On Hearing the Music in the Sound: Scruton on Musical Expression

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On Hearing the Music in the Sound: Scruton on Musical Expression

Consider the lovely moonlight sequence from Smetana's "Vltava". This is not a representation of the Vltava in the moonlight. . . . But it wears a certain expression, and predicates like "shining," "silken," "shimmering," suggest themselves as an apt description of it. . . . It does not seem strained to suggest that Smetana's music expresses the shining and silken qualities that we hear in it, just as the opening chords of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto in G Major, Op. 58, express a tranquil gratitude.[1]

The fact that we can hear a particular passage of music as expressing a "tranquil gratitude" is a central aspect of the phenomenology of musical experience; without it we would be hard pressed to explain how purely instrumental music could move us in the way that it does. The trouble, here as so often elsewhere in philosophy, is that what seems necessary also seems impossible: for how could a mere series of nonlinguistic sounds, however lovely, express a state of mind? One of the central tasks of the philosophy of music is to remove this mystery.

Before tackling the problem, it is important to recognize the range of descriptions that music compels from us. Among the most basic, arguably, are the descriptions drawn from the vocabulary of space, time, and causality: tones can be "high" or "low"; they can *move*, as in a melody; and a melody itself can be *passed* from one instrument to another without interruption. But as Roger Scruton rightly emphasizes, in his recent, ambitious book, the order that we hear in tones is often the order not merely of causality but that of *action*: one tone does not merely cause its successor; it creates the conditions under which its successor is the *right* or *appropriate* response to it. Finally, and in addition to all this, there are the previously noted descriptive and psychological predicates.[2]

What explanation can we offer for how the sounds that are music are able to sustain such complex descriptions? Scruton is very convincing, as others before him have also been, that the answer is not *representation*. Rather, he joins a long tradition of theorists in arguing that the correct account of the relation between music and what it means is *expression*, although he is rightly careful to insist that this should not be understood restrictively, so that it is only states of mind that can be expressed. Put very roughly, the idea is that the opening of the Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto invokes a tranquil gratitude more in the way in which saying "Thaaaankk yoou" languorously might, than in the way in which the word form "tranquil gratitude" does, namely, by referring to it.

What is distinctive about Scruton's view is his claim that there can be *no* explanation of how music manages to be expressive, of how it is able to sustain the descriptions that we give of it. The idea here is not, of course, that there is nothing interesting to be said about expression—and indeed, Scruton has many interesting things to say about it. The idea, rather, is that there is no fact about the sounds that we hear that *justifies* us in hearing them in the way that we do, that *grounds* the characteristic descriptions under which we subsume them when we hear them as music.

This thought is not without precedent, but it has heretofore been used—by the nineteenth-century music critic, Eduard Hanslick, for example—skeptically, to argue that music is not expressive after all, and hence that its interest must be accounted for purely formally. Scruton's point, by contrast, is that the impossibility of grounding music's expressiveness is a funda-

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mental and immovable fact about it, an insight into the nature of musical expression, not a denial of its existence. The upshot is a vaguely "anti-realist" account of musical expression, one that, instead of looking for the conditions under which a piece of music might be said to express a given property, looks instead to the states of mind by which expression is recognized or apprehended, and at the role that such states play in our aesthetic experience.

The reasoning underlying Scruton's negative view is not easy to reconstruct; nowhere is it clearly spelled out. As best I can make out, however, he presents two kinds of argument for it: one general, relying on certain general views about metaphor, the other more specific to the case of music. The former argument seems to go like this:

1. When I hear music I am not hearing mere sound. Even when sound is understood not merely as a physical phenomenon—vibrations in the air, for example—but as a "secondary object" that exists only when it is heard, it is not the intentional object of musical perception.

2. The intentional object of musical perception is rather *tone*, where tone is characterized by such variables as pitch, rhythm, harmony, and melody.

3. As applied to sound, however, these concepts are *metaphorical.* Therefore, to describe music, "we must have recourse to metaphor, not because music resides in an analogy with other things, but because the metaphor describes exactly *what* we hear, when we hear sounds as music."[3]

4. And the use of any metaphor cannot ultimately be explained. "Smetana's music is not *literally* shining or silken. But its expressive power is revealed in its ability to compel these metaphors from us, and to persuade us that they fit exactly. Of course, it is a mystery that they fit. But the mystery is immovable. Every metaphor both demands an explanation and also refuses it, since an explanation would change it from a metaphor to a literal truth, and thereby destroy its meaning."[4]

On this reconstruction, the argument depends crucially on the claim that when a sound is heard as music it is experienced under a description that is *metaphorical.* Can this be right?

It is surely the beginning of wisdom about this subject matter that the descriptions under which we hear sounds, when we hear them as music, are not literally true of anything. There is nothing either out there or in here that literally rises or falls in the way that a melody does. But this starting point leaves open two questions. Are there nonetheless facts about whether some descriptions of a particular passage are more *appropriate* than others? And is it right to call these descriptions *metaphors*?

With regard to the first question, everyone, including Scruton, is agreed that the answer has to be "yes," that there must be some sense in which a particular description of a piece can be more apt than another. As Scruton says in his discussion of the Smetana: the music's expressiveness consists precisely in its compelling certain descriptions from us and in persuading us that they fit exactly. Scruton, however, is heavily invested in calling these descriptions "metaphors," and this is more controversial.

We need not balk at the suggestion that a metaphor might not be a *linguistic* item but rather a *concept* applied in experience. But isn't a metaphorical use of a concept necessarily *knowing*, *willful*, and proffered with the express purpose of capturing the character of some *other* experience? Yet isn't musical experience naïve, in the sense that the ordinary listener is not aware that the concepts under which he or she is experiencing sounds are falsely applied to them? And isn't it true that we hear the animation in music automatically, without willing it? And what, finally, could be the *other* experience that the "metaphorical" experience of music is designed to illuminate?

Scruton seems to think that it is just obvious that musical experience is not naïve, that the unreal movement that we hear in the imaginary space of music is heard *as such.* But this would come as news not only to the ordinary listener but also to the vast numbers of theorists who have attempted to provide accounts of the central concepts of musical experience in terms that would allow them to have literal application.

Scruton is confident that metaphor is the right way to think of musical experience because he is confident that both musical experience and metaphor can be modeled on the important but diffi-

cult phenomenon of aspect perception, as when one and the same drawing appears now as a rabbit and now as a duck. This raises two questions, one about metaphor and the other about musical experience.

According to Scruton, an experience that involves the application of a metaphor involves a sort of fusion of the metaphor and the thing to which it is applied—resulting in an instance of the kind of double intentionality that aspect perception clearly, but puzzlingly, illustrates: the duck is seen *in* the drawing. In addition, Scruton argues, metaphor application is analogous to aspect perception in that, at least within bounds, it is subject to the will, so that one can choose which metaphor to apply.

I doubt that this is a good way to think about metaphor. For one thing, I fail to see that the use of metaphor involves the sort of double intentionality that characterizes aspect perception. Furthermore, it does seem essential to metaphors, as Scruton himself emphasizes, that they can be more or less appropriate to that to which they are applied: some *fit* better than others. But this normative assessment does not apply to aspects: if you see a platypus in a standard duck/rabbit picture, there is no interesting sense in which you have done something wrong. Of course, both aspect perception and metaphor application may be causally constrained, so that only certain sorts of reaction are possible, but only metaphor seems *normatively* constrained. For both of these reasons, I doubt that metaphor can be modeled on aspect perception.

For related reasons, therefore, I doubt that the experience of *music* can be modeled exclusively either on metaphor or on aspect perception. Intuitively, musical experience seems to involve one central element from each of those phenomena, to the exclusion of the other. It is crucial, I think, that when we hear the Beethoven Fourth we can be said to hear the tranquil gratitude *in* the sounds—to that extent the experience is akin to aspect perception and unlike metaphor. On the other hand, the idea of normative fit is also indispensable: someone who heard the slow movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* as expressing a callous cynicism would be hearing it incorrectly.

Scruton would agree with this characterization of musical experience. The disagreement centers, rather, first, on whether this characterization warrants deployment of the notion of metaphor and, second, on whether metaphor itself can be modeled on aspect perception. On my view, a better label than "metaphor" for the sort of experience that music occasions would be "normatively constrained projection."

What then becomes of the question of the justifiability of the central concepts of musical experience? Having severed the connection between music and metaphor, we can no longer lean on Scruton's general argument to the effect that, since the application of no metaphor is explicable, a fortiori, nor is the applicability of the metaphors central to musical experience. This is not too great a loss, however, because more interesting than that general argument are Scruton's many *music-specific* arguments about why we will not be able to dig beneath those descriptions to explain their aptness.

Scruton considers a large number of putatively explanatory theories—Schenkerian analysis, generative views of musical meaning, the biographical theory, among others—but his general argumentative strategy can be discerned in his discussion of just one of those theories, the highly influential "resemblance theory." The core idea of the resemblance theory is that the expressive power of a piece of music depends on a resemblance between that piece and particular states of mind. The thought admits of a number of possible variants; here, for example, is Malcolm Budd's:

> When you hear music as being expressive of emotion E—when you hear E in the music—you hear the music as sounding like the way E feels; the music is expressive of E if it is correct to hear it in this fashion or a full appreciation of the music requires the listener to hear it in this way. So the sense in which you hear the emotion *in* the music—the sense in which it is an audible property of the music—is that you perceive a likeness between the music and the experience of emotion.[5]

According to Scruton, there are two important things wrong with any such theory. First, it will not be able to explain how both music and poetry might univocally be said to express states of mind; and second, it will not be able to say in what the resemblance between music and the emotions consists.

The problem about univocity arises because poetry, too, expresses the sorts of emotions that

music is credited with expressing—sadness, for example, or radiant joy—but it does not do so by *resembling* what it expresses. So "expresses" cannot mean the same thing for poetry and for music.

This is not a good objection. Whatever else may be true about the way in which a use of language expresses a state of mind, we know that it crucially involves the existence of social conventions and mutual knowledge; and whatever else may be true about the way in which a bit of instinctual behavior—a sudden start, for example—expresses a state of mind, we know that it does not involve those elements. As various philosophers have noted, therefore, it is quite clear that we will have to distinguish between two different notions of expression: conventional and natural. The question then becomes: Is expression in a particular art form founded more on a conventional or a natural notion of expression? Clearly, poetry will be heavily (though not exclusively) reliant on the conventional notion, whereas the resemblance theory is counting on being able to explain music primarily through its relation to the natural notion.

But in what sense could music resemble a state of mind? How could there be a cross-categorial likeness between a sequence of sounds and a state of mind? Scruton says: "If you say that the sounds and the state of mind resemble each other, then you must also admit that they resemble each other less than the sounds resemble other things —and other states of mind."[6] The idea seems to be: define resemblance as you will and it will not pick out any particular pairing of music and state of mind over any other.

Budd, predictably, takes a different view:

> It is not hard to begin to identify the resources in virtue of which music is able to mirror those aspects of feeling available to it . . . there is a natural correspondence between the transition, integral to tonal music, from those musical sounds that do to those that do not stand in need of satisfaction and the transition from states of desire to states of satisfaction or from states of tension to states of release. There is a correspondence between the dimension of pitch and the vertical dimension of space, and, accordingly, between successions of notes and downwards movements of greater and lesser magnitude and speed, thus allowing music to reflect felt movements integral to a certain kind of emotion . . .[7]

There is a point to be made about this style of explanation that Scruton seems to come close to making on several occasions, but never clearly enough, and it is this: unless more is said, this cannot count as an explanation of *why* the central concepts of musical experience apply to music, because it *presupposes* that they apply to it. By leaning on the idea that we can hear *tension*, *satisfaction*, and *relaxation* in sound, and so perceive a resemblance to aspects of our feeling, it assumes the very matter it was supposed to explain.

What Scruton's discussion does not adequately address is whether there is any interesting way out of this problem. Perhaps the application of certain concepts (shimmering, for example) can be explained in terms of the applicability of others (fast-moving, light), and then those in turn can be explained in terms of purely formal elements of the sounds. If we are to abandon explicability, we need to be given a reason for thinking that we will never be able to exit from the circle of "metaphors" that constitute musical experience.

Scruton does not present such a general argument; he contents himself with knocking down various proposed attempts at exiting from the circle. His critical arguments are of uneven quality. More significantly, though, there is reason to doubt whether they could ultimately be successful. The doubts arise from two related sources. First, there is the fact—most successfully displayed perhaps by Deryck Cooke—that there do seem to be genuine correlations between elements in classical tonal music, purely formally described, and expressive properties.[8] Second, there is the fact that, whatever else may be true about them, the expressive properties of a piece of music must be seen as *supervenient* on their underlying acoustical properties: no two pieces can differ in their expressive properties without differing in at least *some* of their underlying acoustical properties.

Taking the second point first, Scruton is well aware of the need to insist upon supervenience. But he thinks that this does not in any way imply that there will be rule-like connections between the base properties and the expressive properties that supervene upon them, the sort of connection that will allow one to produce the same effect by the same means in other contexts. He recognizes, of course, that if A supervenes on B,

then facts about B will necessitate facts about A; but he holds that the supervenience base will include nothing less than the *whole* context in which the effect is produced. And that, of course, would not result in a rule for producing *other* works with the same expression.

But what then are we to say about those recurrent elements in the vocabulary of classical tonal music that have been used to similar effect by different composers? Cooke, for example, displays twenty-three examples in which an ascending major scale, from tonic to dominant, is used to express an outgoing, assertive emotion of joy. This constancy of meaning cannot be dismissed as purely coincidental. How is it to be explained, however, if not by supposing that we can perceive analogies between the properties of musical phrases, formally individuated, and our emotions?

Scruton wants to resist this conclusion at all costs. But what he has to say in response is both unconvincing and internally inconsistent. One reaction crops up in his discussion of the "Todesklage" from Act 2 of Wagner's *Die Walküre*.

> This theme contains a tense, tragic, and yet questioning expression. It is a normal exercise of the critical intelligence to look for the features which are responsible for so powerful an effect: the accumulated suspensions, and the final Neapolitan cadence finishing on a seventh chord, with its "unsaturated" and yearning character. Remove the suspensions and the tension goes. Alter the final cadence and we have (with a slight change of rhythm) the serene introduction to Mendelssohn's Scottish symphony in A minor Op. 56. But could one really have predicted that expressive transformation outside the context provided by Wagner's (and Mendelssohn's) melody? And could one have known, in advance of the particular case, that in removing Wagner's suspensions, one would arrive at an effect of serenity rather than insipidity, or that in adding suspensions to Mendelssohn's theme one would arrive at an effect of tragic tension rather than cluttered portentousness? These are surely idle speculations: all we can know is that, *in context,* the suspensions contribute to the tragic expression. But the context includes everything that might be heard as part of the musical *Gestalt*.[9]

Several points are made in this passage, but it is unclear that any of them is relevant to the question of whether we have here an explanation of the expressive power of the theme in question.

Let us first dismiss the distracting and irrelevant epistemological question: in saying that we have here an explanation of the expressive power of Wagner's melody, no one is suggesting that any one could have known in advance of the composer's invention that these musical devices would have that effect, or what effect altering them would have.

The question about *explanation* turns not on any epistemological issue but on whether we can isolate formal elements that, when acting in concert in the same way as they are in Wagner's melody, would produce the same or a similar effect even when embedded in a different piece. Scruton's claim that the "context includes *everything* that might be heard as part of the musical Gestalt" suggests that the most we could say is that they are producing the relevant effect here, in this piece. If that were true, there would indeed be no explanation.

But nothing Scruton provides gives us any reason to believe this. It is unquestionably true that, unlike the example of the ascending major scale discussed by Cooke, none of the elements at work here can be counted upon to have their effect independently of each other. But this disputes nothing essential to the proponent of explanation.

Scruton has another response to the idea that there are isolable elements of musical vocabulary that carry a constant meaning, at least in the tonal tradition. He says:

> The musical vocabulary discerned by Cooke is the outcome of a long tradition of "making and matching"; and his "rules of meaning" are really habits of taste.[10]

Here, inconsistently with the preceding, there is no denial that the formal element identified by Cooke has the context-independent character claimed for it, but the claim is that this is not the result of any explanatory resemblance or analogy, but merely one of aesthetic convention and habit of taste. Unfortunately, no supporting argument is provided.

There are at least two subtle issues that arise for the view that there are elements of musical vocabulary with constant meaning founded on analogy with aspects of our emotional life. The

first has to do with the relation between meaning and history and the second with the relation between meaning and culture.

The first question is this: if musical meaning can be founded on an analogy between sound and feeling, how are we to explain why the expressive power of certain musical devices *decays* over time? Scruton has an insightful discussion of Schoenberg's animadversions against the diminished seventh chord, a chord whose use in the twentieth century, Schoenberg thought, could not fail to be banal.

The phenomenon is unquestionable, although it is arguable that Schoenberg's reaction was too severe. But the proponent of resemblance need have no trouble explaining how certain musical devices could come to acquire the status of *clichés*. On the contrary, the very phenomenon testifies to the truth of that idea—if there were no constancy to the expressive meaning that particular musical devices have, there could be no fear that their overuse to express that meaning had become banal.

But, to come to our second question, doesn't the idea that there are rules of meaning founded on analogy entail—implausibly—that any member of any culture should be able to detect the expressive quality present in a particular passage of Western tonal music?

The answer is that there is no entailment. Abstract thoughts about number are not in any way thoughts about contingent cultural practices; but it does look as if initiation into a contingent public language is a prerequisite for having them. Just so, acculturation into a given contingent cultural practice might be a prerequisite for perceiving the expressive properties of a piece of music, even though the properties thereby perceived are not themselves culturally bound.

If we cannot justify our responses to sounds—if we are not able to explain why the central concepts of musical experience apply—what sort of explanation of our expressive responses are we to give? As I have indicated, Scruton's view has a vaguely "anti-realist" flavor. Instead of saying what it is for a passage to express a certain property or state of mind, he focuses on the mental state of the "recognition of expression" and on its place in the aesthetic experience.

> Our response to music is a sympathetic response: a response to human life, imagined in the sounds we hear. However, in the absence of representation there is no precise object of sympathy—neither an imaginary human subject, nor a situation perceived through his eyes. The life in music belongs in the musical process, abstract, indeterminate, unowned except through the act whereby we listeners possess it.[11]

Scruton goes on to make interesting connections to dance, and to the idea that in listening we place ourselves *in the hands* of the music, so that we are led by it through a series of gestures whose significance lies in their intimation of community. Suggestive as these thoughts are, they are not very clear. A lot more would need to be said—and far more clearly—to convince us that there are intelligible and useful thoughts here.

But what is genuinely puzzling is Scruton's belief that this account, such as it is, is in genuine competition with the more realist theory of expression provided, for example, by the resemblance theory. That theory attempts to give an account of what it is for a passage to *express* a certain property or state of mind. But it must also make place for the idea of *recognizing* expression. Assuming that the resemblance theorist finds himself attracted to Scruton's account of that mental state, why couldn't he just fold it in to his overall view?

Any adequate philosophy of music, it seems to me, must do justice to the two features of musical experience that I earlier isolated as central: that we do not regard just any response as appropriate and that we hear musical expression *in* the sound. The problem is hard because the two features work against each other. The idea of normative fit suggests that there is something genuinely dyadic going on: an experience of sound, an expressive response, and a relation of fit between them. Hearing in, by contrast, seems to demand that there be only a single experience, an experience of a sound *as* expressive. The resemblance theory and its kin, for all their talk of "hearing in," do not really earn the right to that phenomenology. Scruton, on the other hand, emphasizes hearing in, but at the expense of allowing us to make sense of the idea of normative fit. Of course, even on Scruton's view, a person may misdescribe the content of their musical experience. But as for the musical experience itself, it is totally unclear how, on his view, one response could be more appropriate than another. Scruton himself does not hesitate to as-

sess musical experiences in these normative terms. But he never squares up to the problem of saying how, given his basic commitments, this is to be made sense of.[12]

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 96.
4. Ibid., p. 141.
5. Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 136–137.
6. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 147.
7. Ibid., pp.141–142.
8. Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).
9. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, pp. 164–165.
10. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 208.
11. Ibid., p. 355.
12. For valuable comments and discussion I am grateful to Ned Block, Abouali Farmanfarmaian, William Fitzgerald, Jerry Levinson, Malcolm Budd, and, especially, Jennifer Church.