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Co-authored with Constantijn Koopman.

### Musical meaning in a broader perspective<sup>i</sup>

Musical meaning has been an ongoing concern of philosophers, musicologists, and semiologists. Expressiveness and representation have been much discussed during the past two decades. Despite this, the debate concerning musical meaning has been limited to considering what music conveys, how it does so, and what it means for it to do so. These questions ask what music refers to (or denotes, signifies, stands for), or what it represents (or depicts, describes), or what is expressed through it. Without playing down their differences, one can see that these notions all imply a conception of meaning according to which a meaning-bearer communicates a content that exists independently of itself. In principle, the same content could be communicated just as well by numerous other meaning-bearers. The meaning-bearer is merely a vehicle for the meaning it communicates.

This picture of meaning has only limited application to music. Music does not always convey "extramusical" contents. Many compositions do not refer beyond themselves. Music's capacities for representation are limited. Though music's expressive power is considerable, expressiveness is absent from many musical works of great value.

One might conclude that, at root, music has no meaning. Kivy argues this way: because music has no semantic content – despite its quasi-syntactic structures – musical meaning does not exist "as a reality of listening."<sup>ii</sup> His conclusion is inescapable only if one restricts the notion of meaning to the linguistic model. Ordinary language allows for a more generous use of "meaning," however. Most people agree that (good) music makes sense and can be said to have meaning.

In this paper we explore several notions of musical meaning that do not accord with linguistic or semiological frameworks. Part One focuses on formal meaning. Accounts trying to reduce this to linguistic or semiological meaning are flawed, we argue. Instead, progress and structure within musical works can be explained in terms of reasons like those that justify human actions. Next, we describe an even more fundamental, non-discursive kind of meaning in music, experiential formal meaning. In Part Two we turn to the subjective significance music has in human life. With meaning-for-the-subject, we concentrate on the idiosyncrasies of musical experience. The meaning music has more widely for all human beings, rather than solely for individuals, then is discussed as meaning-for-us.

## PART ONE: FORMAL MUSICAL MEANING

### 1. Explanations of formal meaning

A number of theorists hold that musical meaning comes from the specific properties of musical form. They use expressions like formal meaning (Alperson).<sup>iii</sup> Budd, whose term is intramusical meaning, says "the core of musical understanding — of hearing music with understanding — is the experience of what I shall call the intramusical meaning of a musical work, that is, the work's audible musical structure, the musically significant relations (melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and so on) that obtain amongst the sounds and silences that compose the work."<sup>iv</sup> In a similar vein, Davies refers to the formal significance of musical ideas.<sup>v</sup> This type of meaning consists in the coherence of the structure of the work; to understand the musical work is to understand how it is put together. Neither Budd nor Davies have elaborated this notion of formal or intramusical meaning.

Other authors distinguish formal (or intramusical) from extramusical meaning. Meyer has coined the terms designative and embodied meaning: "A stimulus may indicate events or consequences which are different from itself in kind, as when a word designates or point to an object or action which is not itself a word. Or a stimulus may indicate or imply events or consequences which are of the same kind as the stimulus itself, as when a dim light on the eastern horizon heralds the coming of day. ... The former type of meaning may be called designative, the latter embodied."<sup>vi</sup> According to Meyer, debates on musical meaning have centered around designative meaning, that is, music's pointing to extramusical objects and concepts. Though more important than designative musical meaning, critics have ignored embodied musical meaning,

which occurs when parts of a musical work "indicate" or "point to" other parts.<sup>vii</sup> After Meyer, various theorists have proposed similar distinctions: Coker (congeneric versus extrageneric meaning), Nattiez (intrinsic versus extrinsic referring), Jakobson (introversive versus extroversive semiosis), Green (inherent versus delineated meaning), and Nöth (endosemantics versus exosemantics).<sup>viii</sup>

Though we approve of the distinction, we object to the way in which intramusical meaning, no less than extramusical, is characterized in a quasi-linguistic or semiological manner. For instance, Meyer holds that formal meaning results from referential relations within the musical work: "anything acquires meaning if it is connected with, or indicates, or refers to, something beyond itself, so that its full nature points to and is revealed in that connection."<sup>ix</sup> While Coker draws on the semiological theory of C. S. Peirce in employing the term "icon" to analyse congeneric musical meaning as "those resultants of a dominantly iconic sign situation in which someone interprets one part of a musical work as a sign of another part of that same work or a diverse musical work."<sup>x</sup>

Despite the widespread view that formal meaning can be assimilated to linguistic or semiological frameworks, we do not believe that attempts to do so are convincing. The relationships between parts of a musical work are relationships of implication which should not be conflated with the linguistic or semiological notions of reference, denotation, or signification.

In observing that musical relationships have the character of implications, we agree with one of Meyer's central ideas.<sup>xi</sup> Music features stylistic conventions. These determine that some progressions are likely, others less so, and still others impossible. In tonal music from the classical period, a chord on the fifth degree is more likely to lead to one on the first than the sixth degree, while a progression to the fourth is excluded. To be sure, stylistic conventions may be broken. The impossible may become possible and the improbable more likely. In fact, as several authors have noted, the attractiveness of a musical composition significantly depends on its breaking conventions, thus bringing about the unexpected. Nevertheless, the set of stylistic orthodoxies is resistant to change. A composer can disobey only a limited number of rules if her music is to remain understandable, or even recognizable, as music. Though not unassailable, conventions regulate musical practices by defining the musical game that can be played.

In music, structural patterns are subtle, multi-dimensional, and multi-hierarchical. They involve development as well as iteration. As these patterns unfold, they create implications at all levels of the composition. For example, in tonal music within the classical tradition, a large melodic leap usually is followed by a continuation in smaller steps in the opposite direction. A thematic phrase of four measures ending on a dominant chord is likely to be followed by four more measures concluding on the tonic. An exposition of two themes, the first in the tonic and the other in the dominant, leads us to expect a development section after which both themes are recapitulated in the tonic. And at the highest level, a fast opening movement of a symphony, a sonata, or a string quartet is likely to be followed by a slow piece of at least half its length. We hear earlier events as having consequences for the proper order and treatment of later ones, though it usually is the case that, at any given moment, more than one continuation is apt.

However, relationships of implication should not be conflated with referential relationships, as Meyer does.<sup>xiii</sup> An analogy from the visual domain might help to make this clear. Consider patterns comprised of dots or geometric figures. Because principles of Gestalt perception (like those of good continuation and completion) apply to such designs, we consider the placement of particular dots to have implications for the proper location of other dots; several dots may be grouped into higher order Gestalts which are themselves patterned. As with musical notes taken in relation to larger wholes in which they are elements, the observer might identify some dots as misplaced, or might judge some continuations as wrong, with others as more or less appropriate.

We do not usually take one part of the wallpaper to refer to another, despite the implied iteration of the Gestalt. Similarly, we should not assimilate relations between a work's musical elements to linguistic reference. Such connections are on the psychological level of perception rather than the linguistic level of signification or denotation. This can also be seen from other differences between musical relations and linguistic reference. In a linguistic context, reference involves nonreflexive relationships between the meaning-bearer and what it stands for; by contrast, the relationship between musical entities (themes, rhythms, chord progressions, etc.) is reflexive. Within a work, musical events implicate their successors and vice versa. Second, musical entities are not vehicles for referring beyond themselves, but are parts of the very thing communicated. We treat words and signs as transparent to their meaning, ignoring their intrinsic features, but we attend to the formal

properties of musical events for their own sake. Third, whereas meaning-bearer and meaning are related in language through an act of abstract conjunction by which the former comes to stand for the latter, relationships between parts of a musical work are established simply by their being concretely perceived as belonging together within the same perceptual field.

In short, the differences between intramusical relationships and referential ones are so fundamental that it is misleading to "explain" formal musical meaning in terms of linguistic or semiological notions. When used of music, "reference" and related terms have been stripped of the content they have in their original, linguistic setting and have been invested with a psychological rather than a semiological significance. Also, there is no reason to adopt the terminology of icons, as Coker does. We should not be more tempted to think of new occurrences of the theme as icons of its earlier statements than to think some windows of a palazzo are icons of its other windows.

Although relations of implication cannot be equated with referential relationships of language, they do provide us with the key to an alternative account of formal musical meaning. In terms of the relations between its parts, we can provide reasons why a work develops this rather than that way. Moreover, these reasons have a distinctive character: they are like those with which we explain human actions.

We account for most phenomena in terms of involuntary causal mechanisms. We explain rain by a story about water evaporating, accumulating into clouds, condensing again under the influence of falling temperature, and precipitating in the form of drops. With humanly made objects like machines, besides pointing to causal mechanisms we also refer to the intentions of the creator. In the case of musical works, however, we do not restrict ourselves to these two kinds of explanations. More typically, we explain musical works as displaying a kind of internal rationality.<sup>xiii</sup> Musical works cohere in specific ways that can be explained because, like human action, their progressions are ruled by implications. Events happening later in the piece can be understood by relating them to what has come earlier; in view of its antecedents, an event is the right (which is not the same as the most probable, or the only possible) progression of the piece. And events in the beginning of the piece can be explained as connecting to later parts and to the work as a whole. Explanation here is in terms of coherence. The coherence of the parts of the piece at all levels enables us to explain the function of the various parts in the whole.

Because we can explain what happens at a given point in the music by reference to what occurs on either side of it, it is not inappropriate to talk of "the meaning" of the music and of its temporal progress. In the context of formal meaning, the question: "What is the meaning of event x in piece y?" should not be taken as a request to specify some referent z which could be identified as the meaning of x. Typically, it is a request to elucidate the way event x coheres with the rest of piece y.

## 2. Experiential formal meaning

The fact that we can explain music in terms of reasons provides a sufficient justification for speaking of musical meaning. However, there is a more fundamental sense in which music can be said to have meaning. To understand music as meaningful, it is not necessary that we can explain the progression of the music. Meaning can be understood immediately in the musical encounter, without reasoning at all. Music appears to have an experiential, rather than a discursive, logic. We do not merely perceive a succession of patterns in music. Instead, we experience the musical parts as connected into a dynamic whole. There is sense to the way music progresses. Music presents itself as a continuous process in which, at every moment, what we hear follows in a compelling way from what came before; that is, music proceeds not as the temporal succession of otherwise unconnected elements but as the unfolding of an integrated whole. One understands a piece's formal musical meaning when one appreciates the internal connectedness of its parts. Roger Scruton notes that music is primarily understood in response, and that musical meaning is what we grasp when we listen to music with understanding.<sup>xiv</sup> If we add to these observations that listening to music with understanding involves tracking the dynamics of musical forms *per se*, we can conclude that there is formal meaning in response, or experiential formal meaning, as we shall call it.

We take "experiential formal meaning" to refer to the experiential potential the listener is able to realize when she responds to the music with understanding. It is the coherent dynamic content she discovers by focusing on the music's formal progress. In characterizing experiential formal meaning in terms of experiential or dynamic content, we acknowledge a limited, though significant, connection between this type of meaning and the linguistic model. In both, there is a fundamental distinction between, as Dahlhaus puts it, what is present and what represented.<sup>xv</sup> There is a difference between what a musical structure acoustically presents and what we can hear in it. Take, for example,

the standard cadence in classical tonal music in which a chord on the fifth degree is followed by a chord on the first. We can make a distinction between the acoustic sounds and the tonal functions the experienced listener can hear in them. Someone with no background in the culture will hear successive clusters of sounds, not the dynamic connection between a dominant and a tonic chord.

In other respects, however, experiential formal meaning differs fundamentally from the linguistic and semiological models. Experiential formal meaning does not depend on musical form's communicating something that has no intrinsic connection with it; that is, musical form is to be grasped as such if this meaning is to be accessed. The experiential content is uniquely related to the musical form by which it is communicated. No other musical piece has the same experiential content as, for example, Mozart's Sonata Facile.

As we suggested, experiential formal meaning is connected to the dynamics of the musical encounter. As it unfolds, music features a complex of events that change and evolve, while interacting to form a complex whole. Theorists have tried to capture the dynamic character of musical progressions, often describing them as patterns of tension and release.<sup>xvi</sup> Kurth and his followers use the terminology of "musical energetics."<sup>xvii</sup> Building up and releasing energies in specific sequences, every work possesses a distinctive musical energetics. Other authors have used the metaphor of gesture to describe music's dynamic nature.<sup>xviii</sup> Often these quasi-gestures are related to extramusical meaning, but there is no reason to do so; they are features of musical dynamics and can be appreciated as such, rather than being interpreted as conveying extramusical content.

Note that, while patterns of tension and release, or energetic sequences and gestures, are often attributed to the work, they are realized through the imaginative response of the listener.<sup>xix</sup> These dynamic features are present in the work neither at the level of the acoustic signal, nor in the notation that specifies the work. It is only in our experience that they are manifested. Even the phenomena of tone and movement, which are the very basis of musical understanding, feature only at the level of musical response. Nevertheless, these dynamic features are contained in the work and are part of its experiential formal meaning.

If experiential musical meaning is revealed only in the experience of the listener and depends on that response, in what sense is it an objective property of the music? Why do we attribute the meaning to the music rather than to the



listener's experience? Here we might draw a parallel with what philosophers have called "secondary properties," which include colors, flavors, and similar qualities.<sup>xx</sup> Only creatures with the appropriate sensory apparatus, and perhaps also with needs that depend on color discrimination, perceive green. Yet we predicate the color to the grass, not to the experience to which it gives rise in appropriate observers. This is because there is considerable interpersonal agreement in the color judgments made by observers, with the result that such judgments are more informative of what is viewed than of what may be idiosyncratic to the spectator, or to the conditions under which the perception occurs. One way of construing the color property is as a causal power; that is, as the capacity to produce experiences eliciting the appropriate judgments from suitably equipped or qualified observers. Music's meaning can be construed as analogous. Although it is response-dependent, it is an objective property of the music because there is agreement in the relevant judgments of suitably qualified listeners under appropriate conditions.

As the use of "understanding" suggests, it takes more to be a comprehending listener than to be a perceiver of colors, though. Whereas our capacity to perceive colors is innate, our ability to grasp a musical work's experiential meaning results from a (largely unconscious) learning process in which we become acquainted with the conventions of the musical tradition to which it belongs. Only those who have internalized the conventions of the work's style, genre, and tradition are able to respond with understanding to it.<sup>xxi</sup>

The experience of the comprehending listener is governed by the form of the musical work. The character of the melodic and rhythmic motifs, the layout of the themes, the further development of the melodic and rhythmic substance, the harmonic progression, the successive arrangement of the various timbres, variations in loudness: all these features in their specific combination guide the listener's experience. As the form unfolds and builds up a unified structure, so the responses of the listener develop into a unified experience. The consistent progression of musical substance intimates to her a coherent experiential structure.

This is not to say that a musical work completely determines the experience of the listener, however. Even if listeners all have a similar musical background and attend to the musical progression with full concentration, clearly, their experiences differ widely. Musical experience may be thoroughly personal, as we will elaborate in Part Two. Nevertheless, this should not

prevent us from seeing that music possesses a specific experiential potential. A work embodies a certain blueprint for coherent experience. As the listener follows the work, her responses take specific directions that are controlled by the properties of the musical sequence, so that the dynamics of musical form are matched by corresponding dynamics in the response.

Though we tend to speak separately of the dynamic features of musical form and of the dynamic musical experience, the two coincide in the musical encounter; dynamic form and dynamic response are realized in one and the same act. Dynamic musical form does not precede the dynamic response, because it is only through the imaginative response that the dynamic characteristics of musical form — like tension and release, and quasi-gestures — come into being. In musical experience, the constitution of dynamic musical form and musical response are two sides of the same coin.

The special way musical ideas are presented, repeated, alternated, contrasted, and transformed in each musical work results in every work's presenting a complex whole of dynamic qualities, which is experienced by the listener as a unique Gestalt. This experience is ineffable; that is, it is finer-grained, more subtle, and more complex than are linguistic concepts and propositional structures. That is no fault in language, though, which can perform the function of mediating and categorizing the world only because it is not isometric with the direct perception of the world. Moreover, the ineffability of the experience of music's formal meaning does not have the corollaries sometimes claimed: that the contents of direct experience of music and of linguistic assertions about music constitute mutually exclusive domains, and that direct experience of music communicates linguistically inexpressible yet deeply important truths about the emotions.

Our conception of experiential musical meaning bears a close affinity to Levinson's views of musical understanding. He argues that understanding music is a matter of being able to follow the musical connectedness from point to point.<sup>xxii</sup> To have a basic understanding of the music, a listener need not have a reflective awareness of large-scale structures. It is sufficient for her to experience the cogency of the music's progress from moment to moment. Knowledge of large-scale form can add a further dimension to her appreciation, but the pleasure she takes from this is relatively weak in comparison with, and also is parasitic on, that afforded by apprehending music in the moment.

Levinson devotes a small passage to the concept of musical meaning, suggesting that musical meaning "concerns the purely internal connectedness of music, its kinetic and dynamic content."<sup>xxiii</sup> Our elucidation of the concept of experiential formal meaning is similar. We take the experience of coherent musical structure as the basis for ascribing meaning to music and we take music to have an experiential content that can be characterized as dynamic and kinetic. However, our conception of experiential meaning does not endorse Levinson's radical conclusion that the apprehension of large-scale formal structure is largely irrelevant to musical appreciation. In our opinion, one's awareness of large-scale structure, both on a reflective and an unreflective level, can be crucial to musical experience.<sup>xxiv</sup> Nevertheless, Levinson correctly places the cogency of sequence, the connectedness of music as it develops from point to point, at the center of musical experience.

Finally, we admit that our account does not apply directly to certain varieties of contemporary music; for instance, "non-teleological" aleatoric or minimalist pieces. Such music does not comply with the ideals of dynamic progression, evolution, and directionality. Nonetheless, our account of musical meaning is not completely irrelevant to understanding these works, because part of their significance derives from their wilfully neglecting these ideals, which characterize not only Western classical music but virtually all musical traditions. Furthermore, the concept of experiential formal meaning can explain why music that lacks goal-directedness strikes many listeners as meaningless. These listeners are used to music that invites and guides their dynamic response. They are disoriented by non-teleological music which is experienced as not "working" the way it should.

### **3. Understanding in response versus understanding through analysis**

The distinctive character of experiential formal meaning can best be brought out by opposing it to the understanding of musical form we gain through analyzing a musical score.

In formal analysis, the work's elements are identified and separated, producing a picture of self-contained, static components timelessly linked by similarity, opposition, and the like. Formal analysis treats music as architecture, as if the piece's parts co-exist in a timeless reality. By contrast, experiential formal meaning relates to dynamic experience as it unfolds in real time. When listening, we experience an ongoing musical process, not a sequence of isolated events. Caesuras in the music do not undermine this effect. Music presents a

continuous flux of events, to which we react with a corresponding flux of responses. Second, whereas analysis depends on conscious reflection on the work's make-up, experiential formal meaning is nonreflective and nonpropositional. It resides in the response, not in an internal commentary. This leads to a third point. Whereas formal analysis is purely cognitive, feeling (not to be identified with emotion) plays a crucial role alongside cognition in realizing the experiential content of music. To grasp the musical work one has to feel the progression of the music. If one does not experience its sequences of tension and release, one does not have an adequate understanding of what is going on in the music. Comprehending experiential formal meaning calls for a response that engages both our cognitive and our affective powers. Fourth, whereas formal analysis adopts a distanced standpoint, experiential formal meaning requires total involvement in the music. One must be able to give oneself to the music, and be prepared to be carried away by it, if one is to apprehend fully its experiential meaning. Of course, this does not mean that peak experiences always occur. Sometimes the music is too weak to seize us, or it may be simply without much pretension. But even then, our willingness to join in is presupposed. In other cases, we find the music not so much unappealing as repulsive, precisely because we feel that it abuses the empathic stance it presumes from the listener.

Also, with analysis, we approach music from the outside; that is, as an artifact put together in an ordered way. With experiential meaning we understand a work from the inside. We treat it in a significant sense more like a person than like an inanimate object. Cavell writes: "But objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people. ... They mean something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do."<sup>xxv</sup>

There are several respects in which our experience of music is like that of a person. For instance, sometimes we hear the expression of emotion in music. At a more fundamental level, we find in music the kind of coherence and non-arbitrary progress that marks human action; it displays integrity and cogency in the manner of its unfolding. Moreover, we also respond to musical movement with empathy. It is only through Einfühlung that we can apprehend the experiential formal meaning of music.

Scruton observes: "The human psyche is transformed by art, but only because art provides us with the expressive gestures towards which our emotions lean in their search for sympathy — gestures which we seize, when we encounter them, with a sense of being carried at last to a destination that we could not reach alone."<sup>xxvi</sup> He uses both "sympathy" and "empathy" to characterize musical experience, without distinguishing the two. We prefer to describe experiential formal meaning in terms of empathy: "the power of identifying oneself mentally with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation."<sup>xxvii</sup> Empathy is a broader notion than sympathy, and does not presuppose the presence of a person to whom one responds.

Music affects us powerfully because we identify with it; it is in virtue of the empathic responses they elicit that great works have such profound effects on us. Just as we extend our being by identifying with heroes, so we enrich our existence by engaging with music, but whereas an idol merely presents us with an image of a desirable life, music directly intimates an extended way of being alive. Our identification with the work can be so complete that the boundary between ourselves and it seems to disappear. The music's movement can seem to become our own. In our awareness there is no longer a form out there to be contemplated; the dynamics of the music overcome us, imposing their patterns on our experience.

The phenomenology of musical experience might lead one to hear in the work something of the composer's character and personality. That would not always be a mistaken way of hearing the music, but, in general, one is no more justified in extrapolating from the music to the composer than one is in reading novels as autobiographical. Also, the phenomenology of the musical experience might lead one to hear in the work a narrative concerning the emotional life and actions of a persona. Again, that is one way of engaging with music that may assist in the listener's following its progress with understanding. In our view, it is a mistake to analyse musical expressiveness as requiring such imaginings, however.<sup>xxviii</sup> Such approaches are natural to the extent that, where we find action and emotion, we also expect a human agent to whom these can be attributed. A persona is not in any way required, however.

The following should also be clear: the similarity between our experiences of music and of human behavior does not mean that music can be understood only in terms of expressiveness. It also resembles human action with respect to the coherence it exhibits and the empathic response it elicits, and

experiencing neither of these requires that one hears it as expressive of emotion. What music presents us with in the first place is not the expression of human life but an extension of it. Thanks to music we are acquainted with modes of experience we would never dream of. We concur with Goldman, who argues that "the peculiar value of music lies in its presenting us with an alternative world in which we can be fully engaged."<sup>xxix</sup> Our concept of experiential formal meaning explains how our response to the dynamics of musical form can be, and often is, fully empathic without its being a reaction to music's expressiveness.

A last difference between experiential formal meaning and analysis is that only with the former do we comprehend the music as compelling, as a process in which every event grows organically from the preceding ones.<sup>xxx</sup> Through analysis we can trace the connections between musical parts — the oppositions, the elaborations, the reductions, and so on — but such insights by themselves cannot establish that the music is convincing. A work may exhibit a bewildering range of ingenious relationships and lack any sense of cogency. Similarly, through analysis we can establish that the piece is coherent in the sense of its consistently following the conventions of a certain style, but such coherence should not be confused with cogency. Whether a work is compelling is revealed only in the experience it affords the qualified listener.

Don't analyses contain references to musical cogency and to other dynamic qualities of the work? They do, but such judgments are based on the analyst's actual or imagined experience of the music. On the basis of his musical experience, he is aware of the formal dispositions that underlie the listener's experience of musical cogency. Formal relations extracted from the score are not in themselves sufficient to account for the cogency or otherwise of the work at hand. In consequence, musical analyses, though they may enhance the listener's grasp of the work, cannot guarantee a basic understanding of it. To achieve such an understanding, one needs a sense of the experiential meaning of the work, of the organic connectedness of its parts. If this experience eludes us, a formal analysis probably will not help.

It is now time to tone down the opposition between understanding music through analysis and understanding music in response. Analysis often is informed by insights gained through experiencing the music, and sets out to relate form in the score to experiential categories. These analyses aim to elucidate the structures that underlie our experience of coherence, balance,

elegance, and so on. Also, musical analyses often refer to phenomenologically experienced features of the music; for instance, to tension and release, growth and decline, expansion and contraction, thickness and airiness. Again, such ascriptions depend ultimately on the analyst's musical experience and not solely on what is recorded in the score.

Conversely, understanding music in response features aspects associated with analysis. An awareness of large-scale form can be a part of the listener's response. In other words, musical experience does involve the static, timeless dimensions of musical form. Also, as we listen, sometimes we reflect consciously on the work's structural relations. We agree with Levinson, however: self-conscious reflection on the musical experience as it proceeds is less prominent for the average listener than some theorists would want us to believe. At base, experiential musical meaning is apprehended by moving along with the music from moment to moment, rather than by cognizing a picture of the musical form as a whole.

## PART TWO: MEANING FOR THE SUBJECT

### 1. **Meaning-for-the-subject**

So far, we have discussed musical meaning from the perspective of our experience of music's formal qualities. Now we turn to a more personal kind of musical meaning. Meaning-for-the-subject, as we call it, has to do with the place something takes in the individual's life or consciousness, with the specific way he experiences it, and with how this relates to his perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and desires. The meaning a thing has for a subject does not lie in its instrumentality — for example, as a vehicle for communication — but rather, is existential. Like experiential musical meaning, meaning-for-the-subject owes nothing to linguistic and semiological models that explain meaning as a function of a sign's use in communication.

In considering meaning-for-the-subject, the comparison with the meaning other people have for us is again pertinent. Our relation to music parallels our relationship to human beings: as well as regarding music as subject to explanations like those we give for human actions, and as inviting an empathic response, we relate to it as a determining factor of our lives. Musical works are objects of concern, of special care. We treat them with intense affection, with reverence sometimes. We can be hurt by someone's expressing himself unfavorably on musical works we hold in high esteem. Our engagement with

music is so fecund, versatile, and intense that it can be compared to the way we relate to our fellow human beings.

Meaning-for-the-subject is largely subjective. Music has an experiential formal meaning and, sometimes, also expressive or representational properties. Even if we restrict ourselves to these objective contents, there is ample room for personal interpretation and response. Moreover, there are numerous other dimensions — historical, psychological, social, political, ideological, etcetera — that allow for readings of a more personal kind. For example, someone may think Boccherini's famous minuet is the ideal evocation of wigtail period. Or he may consider the mathematical Prelude in A minor from the second book of Bach's Well-tempered Clavier as an exemplification of the composer's character, which he believes to be rigid. Or he may find the music of Richard Strauss, Reger, and the early Schoenberg to be overly decadent. Such examples can be multiplied endlessly.

The best example of a dimension of musical meaning that is idiosyncratic concerns the association of music with particular events in a person's life. A work may be particularly dear to her because it first awakened her to classical music. Or it may be that she used to play it with an absent friend. Alternatively, a person may hate a work or style because it recalls a disastrous episode in his life. The rejection of Wagner's music by survivors of the holocaust presents a marked example.

Though some musical pieces take a more salient position than others in our life, all the works we know have a particular meaning for us. How a given work fits into one's life is a personal matter. For Ben, a classical work is interesting as an accompaniment for a film; for Liz, it is the catchy tune she knows from a commercial; for Nathalie, it is one of the many classical compositions that provide a pleasurable background for her work; for Arthur, it is an object of reverence that is to be addressed only when he can give his full attention to it.

Finally, the role played by music as a whole in one's life is highly individual. The extremes range from music's being the most cherished occupation in life to complete indifference to music of any kind. This last attitude, though, is very rare. Most people do appreciate engaging in musical activities of some sort and consider their doing so to contribute significantly to their lives.



So far, we have focused on the purely individual aspect of meaning-for-the-subject. Specific ways of musical behavior are often shared by groups of people, however; for example, when music contributes to the identity of a group. Teenagers are an exemplary case. They categorize their peers in ways that identify and value a specific way of life in which music is crucial. Members of the group love and hate the same types of music, go to the same concerts, buy the same CDs, talk in the same way about music, wear T-shirts of the same bands, and so on. As this case shows, the meaning music has for the subject is constituted both by meanings that are private and by those that are shared with others. Instead of being objective properties of the music, both kinds of meanings are to be attributed to the subject.

Meaning-for-the-subject has attracted little attention in the philosophical literature. Why should philosophy concern itself exclusively with what is objective in the sense of being shared or common? asks Higgins.<sup>xxxii</sup> She traces and criticizes the tendency to objectify music and its attendant corollary: the assumption that there is an aperspectival way of hearing music, free from the "distortions" that result from taking a particular perspective. If aesthetics is concerned with when and why music has significance, and with how music can have its fullest impact, it cannot afford to ignore the idiosyncratic nature of the musical response, she argues.

Higgins discusses several personal aspects of musical experience; for example, the perspective on a piece taken by a particular musician. She quotes an oboist saying that, for him, there are at least two ways of listening to a particular symphony: that of the first oboe, and that of the second oboe. Also, a pianist complains that she cannot listen to piano music without focusing on technique. Then Higgins notes that our familiarity with a work influences our response upon hearing it. Prior knowledge of the original may lead a listener to concentrate more rigorously on a performance of a piano transcription of a Brahms sextet. A third example acknowledges the specific history of one's engagement with a work. For example, on a particular occasion one might have a quite new experience of the piece being played, so that one suddenly discovers more of its richness and complexity.

Higgins makes a number of interesting observations about these cases: Professional musicians sometimes have the most idiosyncratic perspectives. Also, though the reactions are idiosyncratic, they are motivated and conditioned by objective features of the music. Lastly, what is salient to listeners varies

with their backgrounds. Whereas some people extol the private experience of music, others, including performers, see music as a social enterprise.

## 2. Meaning-for-us

In characterizing the meaning music has for a person, we have stressed its significance for the individual. Now we should ask if musical meaning has a wider scope. As well as meaning-for-the-subject, is there meaning-for-us? There is reason to think so. No human society is without music and there is hardly an individual who would not claim that music plays an important role in her life. The description of someone as without a shred of interest in music conveys an odor of criticism. Musical meaning-for-the-person is too haphazard and private to account adequately for the ubiquity of music, for its vital importance to the life of societies and to so many individuals. Indeed, the power and tenacity of musical meaning-for-the-individual probably depends on the deeper importance that music has in the lives of people. It is not an accident, after all, that music happens to be playing during rites of passage, courtship, war, and the rest. So, it should be possible to explain how and why music has meaning for humankind in general.

Apparently music answers to a deep human need. We might expect, then, that it serves a fundamental evolutionary function. But what could this be? The emotional heightening of human speech? This suggestion, and all the others that come to mind, strike us as unconvincing. Music making and listening do not contribute to the fitness of our species in a direct and obvious fashion.

Perhaps music is important to us not because it serves a single purpose but because it addresses a very broad spread of our interests and concerns. Perhaps it is significant because it is so versatile, contributing in small and different ways to a large variety of tasks and activities. Undoubtedly it does this, yet this fact does not explain the unity of music's appeal. Even if we do not all like the same kinds of music, we are agreed that it is music that is important for us and that its import is as music. Moreover, many people would claim that their enjoyment of music is an end in itself. This suggests that the approaches taken so far are mistaken in seeking a purely functional account of music's importance.

Here is a different kind of story. We are a social species. Our relationships with people are of deep evolutionary importance to us. We must be able to understand others so that we can live cooperatively with them, which

we must do if we are to flourish and reproduce. In attempting to understand our fellows, we look for a coherent, unified pattern in their actions. We expect their response to their situation to be shaped by their reasons and character. To understand them, we must treat them as agents; what they do cannot be understood merely in terms of crudely mechanical causal processes. Our goal in understanding others, of course, is to be able to predict their future behavior. Often this is not easy to do. The problem is not just that a person can act irrationally, or out of character, but that it is not simple always to predict, for the range of conduct that is in character, which will result. Though we strive with success to be mind-readers, our talents are limited, so that sometimes it is only in retrospect that we see how a person's action is consistent with his character and circumstances.

Because of the abiding importance of sociality in our lives, we are inescapably motivated to seek coherence and pattern in human behavior, and we account for it in terms of the agent's reasons and character, not mechanically deterministic processes. So strong is it, that drive can overflow itself. It does so when non-human systems or processes attract our interest and reward our attention through their apparent simulation of human behavior, or because their nature seems to invite the sort of explanation that is apt for human action. Music is of this latter kind. Our fascination with music comes from an evolutionary function with which it is connected only indirectly.

A complementary account starts from the realization that, besides our ability to detect coherence, a capacity for empathy is a second crucial endowment of human beings. Empathy plays a pivotal role in reconciling two fundamental data of human life: our existence as self-contained units in a world of innumerable many similar self-contained units, and the social nature of our relationships to others. Only by associating himself with others can the individual realize himself. Thus, one of the most important things a human being has to learn is how to develop solid relationships with others. For this, empathy is indispensable.

Strong relationships exist only on the basis of empathy. To develop the deeply-rooted relationships a person needs in order to live a bearable life, he must be able to identify with the other. And while less intimate public relations sometimes can be approached in a more impersonal fashion, still there are many situations in which others' actions are comprehensible only from an empathic stance. If people get emotional, for example if they are easily irritated or

unexpectedly burst out in laughter, often we can understand them only by trying to put ourselves in their position.

Being able to deal with other individuals, and in particular, being able to respond to the other with empathy, goes beyond survival or self-maintenance. Empathy allows the individual to flourish in ways unthinkable for the self-contained individual. In terms of their depth and richness, empathy provides the basis for the most valued relationships in life: those of love and friendship. In terms of broadness, empathy allows us to expand our life by experiencing what it is like to live in circumstances that we do not know at first-hand. Artforms, like the novel and film, exploit this fact of human life. These media are attractive because, through our empathic engagement with the characters they present, they allow us to share experiences we will never encounter in our normal lives.

As the case of music shows, empathy does not stop short with real-life persons or fictional characters. Our experience of musical form is empathic; we identify ourselves with the movement of music. Like our motivation to look for coherence and pattern, our tendency to respond with empathy to music's form may be the happy outcome of an overflow of our social drives. By harnessing our indispensable capacities to perceive coherence in, and to respond with empathy to, human action, music presents us with a fascinating extension of experience, thereby adding significantly to the worthwhileness of our lives.

To suggest that music is an inessential spin-off from evolution is not to deny its deeper meaning-for-us. In virtue of its tremendous appeal to our empathic capacities, music can resolve the isolation we find ourselves in as individuals. The desire to transcend the boundaries of the self is one of the Ur-themes of human life, as its prominence in myth and religion testifies. Many religions take the merging of the individual with a higher reality to be the ultimate purpose of human existence. Whatever one may think of them, such visions attest to an enduring tendency in human beings. The triumph of individualism during the last centuries has not been so complete as to obliterate the human desire to escape the confines of the ego.

When putting ourselves affectively in the position of another, ordinarily we remain aware of the boundary between ourselves and that person. With music, however, we can be carried away; we can approach the psychological state of self-forgetfulness. Music has this power, apparently, in virtue of, not in spite of, its abstractness; music provides us with an opportunity for unlimited

empathy but at the same time it does not confront us with life-like situations featuring definite personas. The combination of deep affective and cognitive immersion with a situation in which concrete practical needs and interests are absent appears to produce the best condition for transcendent experiences.

The line of thought developed here can also account for a more down-to-earth dimension of musical meaning-for-us: music's tendency to promote coherence within social groups. In responding to music empathically, we collectively give ourselves to something suprapersonal, rather than identifying ourselves with some individual. Consequently, collective musical engagement provides an ideal picture of social coherence: there is both the coordination of individual actions and the intense devotion to something surpassing the realm of the individual. When successfully engaging in music as a group, we do not merely share a great experience, we also promote our sense of belonging together, our belief in our capacity for effective collective action, and our joint commitment to ideals that go beyond our private well-being.

### **3. Conclusion**

In Part One we discussed the experience of music's formal meaning. In Part Two we turned to what appeared to be a distinct, though equally non-linguistic, model of musical significance: that in which music has meaning for an individual through the way it contributes to the fabric of her life. This led to considerations in more general terms of how and why music has meaning for us. It does so because our experience of music is in important respects analogous to the way we experience human beings. First, music is more like a person in her actions than like a machine in its movements. Being programmed by evolution to be especially interested in understanding actions as forming coherent patterns, we respond to the dynamics of music in a way that parallels our reaction to human behaviors. Second, our response to the quasi-gestures of music is one of empathy. We identify ourselves with these gestures, appropriating them rather than relating them to some persona in the music. There are two more specific ways empathic responses relate to the meaning music has for us: by providing a sense of liberation from the boundaries of the self and by promoting social coherence.

These, admittedly speculative, views provide a route for connecting the notions of formal meaning and meaning-for-us. Earlier we characterized the experience of following musical form with understanding and empathy. What was missing from that account was an explanation of why we would value the

experience achieved by this mode of listening. And that was a significant lack, if one wants to privilege the kind of listening that takes the detailed unfolding of the music as its prime focus and motivation.

As is now clear, the experience of formal musical meaning not only conforms to a model that subsumes our experience of the integrity and rationality of human action but also builds on the empathic nature of human interaction. In light of these connections, it is easier to appreciate why an interest in following dynamic musical form could be a source of deep and lasting pleasure in its own right.

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## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> This article was made possible by a grant of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). We would like to thank Wouter van Haaften for his many helpful comments on the subject matter.
- <sup>ii</sup> Peter Kivy, Music Alone (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 8-9.
- <sup>iii</sup> Philip Alperson, What is Music? (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 16.
- <sup>iv</sup> Malcolm Budd, Values of Art (London: Penguin Press, 1995), p. 127.
- <sup>v</sup> Stephen Davies, Musical Meaning and Expression (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1994), p. 48.
- <sup>vi</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 35.
- <sup>vii</sup> Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music, pp. 32-35.
- <sup>viii</sup> Wilson Coker, Music and Meaning (New York: Free Press, 1972), p. 61; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Music and Discourse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 102 ff; Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), vol. 3, pp. 704-05; Lucy Green, Music on Deaf Ears (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), ch. 2 & 3; Wilfried Nöth, Handbook of Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 431-32.
- <sup>ix</sup> Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music, p. 34.
- <sup>x</sup> Coker, Music and Meaning, p. 61.
- <sup>xi</sup> Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music, passim, and Music, the Arts, and Ideas, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) ch. 1.
- <sup>xii</sup> Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music, p. 34 ff; also see Music, the Arts, and Ideas, pp. 5-14.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Cf. Davies, "The Expression of Emotion in Music," Mind 89 (1980): 74-75.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Roger Scruton, "Analytic Philosophy and the Meaning of Music," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 46, (1987): 171 & 174.

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- xv Carl Dahlhaus, "Das 'Verstehen' von Musik und die Sprache der musikalischen Analyse [Musical 'Understanding' and the Language of Musical Analysis]," in Musik und Verstehen, eds. Peter Faltin and Hans-Peter Reinecke (Cologne: Arno Volk, 1973), pp. 39-40. See also Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 19.
- xvi E.g., Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music.
- xvii Ernst Kurth, Ernst Kurth: Selected Writings, ed. and trans. by Lee A. Rothfarb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- xviii E.g., Coker, Music and Meaning, ch. 3; Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music, pp. 352-64; Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), passim.
- xix For an elaborate treatment of the role of imagination in music see: Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music, pp. 16-96.
- xx Scruton takes musical qualities to be a specific class of tertiary qualities, which are different from secondary qualities in that their perception also involves intellect and imagination. Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music, p. 160.
- xxi For an analysis of the characteristics of the comprehending listener, see Jerrold Levinson, The Pleasures of Aesthetics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), ch. 3.
- xxii Levinson, Music in the Moment (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- xxiii Ibid., pp. 33-34.
- xxiv Cf. Davies, "Review of Jerrold Levinson's Music in the Moment," Philosophical Quarterly 49 (1999): 404-05.
- xxv Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 197-98.
- xxvi Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music, p. 352.
- xxvii The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 383. Our use of "empathy" should not be associated with Aaron Ridley's idiosyncratic distinction between a sympathetic and an empathetic response, the former being associated with a mirroring response to the expressiveness of music, the second with one's hearing the



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music as a manifestation of a persona. Aaron Ridley, Music, Value & the Passions (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>xxviii</sup> One who does so is Levinson in The Pleasures of Aesthetics, pp. 107 ff. For a criticism of the idea that appreciation of music's expressiveness necessarily involves the invocation of a persona, see Davies, "Contra the Hypothetical Persona in Music," in Emotion and the Arts, eds. M. Hjort and S. Laver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 96-107.

<sup>xxix</sup> Alan Goldman, "The Value of Music," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 50 (1992): p. 42.

<sup>xxx</sup> Cf. Levinson, Music in the Moment, passim.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, "Musical Idiosyncrasy and Perspectival Listening," in Music and Meaning, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 83-102.