CULTURE AND CIVILISATIONS

Sunday January 09, 2022

Why do we listen to music?

by JONATHAN GAISMAN | @JONATHANGAISMAN

Member ratings

Well argued: 67% Interesting points: 80% Agree with arguments: 66%

20 ratings - view all

(Alamy)

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (depicted above, by Edvard Munch) famously said that "without music life would be a mistake." He spent a large part of his own life listening to and thinking about it. Why should we do the same?

One place to start might be the anthropological importance of music in human history. It is widely believed that our ancestors sang before they spoke, just as many creatures in the animal kingdom today communicate quasi-musically. The development of larger social groups eventually made necessary the move from "I-Thou" to "I-It" forms of communication among people, as a result of which spoken language, with its more denotative possibilities, replaced what had hitherto been their natural mode of communication. However, primitive men and women continued to address their deities in song for centuries after they had adopted speech to govern their relations with each other.

Despite this commonality of origin, it is not obvious that all genres of music satisfy the same need in us today or evoke the same response. Classical music is not only widely regarded as the most beautiful, elevated and complex manifestation of the form, but also (and perhaps for this reason) has engendered a rich literature in both philosophy and fiction. This has exposed an anterior question, which has first to be answered: how can we understand why we listen to music without knowing what music actually is?

Here the distinction between sound and tone is crucial. It was identified by Roger Scruton in *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997), the best modern treatment of its subject. We all know what sound is, but tone is the word he uses to describe the sound of music. (And not just Scruton: in German, the word *Ton* means both tone and note, and *Tonkunst* — literally the art of tones — is an archaic word meaning music).

Sounds are produced by events in the physical world (a glass breaks; a triangle is struck) which cause vibrations in the air audible to the human ear. But these are sounds only. Not until sounds become tones does music emerge. When we hear music, we do not hear sound only; we hear something in the sound, something which moves with a force of its own. A tone is a sound which exists in a musical field of force; and conversely that field of force is something that we hear when hearing tones.

Latest articles

In defence of Walter Bell: a reply to Denis MacShane
by PATRICK HEREN 21 MAR 2024

Why Britain needs a New Model Army now
by NIGEL HALL 20 MAR 2024

The transformation of the LIA is firmly underway but the next step we take is critical
by DR ALI MAHMOUD
SPONSORED

Balance, bias and Ofcom
by DAVID HERMAN 19 MAR 2024

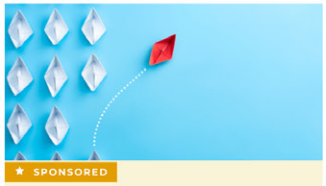
What are spies for? Walter Bell and MI6
by DENIS MACSHANE 19 MAR 2024

Time to thrive: A new concept in London retirement living
by WALLACEA LIVING
SPONSORED

Filed under

Bach Music Nietzsche Schopenhauer

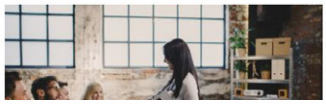
Sponsored picks



SPONSORED

How to innovate in business and embrace change

by CASS BUSINESS SCHOOL



The sound made by an old-fashioned fire-engine could be said by analogy to constitute a descending two-note phrase, but it is not music, unlike the sounds of the same pitch which are contained in the first movement of Mahler's First Symphony. The transformation from sound to tone is thus accomplished within the act of hearing; it has no independent reality. Music occupies the realm of intentionality and purpose; it takes place inside and depends on us. We are the subjects who perceive music as an object; were it not for us, it would have no existence as an object and no existence as music.

Oliver Sacks in *Musicophilia* wrote that music "has no concepts, makes no propositions; it lacks images, symbols, the stuff of language. It has no power of representation. It has no necessary relation to the world." True — yet how much we experience within it. As we listen, we create a virtual sound space in which the notes are heard. For example, we construct the idea of movement within music. In doing so, we use a metaphor to describe that which scientifically consists simply in the vibration of sound waves. The same is true of the ways in which we characterise or respond to particular patterns of notes, which we call melody, harmony and rhythm.

Onto the prosaic fact of the nature and frequency of sounds' physical pitch and the silences between them we heap other metaphors: we talk of music soaring or plunging, a striving melody, a piercing harmony or a syncopated rhythm. In doing so we create a space in which the notes belong, and in which they have relationships with each other. These connections are not in the notes and are invisible in the score; they are perceived by us. They are the essence of what music is, and it is their strength, not their weakness, that they are metaphorical. This is because metaphor is the basis of all human understanding; as Wittgenstein said: metaphor is where one's spade reaches bedrock and is turned. Scruton recognises that this is true of music too: "The metaphor cannot be eliminated from the description of music, because it defines the intentional object of the musical experience. Take away the metaphor, and you take away the experience of music."

From this it follows that the structures and emotions which are such important parts of experiencing music are either within us or, more likely (as Iain McGilchrist argues, following AN Whitehead), they form part of the relationship between us and the music — the relationship between things on this view being more significant than the things themselves. The emotional response which is such a central aspect of listening to music arises through the ignition in our minds of countless associations whose origins lie in every aspect of our experience. Each piece of music, indeed each moment in a piece of music (which is both itself and part of the whole), yields its own set of associations for each of us. That is why listening to music is both a communal and a private activity, because our experiences are both shared with others and unique to us as individuals.

Far from being imprecise in comparison with language because it is wordless, music is far more specific than language, as Mendelssohn was the first to point out, and therefore far more unlimited. Thus, however many words we have for (say) cheerfulness — and there are only a few — each cheerful piece of music expresses the feeling in its own way. Haydn's output alone contains thousands of different embodiments of cheerfulness, and each constitutes a different realisation. One of the great and mind-expanding benefits of music is vastly to enlarge the listener's range of felt emotions, and ultimately to broaden and intensify the experience of life itself. This is like the encounter with a new person: we know pieces of music as we know people (*connaître*), not as we know things (*savoir*). A favourite sonata becomes a friend — it is a "Thou" which is precious and unsubstitutable.

The great composers are those whose genius has so creatively given life to the virtual world which emerges from sound (a world no less real to us than any other) and created works so tremendous that many regard music as not merely one of the arts, but as supreme among them. Hence Walter Pater's statement: "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music." The philosophical reason underlying this supremacy occupied Schopenhauer for a substantial part of his principal work, *The World as Will and Representation*. This work is studded with the most penetrating aperçus, albeit that the entire analysis is performed in support of a metaphysical postulate, the Will, which few would accept on the philosopher's terms.

While we listen to music, he says, we are most perfectly (if temporarily) removed from the framework of unassuageable desires and inevitable suffering which are the human condition. Moreover, the listener hears a piece of music in entirely non-instrumental terms. There is no utility whatever in Schubert's String Quintet; like all living things in a healthy world, it serves no purpose beyond itself to anyone. It just is itself, and that is enough. What separates music from our normal, goal-directed existence is precisely this fact. "When [music] lifts us out of the endless stream of willing and tears cognition away from its slavery to the will, for that moment we are freed from the terrible pressure of the will, we celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing, the wheel of Ixion stands still."

Every religion, except those anti-human manifestations of religion such as Wahhabist Islam or the extreme Christian Puritanism which it in many ways resembles, has incorporated music into its worship. A religion without music is a poor thing indeed. (So, by the way, is religious music which panders to the lowest current cultural referents, rather than seeking to raise the focus of its adherents to rest on higher things.)

It is not just that music is an aid to religious contemplation (though it is). Rather it is the case that, echoing Pater, all great music aspires to the condition of religious expression because, seen in terms of humans' relationship with both, there is a profound correspondence between God and music. This is perhaps what Schopenhauer, advancing his particular metaphysical agenda, meant by saying that music alone, "stronger, quicker, more necessary

and more unerring" than the other arts, is a direct copy of the original ground of being. He called this the Will, but expressly acknowledged its similarity to the vision of the early Christian fathers, for whom the energy of the cosmos was rather, in Dante's phrase, "the Love which moves the sun and the other stars" — the Godhead.

Music, like God, is ineffable. Even non-religious music inspires a feeling of awe and a desire for worship. It affords a glimpse of a purified world beyond our own, for which we long. Music is both transcendent and incarnate. It is inherently dynamic — it moves, it affirms and reaches out, inviting a response which is nonetheless ours to give or to withhold. Though some see God as a fixed entity of motionless perfection, there is another tradition that stresses His active and continuing engagement in His creation. This is the insight of Goethe's Faust who, dissatisfied with and perhaps misunderstanding the implications of the word *logos*, re-translated the first sentence of St John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the deed". Basic to many religious traditions is the fact that God is not so much a noun as a verb, a force or energy bound up in the flow of a continuing relationship with His universe.

The convergence of God and music is fully realised in the person of J.S. Bach (above). So much so that the Romanian writer Emil Cioran (echoing Nietzsche) said that "without Bach God would be a completely second-rate figure", and again that "God's creation would be a total failure were it not for the music of Bach". He saw Bach's music as "the ladder of tears on which our longings for God ascend".

No serious student of music would dispute that the greatest explicitly religious music was written by Bach. The St Matthew Passion occupies a place of its own, combining Gospel narrative, choruses of the utmost vividness and power, and contemplative arias exploring every aspect of the believer's reaction to the Crucifixion. The B minor Mass is scarcely less sublime. Its depiction of the mystery of the Incarnation, or of the tolling of heavenly bells in the joyous round of the Sanctus, bear witness to the fact that religious feeling is in the best sense inarticulate, a response to God and a desire to penetrate the mystery of faith which can neither be verbalised nor assuaged, but which, like music, must be lived, surrendered to and celebrated.

Even Bach's secular music is suffused with religious feeling. Take for example his six cello suites — each a series of dance movements of no especial complexity, dating from the Köthen years when much of his non-devotional music was written. These on their face could hardly be further away from sacred music. Nonetheless, the testimony of some who know them best suggests otherwise. There is a strong case for seeing each of the suites as a meditation on a particular aspect of Christian dogma, as cellist Steven Isserlis argues in his recent book on the set. At any rate, that is how they make him feel. Bach himself said that "music has been mandated by God's spirit"; he regarded music and religion as inextricably combined.

The truth is that listening to any piece by Bach is the aural equivalent of looking into an enchanted kaleidoscope directed heavenwards, where patterns of inexhaustible beauty and ingenuity form and reform, and human senses never tire of the notes' eternal message — proclaiming as they sing, in the words of Joseph Addison's hymn, "the Hand that made us is divine". This is moreover true in different ways of the music of all the great composers, whether spiritual or temporal in conception. And this truth furnishes one reason why we should listen to music.