (London: Routledge, 1985). The assertion that Budd has shown this may be disputed, but even if more successful theories emerge, there are other objections to defending expressionism via emotions roused in the audience. See, for instance, Collingwood’s Principles of Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938) and Kivy’s The Cording Shell, chaps. III and V.

9. The Cored Shell, chap. II.


14. In a program note on Litania by the minimalist composer Somei Satoh, the pianist Margaret Leng Tan says, “The mood of Litania is... pervaded by the undercurrent of ‘angst’ often associated with ‘butoh,’ the avant-garde dance-theatre genre meaning ‘dance of the dark soul’ that emerged... from post-war Japan in the 1960’s.”


16. The fullest account of musical representation I know is Kivy’s Sound and Simbolance. But Kivy wants to show only that representation is possible, not that it is extensive, and eschewing normative questions, as he expressly does, he makes no claims for the importance of this possibility.

17. Representation proper may also be found in these other sorts of cases, however. Arnold Isenberg, in the essay already alluded to, remarks that the sound of the violin in Rimsky-Korsakov’s “The Flight of the Bumblebee” is not at all like the actual sound of a bee, which does not vary in pitch or rhythm.

18. Roger Scruton has argued, contrary to common supposition, that music cannot represent, but in my view Kivy has successfully replied to his arguments. ➔ Roger Scruton, “Representation in Music,” Philosophy 51 (1976) and Kivy, Sound and Simbolance, chap. VIII.


20. For a contrary view, however, see Charles Hartshorne, Born to Sing (Indiana University Press, 1973).

21. This ambition is to be found even in the most minimalism music. The purpose of John Cage’s 4’ 33”, where a pianist sits at the piano but never plays, is to induce the audience to pay the same sort of attention to surrounding sound as they would to music. It inevitably fails, of course, because the aural experience that is “foregrounded” (if it is) is wholly unstructured. The work cannot show us how to hear it.


23. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for many helpful suggestions for the improvement of this essay.