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General Theories of Art versus Music

I claim that music provides a test-case for many general theories of art; not because all arts aspire to the condition of music but for the prosaic reason that its distinctive character easily is overlooked. General theories must deal with the spread of arts and must respect the ways in which the arts differ. Judging by the subject of publications, more theorists are expert in literature or painting than in music. Where the ground is unfamiliar, the theorist is more likely to stumble. And even if she is expert on music, she might pay undue regard to the dominant artforms. Because music has its own nature, it is useful to look to music in seeking counter-examples to the hypotheses proposed in broadly based theories. In Part I I outline some features distinguishing (mainly Western, “art”) music from (mainly Western, “art”) literature and painting. In other parts I argue that aspects of some general theories - Danto’s end of art thesis, Goodman’s account of expression, and Walton’s theory of artworks as representations - do not readily accommodate the case of music.

The ontic character of musical works distinguishes them from works of literature and painting. Musical works typically admit of multiple instances, as do literary works and prints (if not watercolours and oils) but, whereas literary works and prints are completed by the production of a model instance, this usually is not so in music. The musical piece is composed when the final version of its score is produced, if the work has a score. By contrast, an author who has produced the plan of a novel, or a painter who offers sketches for a painting, or an artist who makes blocks for a print has yet to produce the work. It follows that, for music but not for literature and painting, a work might exist in the absence of any instances. Moreover, while very different-sounding performances of a musical work might be equally faithful to its score, the various instances of a novel or print usually resemble each other closely. Accordingly, for music but not for literature or painting, an account of the relation between the work and its instances involves close consideration of the difference between essential and constitutive properties.

Most musical works, as well as involving performance, are written for performance and in this differ from literature and paintings. The performer's role is a creative one, for the composer's specification underdetermines the properties an accurate instance of the work possesses. Musical works admit of interpretation not only by the audience or critic but also by the performer, whereas literary works and paintings allow for interpretations of the former type only. Moreover, in contrast to a prevalent view in literary theory, I maintain that the audience's or critic's accounts, unlike the musician's interpretation in performance, do not generate instances of the artwork. Any adequate theory must capture the fact that musical works are mediated by

performances as literary texts and paintings are not. Performances have properties, including artistically important ones, such as that of being too slow, the work does not. Given our interest in musical works as the works of their composers, the performer, who provides the only access for many to the work, owes duties to the audience and composer that the critic of literature or painting does not owe to the author or artist or their audiences. And given our interest in the efforts of the performer as well as those of the composer, the performer is a focus of attention, whereas the critic of literature or painting rarely is. Because composers usually write for performance, a concern with the performer's role is not separable from an interest in the composer's achievement; an appreciation of what is involved in coaxing the sounds specified by the composer from congeries of wood, bamboo, bone, gut, hide, hair, and metal is relevant to understanding not only the performance but also the work. All these considerations suggest that general theories of interpretation and evaluation require special subtlety if they are to be adequate to the complexities of the musical case.

Though everyone seems to enjoy some, much music preserves a distance between itself and the public because it relies on a distinctive notation, because criticism makes use of a technical vocabulary - third-inversion minor-ninth on the flattened supertonic, for example - and because its analysis involves theories frightening in their complexity and level of abstraction. The average auditor is alienated from some music and ways of talking about music, whereas the novel and painting are more accessible to their publics. Ignorance of music theory and techniques of analysis does not prevent people from enjoying music but it does inhibit their descriptions of music and its effects; music often is characterised in terms of emotions, or images, or as conveying the

ineffable. The relation between the appreciator and the artwork is less straightforward in music than in literature or painting.

It is no longer fashionable for general theories to be formalist; usually art now is described as semantic or semiotic - as symbolic, denotative, “about,” representing; as saying something that invites interpretation. Even where it is abstract, painting takes as its background the tradition of figurative work. Though song, music-drama, and programme music have their traditions, three hundred years of purely instrumental works reveal music as intractably abstract at heart. A general theory narrowly based on literature and painting might underestimate the extent to which some artworks are mainly formal in their appeal. Even where music is expressive and is appreciated as such, the response to music usually is less directly determined by the work’s contents than is so for literature and painting.

II

Arthur Danto, following Hegel, has argued that art has attained its end, this being a philosophically-based self-understanding.ⁱ Art is produced in this, the post-historical era, but it has nothing new to say. The end of art commenced with the Fauves in 1905; in the middle of the end Duchamp moved things along; the end of the end arrived with Pop Art. The start of the end was prompted by painters’ recognising that the goal of mimetic faithfulness could better be attained in other ways, such as by the motion picture. This led them not to abandon painting but to rethink its purpose, which was revealed not as the incarnation of “external” reality but as the exploration of painting as an art. Post-Dada works pose the philosophical question that exposes (to Danto) the very nature of art: how can something be art when it looks just the same as

things that are not art? Danto answers that, unlike mere things, the artwork requires an interpretation not invited by other human, social products if it is to be recognised for what it is; as art, what it “says” depends on the style and the character of the medium of presentation, not merely on the subject presented. In showing this about itself, art laid bare its intrinsic character. The art of the present, if authentic in character and motivation, might retrace these steps to self-revelation but it cannot break new ground. Danto is led to his theory by his deep interest in contemporary painting, but he means the account to apply to other arts. For example, he attacks the view that the point of art is self-expression by noting that this view does not accommodate literature. Danto’s end of art thesis is not solely about painting; it is a theory about the Fine Arts, including music.

In some ways music has followed painting over the past 100 years - Impressionism, Expressionism, Neo-classicism, Minimalism. Some of Cage’s efforts and some musique concrète recall Dada. And, for many, the musical world fell apart early this century, the time that Danto identifies as marking the crisis in painting. Brutal discords, jagged rhythms, and the disintegration of metrical regularity marked Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring and led to comparison with Cubism. At the same time, Schönberg put the last nail in the coffin of tonality as a melodic and structural force. Without the gravitational pull of tonality, music lifted free of its past, just as the move away from figurative painting liberated that artform. Such parallels are superficial, however. It is not clear that music was turned on its head early this century. For example, twelve-tone technique proved consistent with a style of composition that relied on establishing tonal centres, especially so if the composer was prepared to bend the “rules,” as both Schönberg and Berg

were. Schönberg's Ode to Napoleon is markedly tonal and Stravinsky's later application of dodecaphonic method remains in line with his tonal/modal predilections. Moreover, twelve-tone practices hark back to musical devices with a long tradition of use. This is not to deny the drama of the changes in compositional practice between 1913 and 1923 but there is little in what happened then to support the idea that music achieved the kind of self-realisation Danto describes for painting.

The history of music has seen more dramatic revolutions than the one beginning eighty years ago. One was the move from monody to polyphony started by Léonin, Pérotin, and their followers. No less startling were the developments between 1600 and 1770 leading to the collapse of the church modes, for this revolution coincided with significant changes across the entire musical spectrum, including the birth of purely instrumental music, a move from counterpoint to accompanied melody, a move from sequential and cyclic forms to developmental ones, the first appearance of many instruments we associate with the modern era and the loss of others, a shift from the religious to the secular with the fall of patronage along with a rise in public concerts and the growth of opera in the vernacular. If the question about the nature of music ever has been posed from inside the artform then it was so in this period, not the twentieth-century. Yet, if this did occur, it did not mark the end of music's historical development.

Danto's thesis is not without plausibility for the musical case, for one finds in contemporary "serious" music the lack of direction, alienation from the public, and eclecticism symptomatic of art's post-historical phase in his view. He insists that the alterations of this century are philosophically more fundamental than the artistic revolutions of the past. But, this claim is not attractive where music is the subject, even if it

applies to painting. While there have been periods when composers aimed at mimetic faithfulness to expressive human utterance, at representation, or at symbolism, composers rarely have treated the exploration of the medium of sound as subsidiary to other artistic goals. Purely instrumental styles since 1650 constantly have focused on the organisation of sound not for the sake of mimesis or reference but for realising the artistic potential of musical materials within stylistic constraints. The features in twentieth-century music that Danto might deem to illustrate his thesis seem more readily explained by reference to factors other than the achievement in music of self-knowledge. For instance, “high” music now operates at a level of technical sophistication that excludes most listeners. It may be that these auditors are too lazy to make the effort required or that they have found the effort not to be adequately rewarded. In either event, once the audience is lost it cannot easily be recaptured, for often it is possible to make sense of what is happening in a work only where one is familiar with the current musical scene. Neither is it easy or appropriate for contemporary composers to turn their backs on the intricacies and complexities that have drawn them to the craft they practice. They are professionals writing for an amateur audience and the skills they display have become so refined that their audience has difficulty recognising the game as the musical one. Another, external, factor appeals to much wider economic, cultural, and political concerns. That Apollon Musagète follows Rite of Spring seems to have as much to do with social differences between the eve of war and the arrival of peace as it does with a move toward philosophical consciousness-raising. Nowadays, with the decline of the liberal style of education, people are taught less often to play musical instruments or to listen to music. This has not resulted in the demise of music but, instead, in the growth of a popular music that demands less careful attention and

can be accessed, thanks to technology, by the flick of knob. I suspect that it is the changing place and function of music in social life, rather than philosophical enlightenment, that accounts for the present condition of music as an artform.

Danto rarely discusses musical examples, but he writes this:

‘There is a curious and rather touching passage in the Autobiography of John Stuart Mill, in which that philosopher responds with considerable melancholy to the thought that sooner rather than later, music will all be used up. There are only, Mill reflected, a finite number of combinations of a finite number of tones, so before too long all the melodies possible will have been discovered and there will be nothing left to compose. The augmentation of the octave by the twelve-tone scale, something Mill of course had not counted on, would but postpone an inevitable exhaustion, and the future history of music must be repetitions of all the combinations of tones that there are.’ⁱⁱ

While Danto does not examine Mill’s argument, plainly he offers it as illustrating his thesis about the end of art, yet I find it unconvincing.

First, is it true that there are only twelve notes? The modern piano has 93 keys, each producing a different pitched tone, but, for the sake of the discussion, let us accept the identity of octaves, not merely their equivalence. Competent musicians playing instruments that allow for intonations other than those of even temperament play different notes as between, say, G-flat and F-sharp, but let us also ignore the subtle differences between enharmonic equivalents. Now, are composers restricted to the twelve notes of the chromatic scale? - obviously not. Bartok and others used quarter-tones in their works; the blue notes of jazz depart from the standard chromatic scale. Again, let us reject these cases

merely as decorative aberrations present only in some musical sub-styles. Not so easily dismissed, though, are the non-chromatic scales employed in Indonesia, China, Japan, and India, for these are no less normative for the music of these cultures than is the chromatic scale for Occidentals. To take the Javanese example, both pelog and slendro contain notes that “fall in the cracks,” but these scales lay the foundation for the modal (patet) system (Manyura, Lima, Nem, Barong) lying at the heart of the music and it is against the background of these modes that pitch deviations for stylistic effect (sliring) are encouraged. If one lifts one’s gaze above the horizon of Western music, it is clear that there are many ways of dividing the octave; the number 12 is not musically sacred.

Suppose, however, that it is not possible for Western composers and musicians to increase the number of notes beyond twelve. Would this indicate that the end of music as we know it lies before us? - I think not. Musical works do not stop the moment they have included all twelve tones of the chromatic scale; they go on using those notes in different combinations. Moreover, pitches are used simultaneously as well as in succession; harmony and counterpoint long have been a feature of Western music. Yet more, pitch is not the only musical parameter that is variable. Hundreds of different instruments, not to mention taped sounds and synthesisers, are available to the composer. At least 128 differences in duration are in common use and these may be used in every possible combination. Metre might come in any multiple of 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13 or 17 and can vary bar by bar. There are no discrete units of volume, but, conservatively, about twenty degrees are discriminated. Likewise, subtle aspects of attack and decay are difficult to codify, as are the details of phrasing, but many varieties of articulation are recognised. Finally, add to this that instrumentation, rhythm, metre, dynamics,

articulation, and phrasing often are distinctive to each voice. Taking all together, an astronomically huge number of possibilities - more than enough to provide musical masterpieces for the next few thousand years - are available to the composer. If the parameters are finite, so too will be the product of their factorial values, but this is not the kind of finitude of which the end of art will be made.

III

Nelson Goodman offers a general theory of art according to which artworks are symbol systems aiming at denotation.ⁱⁱⁱ The various arts are marked by differences in the syntactic features of their symbol systems and artworks are distinguished from other types of symbol by the manner of their use, which directs attention to, rather than through, them.

Goodman addresses music in some detail but these aspects of his account have famously counterintuitive aspects. He holds that a performance containing a single wrong note fails to instance the work it purports to characterise; also, that a performance spanning a decade (so slow is it) nevertheless correctly instances the work in question. Instead of considering such issues, however, I concentrate on Goodman's account of expression as metaphoric exemplification.

Goodman holds that P exemplifies a property, Q, if P possesses Q, denotes Q-ness, and does so via its possessing Q. Things which function as samples exemplify the properties they model. Metaphoric exemplification differs only in that the property in question is possessed metaphorically rather than literally. I might use an English sheepdog to exemplify the property of shaggy-doggedness literally, or a shaggy dog tale to do so metaphorically. Where a property is exemplified metaphorically, it is expressed, according to Goodman.

An obvious response to Goodman's account is that it presupposes, rather than explains, expressiveness. Exemplification involves the use of a thing lending itself to that use because it possesses the property in question. Music can be used to exemplify sadness because it is sad and it is so whether or not it is given that use. This criticism might be thought to apply only to properties possessed literally. Goodman's theory faces more difficulties, however, when we turn to his notion of metaphoric exemplification. All properties might be described metaphorically, so Goodman should distinguish metaphoric descriptions from descriptions of metaphorically exemplified properties; he should distinguish between saying Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 is more zebra than horse and saying its last movement is sad in tone. The work does not express zebra-ness, but does express (in Goodman's terms, metaphorically exemplify) sadness. For Goodman, the distinction seems to reduce to one between the metaphoric account of a literally exemplified property and the literal account of a metaphorically exemplified property. That is, for musical sadness, such metaphoricity as the description contains derives from what is described rather than from the description's use.

I attempted to clarify the notion of possession by attending to its metaphoricity, but this revealed that the relevant notion of metaphoricity can be explained in its turn only as a type of possession. Therefore I conclude that expressiveness is conceived by Goodman as a complexly unitary property, not as one standing on two legs, metaphor and exemplification. This explains, I think, why analyses of literal possession and linguistic metaphor fail to clarify Goodman's account. But I also conclude that the irreducibility of the notion leads to obscurity rather than analytical perspicuity. In the case of literature and painting, where the expressiveness in the work often concerns the feelings of a

described or depicted character, Goodman's approach might seem plausible; the character displays his feelings and does so non-literally to the extent that he is non-actual. It is in connection with the musical case, where it is the work itself that is expressive, that the emptiness of Goodman's analysis is more evident. Here one confronts the key idea: that it is the music, not the manner of its describing or depicting, that is metaphoric. The result, I claim, exposes Goodman's talk of metaphoric exemplification as an obscure, unanalysed metaphor contributing little to an understanding of what it is for music or art in general to be expressive.

IV

According to Kendall Walton, a representation is something the function of which is to serve as a prop in a game of make-believe.^{iv} Artworks, including music, have this function. Depiction is a sub-species of representation in this view. Few musical works are depictive, according to Walton, but they are, in his special use of the term, representations, and, in that respect, are like other artworks. The games of make-believe in which artworks feature depend on the exercise of imagination. The type of imagination that concerns Walton involves thoughts entertained (whether or not they also are believed). So it is, in his account, that representations always are fictions. In viewing a painting, for example, one takes it as fictional that the perceptual act of seeing what is depicted in the work is an act of seeing an actual thing; in reading a novel one takes it as fictional that one is hearing a narrated tale.

Now Walton obviously intends his account to apply to music. Does it do so comfortably? I deny this in considering the case of absolute, rather than depictive, music. Does the listener engage in a game of make-believe when she hears the theme of a symphony? She

hears the theme in the notes, as opposed merely to hearing a succession of tones, I accept. In Walton's view, "hearing in" involves the imagination, and in doing so, marks the auditor's experience as one of make-believe. Moreover, the attempt to hear the theme is one authorised and prescribed for music, so, in Walton's view, the listener is engaged in a game of make-believe. For my part, I doubt that hearing the theme involves the kind of imagination that must be central to Walton's thesis. Perhaps it does take imagination to organise the perceptual manifold, but, if so, the type involved is one found also in veridical perception rather than the variety characteristic of make-believe. The auditor does not hear the notes as if they are a theme, she does not entertain the thought that they constitute a theme, for she would make no mistake in taking them for a theme. In this case the imagination is required not in taking something for what is not (paint for a barn, say) but to constitute it as it is. It is not fictional that those notes comprise the theme and it is not fictional of the listener that she hears the theme. As I understand it, the imagination lying at the heart of make-believe is not involved in the experience of hearing the theme.

Those who would defend a "seeing in" account of pictorial depiction have charged that Walton's theory misses the irreducibly perceptual element of the experience of seeing a barn in a painting.^v If pictorial depictions invite use as props in games of make-believe, this is because they are seen to be depictive, not vice versa. Walton replies that the seeing in theory and his own might be complementary and counters with the observation that such theorists appeal weakly to the familiarity of the experience of seeing in but fail to analyse its character. He intimates that his own theory gives the missing analysis, thereby shoring up the seeing in account.

Though this objection to Walton's account has force, it seems to me that this is more apparent in music than in pictorial depiction. For pictorial representations, Walton always can insist that imagination is involved since we do not take the depiction for what it depicts. Having secured a role for make-believe, he then can roll into view the full apparatus of make-believe games. It is the musical case described above that reveals more clearly the difficulty to which Walton's critics allude, for there is no scope here (I believe) to integrate the perceptual experience of hearing the melody with a fiction-context. And if that point can be generalised, it shows that it is far from clear that Walton's theory could make good the (alleged) deficiencies of a seeing in account of depiction.

Walton's discussion of music, brief though it is in comparison with the attention he pays to painting and to literature, indicates how he might reply to this objection. He emphasises that motion and emotion are heard in music. It might be held that one cannot hear a theme without hearing musical motion, patterns of tension and release, and that hearing this motion inevitably involves make-believe, since it is fictional that the music moves, or that one hears movement in it. Similarly, perception of the theme's expressive character must involve make-believe, for it must be fictional that the theme is sad. Walton concedes that, where absolute music is expressive, frequently it expresses struggle or emotion from no point of view; not only might we have no idea why there is struggle, we hear that struggle neither as our own nor as that of another. Nevertheless, whatever else might be lacking from the experience, Walton maintains that awareness of the motion and emotion in the music involves the listener in a game of make-believe.

I reject the attempt to introduce here the species of imagination on which make-believe is founded because I do not agree that it is fictional of the listener that she hears motion or emotion in music. In music there is no individual identifiable independently of its location that moves from place to place through time, but this is no reason to think that the listener make-believes that there is such an individual in hearing musical movement. It is, instead, reason to question the exclusivity of this paradigm of movement. We allow that the Dow Jones index goes up and down day by day, and we would not regard such talk as non-literal, as founded on make-believe, but this is another case in which no individual moves. We talk of movement in connection with process as well as individuals, and, in doing so, we talk literally. Musical movement is that of process, I maintain; I see no virtue in appeal to make-believe in explaining the phenomenal experience of such motion.

Though the matter is too complex to pursue here, also I think one might treat musical expressiveness in a similar fashion. Music does not feel emotions, but it could literally possess expressive properties if it presents appearances of emotions (as do masks and willow trees). Many, including myself, have argued for such an account. In that case, perceiving and reacting to music's expressiveness need not involve make-believing the expressiveness to be an agent's, or the composer's, or one's own.

It may be that talk of both motion and emotion in music relies on secondary meanings; we do not and perhaps could not teach children the meanings of the relevant words starting exclusively with musical examples. But there is no reason to regard all secondary uses as involving fiction contexts, as relying on make-believe. That is, I see no explanatory value to be derived from treating all non-primary uses as

non-literal. If they once were metaphoric, this long since ceased to be. So, if talk of musical motion and emotion does not require explanation in terms of games of make-believe, it is hard to see what prescribed, authorised role for games of make-believe could remain in music appreciation. That is, it is difficult, I find, to consider such musical works as representations in Walton's special sense of the term and, for that reason, I question the success of his attempt to provide a general theory of the nature of art.

Before closing I pause to draw attention to a case in which Walton explicitly claims^{vi} that his theory covers music but in which it does not. He explains why we can experience suspense and surprise in reading a novel with which we are already familiar by distinguishing between what we know of the fiction (how it will turn out) and what is fictional of us in reading it (that we do not know what will happen). To participate in the game of make-believe authorised for novels is knowingly (and, if necessary, counterfactually) to accept as part of the fiction-context that one does not know what will happen. The same strategy explains the response to the musical work, he says; it is fictional that the listener expects the tonic after a dominant seventh, despite her knowing from previous listenings that that expectation is to be defeated, and it is what is fictional that dominates the listener's experience given her commitment to engaging in the game approved for music. Walton suggests that it is a rule of the make-believe games authorised for novels and symphonies (as artworks) that it is fictional that one is encountering them for the first time. He also points out that no such rule applies to a person viewing a painting as an artwork; it is not a fiction of the relevant game that the viewer of a painting lacks prior experience of the look of the painting.

I doubt that the “rules” authorised for the musical case correspond to those for novels rather than paintings; that is, I deny of the relevant game that it is fictional of the auditor that she is encountering the piece for the first time. If she is hearing the work for the first time it would be inappropriate for her to entertain the idea that she knows it well, but if she does know it well is it appropriate for her to make-believe that she does not? I doubt this, for it commonly is recognised that musical works invite many hearings and that a grasp of subtle musical details might depend on repeated listenings. Perhaps the listener can fully appreciate the character of the second subject in the exposition only if she recalls, from a prior listening, its idiosyncratic combination with the first subject in the recapitulation. “Causation” works backward as often as forward in music; listeners are to bring with them knowledge acquired in other meetings with the work when they participate anew in the game of listening to the piece.

Walton purports to explain how it is that the listener can be surprised by a false recapitulation when she knows the work already. Just as the reader of a novel should make-believe he is hearing the tale narrated for the first time, so the listener to a symphony should make-believe she is hearing the work for the first time. Through this act of the imagination, the listener is surprised in the fiction context by what she hears, he holds. But Walton’s explanation relies on the unargued claim that a rule authorised for novel-reading applies similarly to music-listening. This assertion might seem plausible - some such rule is authorised for novel-reading and the sequence of events is an artistically significant feature in both literature and music but not in painting - but, once examined, can be seen to be false. Walton’s attempt to generalise from the literary to the musical case fails, I conclude. His account does

not explain why an experienced listener might be surprised on subsequent occasions by something that was unexpected on a first hearing.

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- i See especially The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
- ii The State of the Art, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 202-203.
- iii See especially Languages of Art, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).
- iv See especially Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- v For example, see Richard Wollheim's 'A Note On Mimesis as Make-Believe,' Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 51 (1991): 401-406 and David Novitz's 'Kendall Walton's Mimesis as Make-Believe,' Philosophy and Literature, 15 (1991): 118-128. For replies, see Walton's 'Reply to Reviewers,' Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 51 (1991): 413-431 and Stephan L. Burton's 'Novitz on Walton,' Philosophy and Literature, 15 (1991): 295-301.
- vi Mimesis as Make-Believe, 261-264.