

The Philosophical and Spiritual Value of Music

12/05/2019

There is a duality in life between the rational mind and the emotional mind. This paper proposes a model for mediating between the two that would be helpful in explaining the philosophical meaning of music and for deriving a values system thereof. It also explores the spiritual dimensions of music that offer even more evidence for the accuracy of this model.

Subject: Musicology, Religious Studies

Introduction

Ordinary people engage with music in an intuitive manner. Although practicing musicians have to think more technically about the subject, we rarely ask ourselves what the deeper meaning behind music really is. Even a cursory glance at the currently available writing on the subject will reveal that music is very strange compared to other areas of academic interest.

My purpose here is to provide clarity on the nature of music as an art form. With a better understanding of the mystery behind music, it will be easier to deal with the many philosophical questions that arise from the practice of the art form. It is also important to consider the spiritual dimensions of musical practice, because it further illustrates the philosophical concepts at work in the real world.

The Duality of Art and Science

A concept I found particularly useful for understanding music on a deeper level was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's description of the Apollonian vs the Dionysian. Nietzsche wrote in "The Birth of Tragedy" that Ancient Greek culture saw a duality between the rationality of the god Apollo, and the creativity of the god Dionysus. The typical Apollonian lifestyle would tend to value order and productivity, whereas the Dionysian would involve wild partying and iconoclasm.¹ Music seems to be well described as the most Dionysian of arts due to its ineffability, and the depth of emotion that it awakens within us.

¹ We can even see that the musical culture of the outlaw has captured people's imaginations throughout history. Although political power tends to be produced from top down, art seems to have done the exact opposite.

The mythologist Joseph Campbell believed that these two sides should both be valued, and ultimately a balance could be found between them. But in my experience as a musician, I have found the later aspect of this approach to be an inadequate model for developing a values system. Earlier on in my career I was able to be intuitive with my musical practice. But as soon as I strengthened my faculties of reason through the study of computer programming, I noticed a process of disenchantment, as described by the sociologist Max Weber, occurring within myself.

Negotiating a Value System

Max Weber's theory of disenchantment described the historical process of rationalization in Western society. He believed that rationalization is the main cause of the increasing secularization and bureaucratization that we see in modernity. By describing this process as eventually leading to an "iron cage" being imposed on the spirit of the individual, Weber put a decidedly negative spin on the Apollonian.

Weber was wrong in rejecting the Apollonian altogether because as Campbell noted, a process of repression occurs when we ignore one of the two sides (Campbell). Campbell specifically mentioned the devil being an example of the medieval Christian unwillingness to fully embrace the Dionysian side of life, although I have found the Catholic Church service to be very aesthetically powerful.

My approach is somewhere in between that of Campbell's desire for a synthesis and Weber's critique of rationalization. Although we need to value both sides, one of them needs to be treated as a focal point. To accomplish this I have turned to the philosophical concept of the infinite.

The duality between the finite and the infinite is very reminiscent of the one between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Both the finite and the Apollonian share a this-worldly quality. They are easier to conceptualize and both are used to create stable systems. The problem is that they don't fully capture the complex and mysterious nature of our world.

One example is the way digital recordings can never reproduce analog sound without losing some fidelity. What you hear is a complex algorithm that tries its best to reproduce the sound through a process of sampling. This is akin to the way calculus is able to estimate values in a higher dimensions by using asymptotes. Asymptotes use an infinitely repeating mathematical process. Although exact values are never reached, the models are used to calculate the incalculable. The modern practices of machine learning and graphical representations of data have achieved extraordinary results through an understanding of these principals (Briggs).

Philosophically, infinity gives us a tiny window into what the nature of perfection might look like, and the Dionysian carries this exact quality. No computer can calculate the infinite in the

same way that no words can describe the music. As Weber was able to understand, the world isn't really numerical on a fundamental level, and we lose a lot by pretending that it is. Numbers are certainly an aspect of life that is woven into the fabric of reality, but we cannot reduce everything into logical terms. If you read a lot of academic articles about the philosophy of music, after a while you will come to the realization that you are actually reading poetry.

Having made a correspondence between these two sets of dualities, we can come to a determination on which one we should value the most. Because the Dionysian corresponds to the infinite, it should be the ultimate goal. The reason for this is because the infinite has a numerically higher value than the finite. The finite is merely a subset of the infinite. I have illustrated this equation in Figure 1 as seen below. This model shows, and my experience with making music has confirmed that the Apollonian is at its most useful when it is used in service of the Dionysian. Without studying we cannot improve as professionals, but without the music we lose a sense of inspiration and even contact with numinous.

The Infinite > The Finite ∴ The Dionysian > The Apollonian

Figure 1.

Music and Mystical Experiences

During the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, science took over as the dominant mode of thought among the ruling classes.² Although we have tried to secularize virtually every aspect of life in the West, this has not worked in the area of the humanities. Academic leaders such as Carl Jung have challenged the notion that spiritual concepts are no longer relevant in the modern world. Nietzsche was right when he predicted that Dionysian spirit would live on.

Music is probably best thought of as a religious practice. This idea is backed up by Alf Gabrielsson, a professor of psychology who taught at Uppsala University in Sweden. Gabrielsson was able to complete a major study into people's "strong experiences with music." This refers to the moments in their lives during which music had affected them the most. He studied a diverse sample of the Swedish population and came to some very interesting results: people described merging with the music, leaving one's body, having existential revelations and full blown religious experiences. The descriptions and statistics regarding these accounts are given in detail in the book (Gabrielsson). It is incredible to think that even some non-religious people, without

² I have even come across the fascinating idea that the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution was as a mass human sacrifice toward the god of reason. Scientism is a derogatory term that refers to the treatment of science as a religion.

being under the influence of any mind altering drugs, could have such powerful experiences from an activity as commonly enjoyed as music.

Rupert Till is a professor of music at the University of Huddersfield in England. In *Pop Cult*, he analyzed popular music as a new religious movement, an academic term that is used to describe cults. It definitely seems to be the case that as organized religion has experienced a steep decline in popularity³, music and other spiritual practices have risen to take its place. There are many sociological reasons why this is the case, but I see the human desire to experience the transcendent as being the most important factor.

The philosopher William James provided a powerful model for religion as an experience in “*The Varieties of Religious Experience*.” Music is known to produce altered states of consciousness, and I have personally noticed an increase in synchronicity when I play music. I have not seen this effect described anywhere else in writing. These experiences fit with the concept of re-enchantment that has been created by scholars in contrast to Max Weber’s theory of disenchantment (Landy).

All of this illustrates there is a correspondence between music, the Dionysian, the infinite and even the transcendent. When we experience music, we need to be open to the possibility that we are in the presence of something truly extraordinary. Music can bring a sense of magic back into people’s lives, and all the evidence points to the fact that it influences us in a way that is far beyond our understanding. It would be a grave error to write off music as a merely being a form of entertainment.

Conclusion

I have been able to conclude that we can interpret music as a Dionysian art form. The Dionysian needs to be valued above the Apollonian because it corresponds to the infinite and the infinite is greater in value when compared to its subset of the finite. A study of “strong experiences with music” has also shown that music can provide a direct experience of the transcendent (Gabrielsson). This is even more proof of the Dionysian and spiritual nature of music.

3 More people than ever are identifying as “nones” who have no religious affiliation in the Western world (“‘Nones’ on the Rise”).

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