

Chapter 2

Musical Autonomy and Musical Meaning: A Historical Overview

Art is autonomous and it is not.
—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Abstract The nineteenth century gave birth to the idea of absolute music—(mainly) instrumental music that, due to its lack of mimetic effects and its pure, immaterial form, was thought to transcend the non-musical world and expose its essences; it was thought to forge a more profound connection to the world than could art forms allied with language. This chapter surveys classic formulations of this idea by Schelling, E. T. A. Hoffman, and other German intellectuals. Especially useful will be Schopenhauer’s (and Susanne Langer’s) notion that music is a symbol not primarily of particular emotions but of the dynamics of experience that underlie various emotions. This chapter also locates a precedent of absolute music in Kantian thought and an heir to it in Adorno.

Music is a paradox, inhabiting two, apparently contradictory realms. On the one hand, it operates according to its own peculiar logic; its medium is somewhat esoteric. On the other, virtually everyone agrees that music is emotionally expressive, or that it means something, even if we cannot always pinpoint precisely what. Indeed, while only some pieces represent particular objects (for example, birds, or at least bird calls, at the end of “Szene am Bach” in Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony) or actions (for example, marching to the scaffold in Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*), most if not all pieces represent or embody some emotional element to which we can relate. Moreover, most sensitive listeners have the intuition that music is expressive not *despite* its uniquely musical processes but *because* of them. Arguably, the more intricate and compelling the motivic, harmonic, rhythmic, and formal relations, the more emotionally expressive the piece. As Edward Levy puts it, “Those works that are constructed with the greatest compositional ability will be, if acutely perceived, responded to most deeply, for their greater expressive power is a function of their

richer content” (1970, p. 15). Indeed, an abstract (non-representational) piece that makes ingenious use of purely musical resources tends to be more suggestive of meanings than a mimetic (overtly representational) piece that does not. In short, common experience tells us that the abstract and expressive realms in music are not separate but thoroughly intertwined.

Accordingly, the dichotomy of abstract art/mimetic art is questionable. On the one hand, as Karol Berger asserts, “abstract painting is a species of representational painting” (2000, p. 173), because, even though it is not mimetic per se, it nonetheless expresses something about the external world. (Perhaps this has as much to do with us viewers as with the artwork itself: we have innate anthropomorphic tendencies, we are inclined to impose human-like figures upon abstract forms.) For the same reason, Kendall Walton claims that “most or even all music will likely have to be considered representational” (1990, p. 226). On the other hand, as E. H. Gombrich has shown, even representational art is abstract to some degree, for it often represents objects with a minimum of salient features, the rest of which must be “filled in” by the viewer. Moreover, even with what seem to be salient, straightforward representations, the viewer must have sufficient knowledge of artistic style and convention to be able to translate features of the artwork into what they represent; he must know, for instance, that in painting, the relative sizes of objects translate into relative distances. Indeed, counterintuitive as it may seem, artistic representation relies primarily not on similarity of appearance between the artwork and the object depicted, but on the mediation of artistic convention.¹ Furthermore, the more “realistic” the artistic depiction, arguably the more it highlights the perfection of its own form. Paradoxically, an artwork with great verisimilitude calls more attention to its own formal features and devices than to the object depicted.²

The dualism of abstract/mimetic, then, is largely false: abstract art, as the product of human endeavors, must in some sense signify something meaningful to humans; mimetic art entails a high degree of formalistic abstraction. This dualism thus characterizes less art itself than philosophical stances toward art.

The notion that musical structure and musical meaning (if not always mimetic meaning) are interdependent boasts a rich historical tradition, which I survey in this chapter. Throughout, one should read this notion, in its various forms, against the backdrop of its antithesis, formalism. A musical formalist regards a composition as

¹ Gombrich 1951. Goodman (1976, p. 5) similarly argues that representation does not depend on resemblance but is purely a symbolic (denotative) relation.

² Giorgio Vasari, a biographer of Michelangelo, marvels at the realism of the artist’s sculpture *Pietà*—of every muscle, vein, and limb—but then goes on to state that Michelangelo has produced “such perfection as *Nature* can but rarely produce in the flesh” (his italics). *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*; quoted in Treitler 1989, pp. 67–68. As for the novel, another supposed mimetic artform par excellence, Wolfgang Iser has argued that it is not realistic but rather comprises the frame by which we *configure* reality. It represents, if anything, the faculty of memory, by which we make sense of reality, bringing order to multiplicity. “The traditional realistic novel can no longer be regarded as a mirror-reflection of reality, but is, rather, a paradigm of the structure of memory...” (1978, p. 125). More simply, fiction “must always in some way transcend the world to which it refers” (ibid., 182).

an autonomous entity, one divorced from the world, a purely formal structure that can be studied in purely objective, even scientific terms. This stance is evident in music analyses that treat the musical work as a self-enclosed, self-referential system, whose only meaning resides in its structural processes. It is also evident, if to a lesser degree, in what Rose Subotnik calls “empirical” musicology, which harvests biographical and other factual information about a piece but fails to consider the more complex cultural, social, and political context in which the piece is embedded.³ (Formalism has also seeped into performance and studio teaching, in ways I will discuss.)

While this trend has been countered to some extent in the past few decades by an emphasis within the fields of music theory and musicology on musical meaning, it would nonetheless be quite valuable, I think, to reaffirm and elaborate upon the idea that musical autonomy need not equate with nihilism but can in fact equate with a capacity to mean. This chapter explores various forms this principle assumes within modern aesthetics, in particular nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German philosophy. I begin, however, by posing two possible eighteenth-century precedents.

2.1 Two Eighteenth-Century Perspectives

2.1.1 *Music as Mimesis*

From Antiquity to the Enlightenment, music assumed various functions: to evoke emotions, enhance religious worship, convey moral sentiments, serve the court, accompany dance and text, and so on. The value of music was seen to derive largely from these functions—music was not yet self-validating. Music also assumed a distinctly mimetic role, representing specific emotions, natural phenomena, and so forth. This role can be seen as a type of utilitarian function—one of music’s uses was to imitate aspects of the world—but also, perhaps, as *analogous* to such a function. That is, in both functional and mimetic capacities, music steps outside its own sphere—in the former case by serving something external to it, in the latter by representing something external to it.

To home in on early- to mid-eighteenth-century music, much of it was mimetic in depicting distinct affects. As codified in the *Affektenlehre* (the doctrine of affects) of the Baroque, each piece, due in part to spinning-out a single rhythmic-melodic kernel (*Fortspinnung*), sustained and elaborated a single basic affect. By contrast, the thematic fecundity of later eighteenth-century music (especially Mozart’s) yielded a concomitantly greater range of affects within a given piece. This repertory was mimetic in another sense as well: it made extensive use of *topoi* (topics), conventional melodic or rhythmic figures that represent (a) some kind of music,

³ See Subotnik’s critique of empirical, Anglo-American musicology in 1991, pp. 3–14.

Sarabande (Symphony No. 41 in C, K. 551, movt. 2)



Siciliano (Piano Sonata in F, K. 280, movt. 2)

Adagio



Various (Piano Sonata in F, K. 332, movt. 1)

minuet

learned style



Fig. 2.1 Some *topoi* in Mozart

usually dance music of the Baroque, such as the musette or minuet; (b) musical technique, such as imitative counterpoint; (c) musical activity, such as singing; (d) literary style, such as *Sturm und Drang*; or (e) non-musical activity, such as hunting, or setting, such as pastoral (see Fig. 2.1). In addition to these denotations, *topoi* also connote (a) a class distinction: for example, the minuet connotes a relatively high social stratum, the musette a lower one; (b) a more or less exalted—that is, sacred or secular—state; for example, imitative counterpoint is more exalted than a dance; or (c) an emotional element; for example, the pastoral mode is contented, *Sturm und Drang* anxious, and so forth.⁴ *Topoi* afforded instrumental music a salient

⁴ I simplify here for the sake of exposition; *topoi* almost always operate in tandem, thus generating more complex meanings than any one topic could on its own.

connection to life; they were, in Wye Allanbrook's words, "the natural concomitant of an aesthetic [whose goal is] the mirroring of aspects of the universe" (1983, p. 4).

However, it is critical to note that, if *topoi* are mimetic, they first and foremost represent music itself (musical styles, techniques, and activities) or non-musical phenomena or affects *through* the music associated with them—for example, a topic represents hunting or evokes pastoral sentiments via horn calls, aristocratic refinement via the minuet, erudition or spirituality via imitative counterpoint, and so on. Accordingly, we might regard *topoi* not as unequivocally mimetic devices but as negotiations between mimesis and abstraction. As Allanbrook states, in paraphrasing Michel Paul Gui de Chabanon, an eighteenth-century writer on music:

Art music should represent the passions through the mediation of the simpler music which men use to accompany their daily activities and amusements. *Music could then retain a dignified autonomy without thereby denying the human subject matter of the art.*⁵

2.1.2 Music and Reflective Judgment

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant claims that our apprehension of a beautiful object must be disinterested, free of any propensity to subsume it under a concept. That is, when we take in an object of beauty (be it natural or man-made), the object activates not a particular idea about it—for example, the category or categories to which it belongs—but rather an act or sense of *thought itself*, devoid of any discernible content. It activates, in Terry Eagleton's words, "a free-wheeling of our [rational] faculties," in which we experience our capacity for cognition in general. In this so-called "reflective" or aesthetic judgment, Eagleton continues, "instead of pressing ahead to subsume to some concept the sensuous manifold we confront, we just reap enjoyment from the general formal possibility of doing so" (1990, p. 85). In Kant's own words, "in the case of a relation that is not grounded in any concept... no other consciousness of it is possible except through sensation of the effect that consists in the facilitated play of both powers of the mind (imagination and understanding), enlivened through mutual agreement."⁶ Moreover, when we judge an object beautiful, Kant suggests, we necessarily assume everyone else will judge it beautiful as well. This is not to say that everyone in fact *will*, only that inherent in such a judgment is the supposition that they will or ought to. Hence, these judgments, though arising from subjective inclination and taste, are nonetheless,

⁵ Allanbrook 1983, p. 6 (my italics). A similar and very common phenomenon in the Classical period (and to some extent in other styles as well) is that of one instrument imitating another, as when the piano imitates the voice or orchestra, and of one genre imitating another, as when the solo sonata imitates a concerto through virtuosic passagework (usually in approaching a major formal juncture). Also regarding concerto, Charles Rosen notes that "mimesis of the tutti-solo alternation is standard throughout late eighteenth century music of whatever genre" (1988, p. 77). Here again, such music-to-music reference connotes emotional states—the evocation of concerto in a sonata, for instance, generates no small amount of anticipation and excitement—but such paramusical reference is conspicuously mediated by intra-musical reference.

⁶ Kant 1790, p. 104. Imagination grasps a manifold while understanding unifies it.

and paradoxically, universal.⁷ Accordingly, from these judgments one acquires a sense not only of how one's own mind works but of how cognition works in general.

For Kant, aesthetic judgments apply not just to beautiful objects but to sublime ones as well. The "mathematical sublime" involves something so vast or daunting that it overwhelms the senses, thus forcing us to rely solely upon our faculty of reason; we cannot measure or apprehend the phenomenon directly (quantitatively) so we must do so speculatively, through pure reason. In this process, we learn more about our own mind than about the object per se, and we affirm to ourselves the superiority of reason over nature. In this connection, Kant mentions the Egyptian Pyramids and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, but ultimately, he seems to prefer as examples natural phenomena, especially those devoid of purpose. This excludes animals but includes oceans and mountains, for instance. The "dynamical sublime" involves otherwise fear-inducing objects, such as cliffs and volcanoes, that cause us no fear (for if they did, we would be unable to judge them disinterestedly); that is, we attribute to the object the quality of fear it would otherwise induce in us. Yet, this object does induce mental agitation, awakening in us a sense of the tension between the object and the faculty of reason, between the sensible and the supersensible. Hence, in both types of the sublime, a disparity exists between a phenomenon and our rational faculty, both isolate reason from the object with which the subject is confronted. Put another way, in apprehending a sublime object, we produce an idea for which there is no possible representation. Accordingly, we cannot really have knowledge *of* a sublime object, but knowledge is involved *in* its apprehension.

To expand upon this crucial last point, in Kant's view, we cannot actually know aesthetic objects (artworks, for our purposes), both because aesthetic judgments are subjective and because our experience of such objects is irreducibly material—we cannot extract knowledge of the artwork from our sensuous experience of it. (Even if we derive information from a work of art—a model of moral conduct, for instance—that is knowing, but not a knowing *of* the artwork per se.) Yet, our experience of artworks is nonetheless an experience of knowing. As Kant says, "for although by themselves [aesthetic judgments] contribute nothing at all to the cognition of things, still they belong to the faculty of cognition alone."⁸ Or, in de Bolla's gloss, "our experience of the object in the form of an aesthetic judgment does not provide us with knowledge of the work, but the judgment belongs, nevertheless, to the cognitive power" (2002, p. 29). In other words, the experience of art is neither the complete absence of knowing nor the knowing of something definite; it is, rather, an experience of the *sheer capacity* of knowing. Art itself may be unknowable, but it nonetheless exercises the faculty by which we know. Consequently, an aesthetic object seems to mean something, but its precise meaning is held in permanent abeyance.⁹

⁷ For this reason, Peter de Bolla (2002, p. 27) characterizes reflective judgments as "radically subjective"—the universal follows from the individual judgment rather than the reverse.

⁸ Kant 1790, p. 57.

⁹ I have provided barely a thumbnail sketch of Kant's aesthetics—only as much as was needed for our present purposes. For an extensive exegesis, see Guyer 1997.



Fig. 2.2 Musical causality: harmonies linked by synopes

In my view, these Kantian notions have two distinct implications for Classical (mid-to-late eighteenth-century) music.¹⁰ First, viewed as a Kantian object of beauty, music seems to speak—it emulates patterns or gestures of speech as well as the figures and structure of oratory.¹¹ Yet, its precise meaning is indeterminate—it has syntax but no semantics (or, to adopt a Kantian phrase, “purposiveness without purpose”). Relatedly, it has a kind of linear logic despite being unable to make concrete propositions. Classical music emulates a logical system in emphasizing linear process¹² and intimating causal relations. The realms of harmony and counterpoint, in particular, are considerably constrained in terms of syntax, such that one event often appears to be implicated by the previous. Schenker, for example, in explaining fourth species counterpoint, cites the dissonant syncope (suspension) as “a means of establishing a purely musical *causality*.... [for] harmonies appear to be linked more intimately and with seemingly greater necessity the more drastically and obtrusively a tone of one harmony hooks into the flesh of the following one.”¹³ Fig. 2.2 provides one such example of interlocking harmonies.

¹⁰ I should clarify that Kant’s actual views on music (as laid out in Sects. 53 and 54 of the Third Critique) are cursory and notoriously deficient. Briefly, he considered music incapable of stimulating the free play of cognition and thus incapable of being an object of beauty. (Peter Kivy attributes this verdict to Kant’s lack of familiarity with Classical form and syntax; see Kivy’s 1993 commentary on the suggestive yet ultimately unsuccessful elements of Kant’s musical theory.) In what follows, I shall extrapolate from Kant’s general theory a more charitable and promising Kantian view of music than he himself allowed.

¹¹ See Bonds 1991.

¹² However, as Dahlhaus (1991, p. 163 ff.) reminds us, musical logic does not depend exclusively upon linear, causal relations. For, on the one hand, not all contiguous events are processive (“not everything that ‘proceeds’... is a ‘process’”), and on the other, non-contiguous events may be related—sometimes music evinces non-linear logic.

¹³ Schenker 1910, p. 291 (his italics). Interestingly, though Schenker employs an organicist metaphor here, and in later work fervently espouses organicist ideology overall, here he emphasizes that such causality is fabricated rather than real: “the artistic instinct discovered in the *compulsion* to prepare and resolve a dissonance a most welcome means of *feigning* a kind of musical causality and necessity at least from harmony to harmony (ibid., 291, first italics his, second mine). In fact, in an earlier writing, “The Spirit of Musical Technique” (Schenker 1895), he holds music to be essentially *inorganic*.

Classical music simulates a logical system also in its universal character, in its aura of self-evident intelligibility. As Subotnik argues, such intelligibility is evident in the fact that a listener can follow this music and apprehend its structure without any “extrastructural mediating explanation or specialized information or training.”¹⁴ Classical music, Subotnik continues, replicates “the relation of implication or self-generation that obtains between premise and conclusion within a pure system of logic, which, as described by Kant in his account of theoretical reason, would be universally intelligible.”¹⁵ In short, Classical music exemplifies Kantian beauty in compelling the perceiver to apprehend logical forms or the semblance of rational thought without, however, conveying definite ideas. Crucially, such self-enclosed logic renders Classical music autonomous—such music requires no external system to be comprehensible. Yet, paradoxically, the music is autonomous by means of a logicality that emulates the premise-conclusion structure of non-musical assertions.

The second Kantian consequence is as follows. Music may be viewed not solely as a Kantian object of beauty, but also, I submit, as analogous to the Kantian *subject* exercising reflective judgment. Just as this subject, when reflecting upon a beautiful or sublime object, exercises her faculty of reason without summoning particular concepts—we might term this “cognitive formalism”—so music, when reflecting, as it were, upon an external object, exercises its own formal procedures in response. For example, the penultimate movement of Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony ostensibly depicts a storm, but a more accurate statement would be that a storm (or, more precisely, the idea of one) is merely the impetus for the formal unfolding of the movement. This sublime phenomenon, which would elicit an experience of cognitive formalism in the subject, elicits one of musical formalism in the piece. That is, Beethoven takes this phenomenon as a point of departure and proceeds to depict it (or rather, emotionally react to it, more on which later) with such a fine degree of nuance that this process ultimately yields an intricate and ingenious display of purely musical relations.¹⁶ What “began” as the representation of a non-musical occurrence (or an emotional response to it) eventuates in a network of intra-musical relations, ones ultimately semi-opaque to that occurrence. Yet, the resultant formalism is by no means empty or self-referential, for, trivially, it presupposes an external object—it occurs in response to that object and may not have arisen otherwise (just as the Kantian subject may not have had the opportunity to revel in pure cogitation if he had not engaged the aesthetic object). Non-trivially, the resultant contours and processes of the music reflect on some level (though do not precisely mirror) those

¹⁴ Subotnik 1991, p. 196. However, Subotnik continues with the caveat that one cannot assume such musical reason to be absolute and invariant, for even “pure” musical logic needs to be interpreted by humans who introduce elements external to such logic. Classical music as a self-explanatory mechanism, then, is at once universal and contingent, somewhat dependent on the systems of meaning people apply to music.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Even in cases where the composer himself has employed pictorial tags in talking about his work—calling one symphony ‘Pastoral,’ one movement ‘Brook Scene’ and another ‘Jolly Concourse of Peasants’—these tropes are properly reducible to purely musical elements rather than standing for actual objects expressed through music” (Nietzsche 1871, p. 44).

of the phenomenon to which it responds. Hence, music addresses or responds to an external object without representing it, just as Kant's subject of reflective judgment responds to an object without conceptualizing it. The object is a foil for the display of purely musical processes rather than the end to which such processes lead. Music's engagement with the external world, then, does not undermine its autonomy; on the contrary, such engagement is in a sense a *precondition* for its autonomy, an impetus for the exercise of "purely" music-formal possibilities.

To summarize, I have presented two eighteenth-century views of how music relates to the world. The first is ostensibly mimetic, in that the rhetoric of Classical music makes extensive use of *topoi*. Yet, as we have seen, with these devices music mostly imitates other music—a piece invokes various musical idioms and alludes to non-musical phenomena via their musical associations. Hence, nascent within the Classical semiotic universe is the notion—one that will blossom in the Romantic period—that music relates to the external world from within the confines of its own medium, through a musical lens. The other, Kantian view entails, first, that music, as an object of beauty, seems to possess conceptual content by virtue of its linguistic and logical character (the latter deriving from its semblance of consequentiality and universality), yet it cannot be reduced to definite concepts. A musical work is meaningful without delimiting a precise meaning. Here, the autonomy or self-sufficiency of music is inseparable from its intimation of non-musical discourse. Second, music, as a metaphor for the Kantian subject, explores and exploits its internal logical and formal relations often in response to an external, beautiful or sublime phenomenon, and is thus conditioned by its interaction with, and bears an indelible trace of, the external element it formally sublimates. Hence, in the above cases, music's autonomous character is at one with its paramusical connections and resonances.

2.2 Aesthetics as Ideology

The eighteenth-century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, who in 1750 established aesthetics as an independent branch of philosophy, defined it as "a science of sensitive knowing"—a form of knowing that occurs through the senses. That is, the aim of aesthetics was to reconcile the rational and empirical, the conceptual and sensuous, realms that had been torn asunder by previous philosophies of art. Eagleton posits that this agenda arose in response to the advent of bourgeois capitalism in eighteenth-century Germany, in which, in contrast to the hierarchical system of feudalism that preceded it, society was splintered into discrete, equal, and autonomous individuals. The challenge for governing bodies was thus to instill laws of the land in a manner compatible with the enlightened and autonomous bourgeois subject—that is, by creating the illusion of sorts that individuals, in abiding by the law, were merely following their own most personal instincts and spontaneous desires. As Eagleton states,

Power is now inscribed in the minutiae of subjective experience, and the fissure between abstract duty and pleasurable inclination is accordingly healed. To dissolve the law to

custom, to sheer unthinking habit, is to identify it with the human subject's own pleasurable well-being, so that to transgress the law would signify a deep self-violation (1990, p. 20).

This reconciliation of the law and the individual and particular is typified and embodied by the aesthetic, whose artifacts abide by a law, but one they themselves have created, or at least have appropriated in their own, idiosyncratic terms. Moreover, just as each artwork as a whole manifests a general principle (stylistic norm or tonal schema, for example) in its own, unique way, so, microcosmically, does each part *within* the artwork manifest the formal law of that work in its own, unique way. On this latter point, Eagleton states,

This fusion of general and particular, in which one shares in the whole at no risk to one's unique specificity, resembles the very form of the aesthetic artefact.... For the mystery of the aesthetic object is that each of its sensuous parts, while appearing wholly autonomous, incarnates the "law" of the totality (ibid., 25).

Artworks, in this view, are ideological constructs that foster the sense that conformity is subjectively palatable.¹⁷

Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) is a classic formulation of these ideas. The state, Schiller holds, reconciles unity (reason, morality) and multiplicity (nature, affect) and appropriates rather than suppresses subjective impulses. It is the "play impulse" that achieves this synthesis of the rational and sensuous; it does so by moderating each pole: "In proportion as [play] lessens the dynamic influence of the sensations and emotions, it will bring them in harmony with rational ideas; and in proportion as it deprives the laws of reason of their moral compulsion, it will reconcile them with the interest of the senses" (Schiller 1795, p. 75). Schiller concedes to an ineluctable chasm between sense and reason, yet also holds that the aesthetic can bridge this chasm to some degree by (to mix metaphors) shifting weight from physical sensation toward reason, yet without losing the former altogether, lest reason become too abstract and forfeit its foundation in empirical experience. Hegel offers his own version of this synthesis, claiming that the Idea underlying the artwork must embody a plan for its own materialization: "the Idea must be defined in and through itself as a concrete totality, and thereby possess in itself the principle... of its particularization and determination in external appearance" (1820–1829, p. 81). Inherent in the Idea is the blueprint for, or seed of, its sensuous embodiment.

In summary, as with the artwork under the Kantian model, the artwork under the concept of the aesthetic (in Eagleton's politicized formulation) relates to external phenomena in a way that is compatible with its own autonomy. This holds on two levels. First, art appropriates only those ideas, or only the elements of ideas, that are amenable to artistic embodiment and sensory reception. In this way, the artwork can embody an external idea without abdicating its autonomy in the least. Second, in

¹⁷ This duplicitous aspect of the aesthetic is nicely captured by Henry Kingsbury's recollection of a studio teacher who counseled his students to abide by the letter and law of the score but somehow convinced them that this is what they subjectively preferred. "A fundamental principle of Goldmann's teaching was that students must play what is printed in the score, and yet that they must not play something simply because it is written in the score, but rather because they *feel* it that way" (Kingsbury 1988, p. 87, my italics). I return to the politics of interpretation in the next chapter.

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