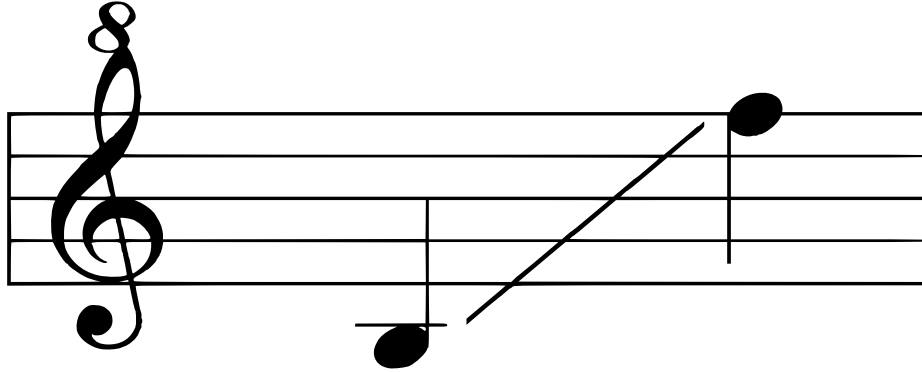


UP FROM ABSOLUTE MUSIC



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The idea of “absolute” music is central to many debates about what music is and which music should be considered beautiful. This essay engages with Mark Evan Bonds’s book, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*, to understand the historical roots of the term and its philosophical implications and contradictions. By exposing issues in the “absolute music” framework, new pathways emerge which synthesize knowledge from diverse fields—including sociology, ecology, musicology, and psychology—to create a more informed, scientifically grounded, and culturally situated perspective on what music is, how it should be treated, and how it might be used.

THE effects of music have dazzled minds from ancient times to the present. Despite the ubiquity of their subject, however, the task before contemporary philosophers of music is surprisingly difficult. The deceptive simplicity of music is evident in defining what music is—which is an essential starting point. I echo Socrates’ admonition in the *Meno*: that if a virtue is teachable, we must first know what it is (Plato, 385/1997a, p. 880). If we are to understand, create, and teach music, we must know what music is. Set-

ting the parameters for studying music is a normative process—deciding what is “in” as much as what is “out” for serious scholarship.

So, what is music? The philosopher Stephen Davies (2012) found, unfortunately, that definitions of music are “rarely attempted” and speculated this was because it was easily identifiable (p. 535). But, while definitions like “I know it when I see it” might work for the Supreme Court, they are unsatisfactory in musicological scholarship (Mikula & Mabunda,

1999, “Other Opinions”). Debates over the essence of music are many; however, in the Western philosophical tradition this essence is a key component of an object’s definition. For some of the titanic figures in this debate—such as Hanslick and Wagner—so-called absolute music held the key. Mark Evan Bonds (2014) describes absolute music as the conception of “autonomous, self-contained, and wholly self-referential” music (p. 1). This idea is necessarily and unequivocally linked to the non-verbal music of the orchestra in Western thought. Orchestral music (as well as band music and instrumental chamber music for that matter) does not require words, visual stimulants, or any other extra-musical element to be enjoyed. As an art form, it is the manifestation of Bonds’s definition: autonomous, self-contained, and wholly self-referential. Put simply, it is music boiled down to that which makes it music.

Much of the oxygen in the room is sucked up by arguments over absolute music, so I will engage with the history and philosophy of music as it progressed toward and through the concept of absolute music vis-à-vis Mark Evan Bonds’s book (2014), *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*. This will provide a robust understanding of music’s essence as it was understood in the Western tradition and offer contextualized critiques. Then, I hope, we can create a better and more comprehensive path forward. To understand how we arrived at “absolute music,” we should consider how thinking about music progressed from antiquity to present.

For St. Augustine (400/1992), music was something powerful—in all the

fear-inducing connotations that word may convey (p. 207). Music purportedly gave Orpheus control over animals, which should expose the stunted, anthropocentric definitions of music as unsatisfactory (Bonds, 2014, p. 21). More on that later. For Plato and others (375/1997b), the hypnotic effects of music were so immense that even the state should be wary of them (p. 997). Later thinkers, undoubtedly hampered by advancements in science and philosophy, found music moving (in one way or another), but perhaps not quite a siren-esque enchantress

worthy of irrational fear. Make no mistake, though—people still fear it. After all, is there a recent generation whose parents, upon hearing the new music of a burgeoning youth, didn’t dust off the

family Bible, phone the parish priest, and secure outward-facing locks on their children’s doors? The conservative impulse is perhaps never as quickly revealed as when it is exposed to new patterns of sound. But maybe that’s what music is about. New music and changing musical tastes undercut the idea that musical experience is static and universal.

Part 1, “Essence as Effect,” of Bonds’ book (2014) introduces the figures of Orpheus and Pythagoras. Orpheus was a practitioner of music whose abilities to enchant even the non-human were mentioned earlier. He gained a reputation exclusively for his mastery of musical effect. Pythagoras, on the other hand, was more theoretical. He engaged as a mathematician and philosopher. Pythagoras’ contributions in and popular notoriety for mathematics is also applicable in his discussion of music, which was, in his view, a manifestation of number. According to Bonds (2014), the legacies of Or-

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pheus' "effectualness" and Pythagorean essentiality were mutually reinforcing (p. 17). These are exciting suggestions that no doubt continue to persuade listeners and analysts, but they tell only part of the story of music. In fact, they expose little more than the physics of sound and physical techniques of music-making. Music is more than this, as Plato and Augustine made clear already in considering its effect.

In the middle-to-late centuries of the last millennium, humanist thinkers rejected a cosmic significance of music, but maintained the idea of numerical representation in music (Bonds, 2014, p. 39). During that period, five considerations took primacy of place in considering the connection between the nature and power of music: expression, form, beauty, autonomy, and disclosiveness (i.e., music's ability to disclose higher truths) (Bonds, 2014, p. 40). But the ability to discern any of these is secondary to musical experience. Here, music exposes the fatal flaw of humanism and reaffirms the necessity of a broad definition for itself. Encounters with music are often instantaneously impressive, meaning analysis follows rather than leads in considering music. Further, music is shared beyond our species, where appeals to "higher truths" in the human sense are obviously absent.

Between 1850–1945, absolute music was conceptually formed and subjected to intense critique. Most prominently, Wagner insisted on combining music with other art forms to rectify music's inability to convey concepts when presented alone, riling the formalist sensibilities of such thinkers as Eduard Hanslick. Hanslick's treatise *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854/2018) explained musical beauty in purely musical terms. That is, combining it with other arts (and, thus,

changing its effect) did not change the essence of music itself. The implications of Wagner and Hanslick's philosophies of music had ramifications for political sensibility as well. The rise of realism, a controlling school of thought in the academy to this day, encouraged what we might now call the intersectional paradigm. For music, that meant its effects must be put to use to further the community so that it could catalyze social reform. Hanslick (1854/2018), often the conservative, disagreed heartily. Relating it to Bonds's definition, music's beauty and subliminality (wherein lies its power) is self-referential, not governed by social or political context.

Wagner seems utterly reasonable in suggesting that music can't convey concepts, but it does convey something.

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Hanslick seems equally reasonable in suggesting that the core of what makes music is its organizational scheme. But organization for organization's sake is pointless.

These debates between Wagner and Hanslick were passionate and remain central to discussions of musical beauty to the present day. (As of at least 2002, Peter Kivy is still in the business of making formalism more workable by making concessions about the emotional expressiveness of music in his books. See his *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* for an example.) Further, they reflect debates within other departments of the academy and the evergreen politics of school funding, free speech, and publicly funded research that ring out any time two or more legislators are gathered. A prac-

tical musician would do well to think about these ideas. They will inevitably be forced to defend them.

So, what is left for music after these warring titans? Everything. I would like to begin sculpting a new way forward, informed by the emerging subfield of ecomusicology. My reasoning follows.

Many of the debates about the essence of music—that which proponents of an absolute music try to isolate—are arguably more appropriate to the scholarly pursuits of psychology, neuroscience, and music theory than philosophy. The essential elements already mentioned fail to consider the whole of what music is. Physicists and music theorists offer answers measured in intervallic terms with musical or engineering dress (e.g., decibels or dynamics; interlocking frequencies or major, minor, perfect, augmented, and diminished intervals; the passing of seconds or beats). Psychologists describe how it relates to others (the feelings evoked by listening) and itself (the tonally moving forms of Hanslick's pure music, but without the pseudo-spirituality; in other words, music theory). These are important answers, no doubt, but they are partial. Their concern is with the systematic and physical organization of music alone or with the effects on humans only, but what some call the essence of music lies in its real-time experience. In the end, essence is no longer functional. We cannot distill music into anything less than what it is, in all its fullness and multiplicity. We can study how music is used—that is, its purpose—or components of musical experience, but this tells us relatively little.

This last point brings a big issue to the fore, one in which ecomusicology offers a relevant critique. The idea of absolute music is tenable only with humans and human reason at the center. It takes a narrow view of music, implicitly asserting that only humans make and en-

joy music—at least as we know it. But this logic is circular. That is, we baked a bias into how we define music which has been hindering us ever since. It is based on reality-defying notions of purity and the possibility of an absolute, neither of which reflect the fullness of existence.

Ecomusicology, the study of “the relationship between sound, nature and people or culture,” can force us to reckon with the breadth of music by showing the ways in which definitions dependent on human reason and experience fail to grasp music's many effects, uses, and experiences (Beard & Gloag, 2016, p. 84). Emerging research in zoosemiotics (animal signs) supports the point that beauty or aesthetic judgment is not exclusively human. In *The Evolution of Beauty*, Richard O. Prum (2017), a Yale ornithologist, provides striking evidence that birds have aesthetic sensibilities. This idea is not totally new, as Prum readily admits. It comes from Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, in which Darwin (1871/2004) expounded on a second method of reproductive choice-making (complementing natural selection): sexual selection. Prum adapts this term as “aesthetic selection.” I was stunned by discussions of paleontological and floral exhibits created by bowerbirds to attract a mate vis-à-vis their aesthetic sensibilities. (Seriously, read the book.) It had never crossed my artistic mind that what we call art—or consciousness, or romance, or friendship for that matter—could be more than human.

Luckily for me, this realization coincides with the advent of a revolution in personal thought away from the creationist, man-in-God's-image, toward an integrated view of the universe. That is, a growing acceptance of what Timothy Morton (2010) calls “the ecological thought.” Thinking ecologically requires one to recognize the fundamental connection between all things—a universal

ecology. In line with Prum's writings, Morton (2020) suggests the immense similarity between all things we know to exist. Even the human form is not a discrete bundle: micro-ecologies make the stomach and mouth function, and individual cells comprise us. This thought is gaining traction in environmental management, public policy, urban design, architecture, visual arts, and geography (I should know, being a degree-holding geographer). Music is the odd holdout. For a craft whose practitioners are (in) famously Left-leaning, this is striking. Musicians look more like William Buckley, Jr. than the tolerant, scientifically grounded, progressive image they otherwise cultivate. Buckley (1955), a founder of the conservative magazine, *National Review*, famously described a conservative as "someone who stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it" in the magazine's 1955 mission statement (para. 2). It's time for our understandings of music to catch up.

Even in human terms, what we often argue about in music is the *experience* of music. But these debates often ignore the how and why of our experience. That is, they ignore the neurological origins of experience. To discuss music more appropriately, we should integrate our knowledge about what we experience, which is often subjective, with the neurological machinery responsible for processing the inputs that create it. Subjectivity is of principal importance to me and suggests the near impossibility of creating a universally satisfactory aesthetics. It's like trying to answer Steven Pinker's (2009)

tongue-in-cheek question in *How the Mind Works*: "What is it like to be a bat?" (p. 146). How can we ever know? Where subjectivity is limiting in one sense, it is the most expansive in another. The ecological thought allows us to co-create value together—and to create value alone. This ecomusicological project is already being undertaken by researchers like Holly Watkins (2018) in her book *Musical Vitalities*, where she confronts the biases that limited our understanding of music as something only human, argues against exceptionalism, and redefines music as the art of possibly animate things. This is only a beginning. We would be better researchers if we cracked open the silo door and experienced sunshine—perhaps for the first time since graduate school.

If there's any hope for musical aesthetics, it's found in being more broad, more eclectic, and more scientific. This doesn't mean that the beauty goes away, but it's 2021, and I am rightfully tired of bickering, especially about nonsense. But this project isn't just about getting along. It's about accepting and appreciating more as beautiful because it is. This perspective is a long-overdue shift. If we can create more beauty in the world without moving from our armchairs, why shouldn't we?

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