

Absolute Music and Ideal Content: Autonomy, Sensation and Experience in Arthur Symons's "Theory of Musical Aesthetics"

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A trained belletrist, with culture and a style, coming among us merely musical people and showing us that musical criticism may be made a branch of literature, and that a musical article can be made a really readable performance. Few professional musical men, I grieve to say, could write half so interestingly about literature as Mr. Symons writes about music; our style is as a rule too heavy and our culture too light.

Ernest Newman, "Mr. Arthur Symons on Richard Strauss" 35

This recommendation of the music criticism of Arthur Symons (1865–1945) was penned by Ernest Newman (1868–1959), a leading British music critic who was not usually in the habit of lavishing such praise on his critical contemporaries. These words are all the more surprising when one considers that Newman and Symons shared very little common ground in their respective outlooks. Symons was of course known primarily as a literary critic, a devotee of the work of Walter Pater, facilitator of the transmission of modern French literature to English writers, and one of the great 'circulators' of *fin de siècle* aestheticism.¹ Newman's critical mandate, on the other hand, was conditioned by his rationalist and freethought associations. He was instrumental in advocating a more "scientific" approach to music criticism in England—an agenda that was explicitly pitted against the prevailing "subjective," "dogmatic" or "impressionistic" critical styles—at a time when the profession was in the process of radical transformation.² Further, Symons was an avowed Wagnerian, together with his literary contemporaries George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley and George Moore. He was an active member of a culture of British Wagnerism that reached its highpoint in the 1890s, whose adherents, following their symbolist counterparts on the continent, drew from Wagner's writings more than his music.³ In contrast, though Newman was in no doubt of Wagner's musical genius, he was a vocal anti-Wagnerian when it came to the composer's philosophy, publishing the scathing *A Study of Wagner* in 1899⁴ only a year after Shaw's celebratory *A Perfect Wagnerite*.

In light of these divergent tendencies, it is no surprise that Newman devoted the remainder of the article in which the opening approbation appeared to rebutting what he called the "theory of musical aesthetics" upon which Symons's critical views were based. But to what extent can Symons's music criticism be said to aspire to the level of theory, and if it does, then what is the content or normative foundation of that theory? How effectively can it be said to have taken account of or contributed to the major aesthetic concerns of the time in the musical sphere? And—in a point specifically put at issue by Newman—what impact did Symons's literary personality have on his views on music?

In what follows, I seek not only to discern the content of Symons's "musical aesthetics," such as it is, and to situate it within contemporaneous musical

discussions, but also to show how his perspective provides a crucial illumination of the interaction between literary and musical models of autonomy at the turn of the twentieth century. Symons can certainly be seen as distinctive in his facilitation of this interaction because he was the only aesthetic critic to engage directly with the musical repertory, as opposed to an abstracted concept of music—or, following Pater, the “condition” thereof. But further, I will argue that Symons’s transplantation into a musical context of a notion of literary autonomy that was shaped by his symbolist sympathies generated a range of conceptual paradoxes that can inform current attempts to revise our understanding of how the concept has functioned historically. For example, Symons’s devotion to Wagner seems antithetical when considered with reference to his position on “absolute” and “programme” music in his writings of the early years of the twentieth century, which clearly aligned him philosophically with some of the most vocal critics of Wagner. His position in this respect was avowedly conservative, derisive of “modern music” and beholden to views that were associated with the very essence of musical romanticism, yet arguments for autonomy and non-representation in instrumental music before World War I were also central to the harmonic and formal experiments of the modernist avant-garde, as well as to developments in literary modernism. In addition, both romantic and modernist conceptions of autonomy tended to have a special regard for the integrity of the musical text in an attempt to discern music’s essence, rather than the transient, sensual effect of its sounding form, yet for Symons, music attained its highest aesthetic function in performance. Equally, this tendency has often been associated with objectifying forms of analysis, yet Symons’s critical authority in his writings on music was grounded in the immediacy of his perspective as a “passionate spectator.” In these tensions, and others, Symons’s writings on music offer a conduit to complicating accepted accounts of the history of musical autonomy, including in discerning the living relationship between idealism, formalism, critical style and performance at the turn of the twentieth century.

Symons on Music

Despite Symons’s primary realm of influence being literary, his writings on non-literary art such as painting and dance have garnered some recent attention.⁵ In the early years of the twentieth century Symons wrote regular art criticism for the Anglo-French periodical the *Weekly Critical Review*, as well as for *Outlook* and the *Saturday Review*, and contributed accounts of his visits to variety theatre in London to journals such as *The Star*, *The Sketch* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

By comparison, contemporary readings of Symons’s music criticism have been scarce, and have generally focused on his rendering of popular entertainment forms, positioning him more as a cultural critic than a specifically musical critic. One particularly strong example of this type of study was Barry Faulk’s examination of Symons’s writings on music-hall for *The Star* newspaper and *The Fortnightly Review*. Faulk argued persuasively for the contemporary theoretical relevance of the intellectual persona or “pose” that Symons adopted in his writings about his experiences at variety halls such as the Alhambra and Empire in Leicester Square.⁶ Faulk examines how Symons’s critical pose as a self-avowed *aficionado* in these writings allowed him to occupy a position at the border of expert and amateur that saw him serve a translational function that undercut traditional cultural hierarchies. Symons’s critical pose here is cast as a form of cultural humanism, involving a powerful combination of critical distance and expert knowledge on the one hand, and

identification, passion, and intuitive engagement with free play on the other. Symons's critical pose, Faulk argues, seeks to maintain this counterbalance between distance and engagement for the purpose of incorporating non-canonical cultural forms into professional discussion—a mandate that clearly holds a great deal of insight for our own critical practices today. It is also clear that Symons's notion of the *aficionado*, similar to Baudelaire's "passionate spectator," may provide insight into his contribution to the criticism of Western art music forms, especially in relation to his ecstatic critical responses to musical performances and performers, and his focus on the sounding art of music and notion of music as an experience rather than a textual phenomenon.

Apart from Faulk's insightful investigation, there has been very little attention afforded to Symons's music criticism generally, especially his criticism of non-popular musical forms, or indeed to his "theory of musical aesthetics." Symons's writings on art music appear in two books specifically dedicated to non-literary arts: *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory* (1903) and *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906); and in the form of reviews in various journals around the turn of the century, especially intensifying in 1907 and 1908 in regular contributions to the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*. These writings cease just prior to Symons's mental breakdown—an illness that he partly attributed to Wagner's music (Sutton 78).

Symons's article on "The Music of Richard Strauss,"⁷ which raised both Newman's praise and ire, provides an excellent starting point in comprehending Symons's understanding of music. From the very outset of the article it is clear that Symons intends to use the music of Strauss as a vehicle for a wider discussion about music's capacity for representation and expression, capitalizing on Strauss's iconic status as a purveyor of extra-musical association through his extraordinary contributions to the genre of the "tone poem"—a symphonic, purely instrumental, form that contains narrative or conceptual allusions. For Symons, Strauss represented nothing less than the general tendencies of "modern music," and his strident criticism of Strauss acted as a platform for his advocacy of musical autonomy in opposition to these tendencies. Marking out his polemical position, Symons wrote that:

With the entrance of the "programme" into music, with the attempt to express pure idea, with the appeal to the understanding to make distinctions, music has at once forfeited all the more important of its advantages over the other arts, condescending to an equality which it can never even maintain; putting itself, in fact, at a willful disadvantage. [...] Music can call up mental states of a more profound, because of a more perfectly disembodied, ecstasy, than any other art, appealing, as it does, directly to the roots of emotion and sensation, and not indirectly, through any medium distinguishable by the understanding. But music can neither express nor suggest an idea apart from emotion or sensation. It cannot do so, not because of its limitations, but because of its infinite reach, because it speaks the language of a world which has not yet subdivided itself into finite ideas. (80–81)

Extending upon his notion that music should not be put to the service of ideas, and drawing heavily from Pater's conception of music as an ideal exemplar of pure form not beholden to its subject or content, Symons decried Strauss's *Also sprach*

Zarathustra, Op. 30 (1896) as a fallacious attempt to write “philosophical music”—a notion that he construed as antithetical to music itself (82). Symons conceded that the use of musical quotations in this and other works express “something approximating to an idea [sic]” but suggested that this kind of expression occurs not directly through music, but rather through literary or abstract association (83). Instead he advocated a purity of conceptless emotional expression in music, and implied deception or a lack of sincerity on the part of composers who attempt to convey the abstract and the emotional together, writing that “I must be sure that the emotion is there, that it makes and fills the form through which it speaks, that its place is not taken by a clever imitation of its outward and unessential part” (84).

Symons construed Strauss as being overly cerebral, as someone who:

feels through his brain, in whom emotion transforms itself into idea, rather than in whom idea is transfigured by emotion [...] He thinks with all his might, and he sets his thoughts to music. But does he think in music and what does his thinking come to? (84–5)

As Symons was proceeding from the assumption that music can only express emotion and sensation, rather than idea, any claim that Strauss is somehow unemotional clearly invites the intimation that he is in fact unmusical, and indeed later in the article Symons went even further, writing that:

Strauss has no fundamental musical ideas (ideas, that is, which are great as music, apart from their significance to the understanding, their non-musical significance) and he forces the intensity of his expression because of this lack of genuine musical material. (85)

It is clear from Symons’s writings on Strauss that he is not unmoved by the composer’s music—he admits for example that Strauss “delights you with his effects as effects” and that he certainly has a “genius for technique” (89). These remarks are faint praise, however, that foreshadow a far more damning criticism than that of being an unmusical composer (if that were possible): the very core of Symons’s critique of the type of music that incorporates non-musical elements is that it is insincere and transitory, rather than attaining the immortality of great works of art.

This core criticism appeared time and again throughout Symons’s polemical critique. He wrote for example, that in Strauss’s music “there is a feeling one had passed in front of some great illumination, as if one had feasted on colours, and wandered in the midst of clouds. But all is over, not a trace remains; there is no pulse ticking anywhere in one’s body” (86). Likening the plight of music under Strauss’s command to that of a “caged wild beast doing tricks under the whip of the keeper” (89), Symons wrote that Strauss “gives you sensation, but he gives it to you coldly, with a calculation of its effect upon you. He gives you colour in sound, but he gives you colour in great blotches, every one meant to dazzle you from a separate angle” (87).

Symons drove the critical knife even further still when he finally characterized Strauss’s music as “logic without life” (89), and contrasted the “vital sincerity” of great art with Strauss’s merely “clever music” (89). He concluded with a final damning comparison between Strauss and Wagner:

I play twenty pages of the piano score of “Feuersnot,” and as I play them I realize the immense ingenuity, the brilliant cleverness, of the music, all its effective qualities, its qualities of solid construction, its particular kind of mastery. Then I play a single page of “Parsifal” or of “Tristan,” and I am no longer in the same world. That other flashing structure has crumbled into dust, as if at the touch of an Ithuriel spear. Here I am at home, I hear remote and yet familiar voices, I am alive in the midst of life. I wonder that the other thing could have detained me for a moment, could have come, for a moment, so near to deceiving me. (91)

Symons’ Paterian sympathies were of course crucial to his position on musical autonomy, and indeed his discussion of Strauss proceeded from Pater’s famous rallying cry in “The School of Giorgione:”

“All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.” And of music because, “in its ideal, consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; and to it, therefore, to the condition of its perfect moments, all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire.” (80, quoting Pater, “The School of Giorgione,” 57)

Despite the exalted position allotted to music in Pater’s aesthetic theory, one is hard-pressed to find, as Patricia Herzog has observed, any real engagement with specific musical works in Pater’s writings (Herzog 122). The same could be noted of a number of aesthetic, decadent and symbolist writers for whom music supposedly embodied their poetic ideal.

In opposition to Symons’s view that “programme music” represented a regression from the condition to which all art aspires, Newman cast Symons’s Paterianism as anachronistic and fundamentally at odds with musical progress, writing that:

we are finding out every day how many fresh things can be said in music, how greatly the representative, as distinguished from the merely expressive, side of the art is developing; and this evolution is really not to be cut short by the haphazard use of an epithet that has come to be looked upon as opprobrious. (36)

Newman takes particular issue with Symons’s complaint that Strauss is “more intellectual than emotional, more a thinker than an artist” and that attempting to convey ideas through music makes the overriding force of the work more literary than musical, thereby devaluing the art. Newman writes instead that the ideas conveyed by Strauss are specifically musical ideas, and that it is Symons’s own lack of a truly “musical brain” that prevents him from perceiving this (36).

Here we can see that Newman’s argument relies upon the strategic evocation of certain dualisms that have conditioned some of the most prominent polemical divides in the history of Western musical aesthetics—particularly representation and expression; and intellect and emotion—that ultimately allow him to suggest that Symons’s position on “programme music” is in fact the result of his literary

sensibilities. Newman implies that Symons's exaltation of "absolute music" is at root an anti-musical viewpoint, and that Symons's literary background makes him cling to an anachronistic attitude towards music. This rhetorical manoeuvre effectively confines the concept of autonomy to the status of a literary concept only, quarantining it from the sphere of "modern" music by casting it as an issue that was dealt with in a bygone Romantic age. This sense of the anachronism of Symons's views on music was echoed by another prominent British music critic of the time, John F. Runciman, who, in reviewing an article by Symons on the writings of Wagner, complained that "to read an article like this is like seeing ghosts. It calls up the ghosts of dead passions, dead arguments, even dead personalities of twenty years ago" (142). Though Runciman concedes that "I cheerfully say that no better summary of Wagner's views on Wagner and other questions has ever been given," he notes that "most of the serious are already converted and like me will only see ghosts out of the past in reading Mr. Symons' pages" (142).

Newman's and Runciman's invectives against Symons represent an understandable reaction against the easy idealization of music as a archetypal aesthetic model by literary figures—largely without reference to specific composers or musical works—in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Yet to baldly assume that music's expression of ideas is synonymous with musical "progress," and to say that "we all know that Wagner was right and any further discussion is moot," only reflects their uncompromising professional agenda. Still, Symons certainly seems to have positioned himself against the tendencies of "modern music," with which he associates "programme music" and the "progressives" in general, and Strauss in particular. Yet Pater's dictum about the "condition of music," with which Symons began his article on Strauss in 1902, had by that time become a catch-cry for a range of modernist agendas across the arts, particularly in relation to the move towards abstraction in painting and literature—a move that mirrored contemporaneous musical developments away from representation, and towards post-tonality in music. Equally, Symons was no conservative. It may be that the transplantation of Symons's Paterian model of autonomy onto music resulted in an unintended alignment with a school of musical thought (outlined below) which at that time was considered by many as retroactive. Alternatively, however, this transplantation may also undermine modernism's claim to historical rupture or interruption, by revealing an underlying continuity of aesthetic concerns between romantic and modern outlooks regarding the representational capacities of music.

In beginning to explore this matter, it is important to note that what is at stake here in Symons's critique of Strauss is not whether this type of music is worthy or unworthy of critical commendation, but rather whether it is, in essence, anti-musical. In other words, Symons is clearly out to make an ontological claim about music, and one that is central to what may be described as his "theory of musical aesthetics" as a whole. In his characterization of Strauss's music as being of only transitory impact; in his distinction between effect and essence; between sincerity and cleverness; technique and inspiration; between beauty and what he calls "a dry and dusty pleasure" (90); in his implicit distinction between true genius and mere craftsmanship; in his pejorative use of otherwise positive descriptors such as "ingenuity," "cleverness," "solid construction" and "mastery"—in all these powerful distinctions, we see Symons weighing in to one of the core debates of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century music aesthetics, concerning the nature of musical expression. Symons's use of the

term “programme music” in the essay on Strauss, and his extension of this idea in opposition to “absolute music” in other substantial essays on Beethoven and Wagner, suggests a level of familiarity with this ongoing debate, as well as the politics and personalities involved.

Autonomy and “Absolute Music”

Though the collection of aesthetic ideas underpinning the term “absolute music” had a lengthy history prior to the nineteenth-century, the term itself was first coined by Wagner in an essay on Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (Wagner 252). Here, Wagner used the term to forward an “end of history”-style polemic, which saw Beethoven’s addition of voices and text into the final movement of the symphony—formerly a purely instrumental genre—as an indication that music by itself, “absolute music,” had reached the end of its expressive possibilities. For Wagner then, the notion of “absolute music” provided an opposition against which he could introduce his own post-Beethovenian vision for a revolutionary “artwork of the future,” which involved the unification of the arts in his new genre of “music drama.”

Wagner’s pejorative use of the term has been historicized within the context of Ludwig Feuerbach’s 1839 *Towards a Critique of Hegelian Philosophy*, and contemporaneous intellectual tendencies that involved valorizing sensory experience over what were considered to be the abstracted, isolated or specialized (and in this sense, “absolute”) forms of knowledge. Indeed, Sanna Pederson has surmised that “Wagner may have appropriated [the notion of the absolute] in the broadest sense to make the parallel between Feuerbach’s radical critique of the venerable Hegelian tradition and his own critique of the Beethovenian heritage” (242).⁸ The “Beethovenian heritage” which gave rise to Wagner’s critique was a romantic aesthetic of instrumental music, articulated most famously by writers such as Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773–1798), Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), and E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822). For these writers and others, purely instrumental music could evoke the realm of the infinite, more than any other art. This type of music eluded any “extra-musical” association such as a literary program, or any attempt at musical representation. It treated music as an ends, rather than as a mere means to the expression of a non-musical idea, and its meaning could be determined in purely musical terms. In other words, the music that was most prized according to this romantic, idealist aesthetic, had no meaning beyond its purely musical meaning, and its indistinctness of expression made music the key to the Absolute, or the Idea.

Instrumental music’s heightened superiority in this respect was a result of its capacity to elude conceptual explication, positioning it as a gateway to a higher spiritual unknown, beyond the reach of every-day language or conventional forms of representation. The notion of autonomy underpinning this construct—music’s autonomy from text, and from representation—owed its modern articulation to Kant’s promotion of the disinterested aesthetic contemplation as allowing access to a type of knowledge that was not available through other forms of reason. From this basis, those who advocated musical autonomy could position music as being the archetypal form of aesthetic expression and experience, and argue that any intervention from other arts or other forms of reason that would involve the operation of understanding (such as abstract ideas) would only sully the purity of music’s conceptless and disinterested status.

In Wagner's usage, "absolute music" embodied the undesirable alternative to his own "music drama," and it was not until the 1880s that its opposition came to be described by the term used by Symons—namely, "programme music." "Programme music" described a growing tendency in music of the mid-nineteenth century to include narrative or representational associations into instrumental music. It proceeded primarily from an aesthetics of expression rather than an aesthetics of form. This aspect of the debate was generally understood to be "progressive" in the sense of being at variance with the predominant Enlightenment view of the closed integrity of instrumental forms (a conception that was seen to have been epitomized in the late symphonic and chamber works of Beethoven). The broad agenda of program music became associated with Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner in the popular imagination, though these associations were rife with the politics of polarization, and often did not adequately describe the composers' respective positions.⁹ Program music was also associated with non-rationalism and specific musical genres such as "tone poem" (of which Strauss was a leading proponent) and "music drama" (of which Wagner was the leading proponent). There were also regional associations, with the "conservative" purveyors of musical autonomy being based in Leipzig and Berlin, and the "progressives" or "New German School" being associated with Weimar.

Embedded within this debate, therefore, were a myriad of agendas concerning the promotion of certain musical genres and composers, certain methods of evaluation and practices of listening, certain regional and institutional associations, and a range of epistemological subject-positions. The regional associations have made this debate look very much like a purely continental phenomenon, yet the exchange between Newman and Symons on the topic of the music of Richard Strauss which prompted the opening quote from Newman (who was himself claimed by the "progressive" camp), clearly suggests that this debate continued to be a live issue in English-language music criticism many decades later, and indeed one that galvanized discussion about music's relationship with things outside of itself, and in relation to its function as a way of acceding to non-rational forms of knowledge.

The notion of "absolute music," which, for some, was positioned against program music, was polemically forwarded by the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904) and Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim (1831–1907). In one of the key texts of the debate, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*On the Musically Beautiful*, 1854), Hanslick famously insisted that music could "express no conceptual content" (385), and that it was fundamentally different from language in this respect:

The essential and fundamental difference is that in language *tone* is only a *means* towards the end of expressing something quite foreign to this means, whereas in music the tone appears as an end in itself. The self-existent beauty of tone forms, on the one hand, and the idea's absolute domination of the tone as a mere means of expression, on the other, stand in such mutually exclusive opposition that an intermingling of the two principles represents a logical impossibility. (390)

Importantly here, Hanslick and other sympathetic writers insisted upon the "specifically musical" quality of music's "self-existent beauty," supporting Hanslick's formalist characterization, and an impression that this formalism was pitted against the idealism of earlier conceptions of music's expression of the infinite (385).¹⁰

Indeed, Thomas Grey has suggested that neither Hanslick's nor Wagner's conceptions of "absolute music" around the 1850s were intended to invoke the Hegelian notion of the "Absolute," but rather were merely meant to refer to "music alone" (46). Mark Evan Bonds, however, complicates this view by highlighting the idealist inflection of certain passages in the first edition of Hanslick's treatise that were deleted in subsequent editions. For example, although Hanslick argues that music has no representational content, and exists only as form, he notes that this purely musical content "is elevated high above the tones themselves, allowing us to perceive at the same time the infinite in works of human talent" (qtd Bonds, "Idealism"), and concedes that, though music cannot represent thoughts or feelings, it can nevertheless possess "a high degree of symbolic significance in its reflection of the great laws of the world, which is something we find in all artistic beauty" (Bonds, "Idealism" 415). Both of these passages were deleted by Hanslick in the second and subsequent editions, from 1858, in response to a suggestion from his friend Robert Zimmerman that such comments risked invalidating Hanslick's central thesis. In other words, if music could be said to reflect the "great laws of the world," how can it also be said to have no representational content? Hanslick's self-bowdlerization in this regard fed the polarization of "absolute music" and "programme music," and belied his debt to idealism. To further complicate matters, the influence of idealism can be seen as underpinning the development of program music, because even though ideal content, or the representation of the ideal, takes music beyond the realm of the purely musical, this content cannot by its very nature be clearly explicated, and is therefore different from the representation of everyday objects and concepts (Bonds, "Idealism" 416).

Bonds has argued persuasively that changes in perceptions about instrumental music during the nineteenth century—from which the idea of "absolute music" emerged—were driven by the revival of idealism as an aesthetic principle, rather than by changes in musical repertory, which goes a way to explain the absence of actual music in the discussion of Pater and other literary figures who idealized the concept of music. This may be surprising, given that Kant notably relegated instrumental music to the category of "free beauty" (even lower in aesthetic value than the telling of jokes), and as being "more pleasure than culture" ("Idealism", 399, trans. from Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*). Yet Bonds has observed that Kant's relegation of instrumental music to the category of "free beauty," rather than the aesthetically superior "dependent beauty," left an opening for mid-nineteenth century formalists such as Hanslick to claim that this type of music could be evaluated purely on the basis of its form. The writings of post-Kantian thinkers such as Friedrich von Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, and August Wilhelm Schlegel gradually initiated a shift whereby the artwork's function came to be providing a bridge between the phenomenal and the ideal, so whereas prior to the mid-nineteenth century instrumental music's lack of firm conceptual content was generally viewed as a failing, it gradually came to be viewed as the archetypal model for discerning the infinite—or a world beyond objects.

In this sense, the language of idealism pervaded Romantic music aesthetics, in a way that should have made Symons's views on musical autonomy appear archaic in the modernist context of the turn of the century, as suggested by Newman and Runciman, quoted above. But Symons's views could equally reflect an underlying continuity in concerns over autonomy, in the same way that the arguments against romanticism presented by staunch modernists such as Egon Wellesz (1885–1974), pupil of

Schoenberg, were “strikingly similar to the complaints voiced by the critics of the New German School in the middle of the nineteenth century” and that “as such, Wellesz, the archmoderist, was advocating—probably without being aware of it—an aesthetic most closely associated several generations before with Eduard Hanslick” (*Absolute Music*, 282).

Hanslick’s writings for the *Neue Freie Presse* were often translated and reproduced at length in Britain in the 1870s, in periodicals such as the *Musical World*. His name appeared most regularly in articles on Wagner, where he became a mouthpiece for the anti-Wagner campaign in Britain. By the 1880s, there were increasing calls for the translation of Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, which finally took place in 1891. Though we cannot be sure whether Symons read Hanslick’s seminal text, the poet’s investment in Wagnerism, his close association with a number of prominent literary Wagnerians, the centrality of Wagner’s writings to the French poets whom he admired, and the association of Wagner and decadence in Britain at the turn of the century, may suggest that he would at least have been familiar with the gist of Hanslick’s position on “absolute music” and its anti-Wagner intimations. Symons certainly demonstrated an impressive grasp of Wagner’s writings from across his lifetime—with a special interest in Wagner’s writings on Beethoven—in a substantial chapter on “The Ideas of Richard Wagner” in *Studies in Seven Arts*, reprinted from the article reviewed by Runciman. So while Symons argues vehemently against “programme music” and seems to concur with Hanslick in his notion that music should not be put to the service of conveying defined concepts or ideas, Symons’s position on Wagner—who circuitously argues against the isolation of music from its sister arts—presents a productive complication to the increasingly fragile conceptual unity of these ideas.

“Ideal Content”

In order to reconstruct Symons’s understanding of musical autonomy, we must look to the clearest articulation of his conception of Symbolism in his iconic work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). In this work he describes the symbolist mandate as:

an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings. Mystery is no longer feared, as the great mystery in whose midst we are islanded was feared by those to whom that unknown sea was only a great void. We are coming closer to nature, as we seem to shrink from it with something of horror, disdaining to catalogue the trees of the forest. And as we brush aside the accidents of daily life, in which men and women imagine that they are alone touching reality, we come closer to humanity, to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it.

Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realized by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty,

and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual. (8–9)

There are two salient points indicated in this passage that are particularly important for Symons' understanding of music in the context of his symbolist aesthetic schema. The first relates to the function of art and the second relates to how this function is best achieved.

Symons's notion of the function of art carries with it precisely the dialectical tension between distance and engagement that Faulk recognised as such a powerful element of Symons's critical "pose." This tension is prominent immediately in this passage, where Symons clearly associates the process of "spiritualisation" with serving the function of "humanising." Here he evokes a type of internal practice prepositioned upon detachment from phenomenal concerns (namely distance from a normative perception of reality), and explicitly associates it with the concept of humanity or human nature. This action relies upon an underlying conception of human nature as a non-particularised form that resides in a noumenal, or universal realm rather than a physical or material realm, reflecting Symbolism's neo-Platonic roots and its rejection of critical traditions based on realism (Taine, Spencer etc.). This universalized conception of human nature becomes important for Symons's discussion of music, conceived of as a universal language, but still with national characteristics.¹¹

Also, the religious function played by art can be seen in Symons' equating of music to the voice of God, or as providing access to the eternal. The universalising and spiritualising roles of art were related for Symons, in that he associated the divine with the universal or non-particularized, and conversely associated nature with individuation (similar to the finite character of abstract ideas in language, according to Symons). Art's function, in effect, was to perfect nature by illuminating the universal. This central epistemology can be very clearly seen in Symons' discussion of the music of Wagner in *Plays, Acting and Music*:

Wagner, alone among quite modern musicians, and though indeed he appeals to our nerves more forcibly than any of them, has that breadth and universality by which emotion ceases to be merely personal and becomes elemental [...] He brings us nature, heroically exalted, full of fiery splendour, but nature as if caught in a mirror, not arranged, subdued, composed, for the frame of a picture. He is afraid of no realism, however mean, because he has confidence in nature as it is, apprehended with all the clairvoyance of emotion. ... These motives, by which the true action of the drama expresses itself, are a symbol of the inner life, of its preponderance over outward event, and, in their guidance of the music, their indication of the real current of interest, have a spiritualising effect upon both music and action, instead of, as was once thought, materialising both [...] Here music is like a god speaking the language of savages, and lowering his supreme intellect to the level of their speech. The melodious voice remains, but the divine meaning has gone out of the words. Only in Wagner does God speak to men in his own language. (275, 308, 310, 314)

Symons's exalted positioning of Wagner presents a clear disconnect with the critic's position on "absolute music," because Wagner's music dramas clearly embody subject matter that can be separated out from its particular form, by virtue of the fact that the genre involves an intermingling of different arts. Indeed a similar paradox has been noted of Pater, whose writings on Renaissance art—art that conventionally involves the conveyance of subject matter—presents a similar difficulty for his avid theoretical stance on the annihilation of the distinction between content and form.

Despite this apparent paradox, Pater demarcates the type of content embodied in Renaissance art as "ideal content," or rather content whose "meaning reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding" (Herzog 127). In this way, ideal content is that which is conveyed through suggestion and veiling in a manner that subverts its outward representational character. Its meaning speaks not to the understanding or to intellect, but to what Pater, in "the School of Giorgione," terms the "imaginative reason" (Pater 52), a faculty that relates to the intuitive apprehension of artistic symbols. Herzog describes this distinction between representation and ideal content for Pater in the following terms:

In the representational sense, the *Mona Lisa* and Giorgione's painted idylls have as their subject-matter a real woman, La Giaconda, and a group of strangely situated figures, respectively. In the ideal sense, each has as its subject-matter a humanity embodied in fleeting and fantastical images, a wholly imaginary humanity that defies all attempt at definition or conceptual closure. (129–30)

This distinction can similarly be called upon when construing Symons's paradoxical rejection of Strauss yet appreciation of Wagner, especially considering Symons's reliance on Pater's essay "The School of Giorgione" in his article on Strauss. For Symons, the narrative subject matter of Wagner's works barely rates a mention—rather it is the sensual essence of what is conveyed through form on which he bases his admiration:

What Wagner has tried to do is to unite mysticism and the senses, to render mysticism through the senses. Mr. Watts-Dunton has pointed out that that is what Rossetti tried to do in painting. That mysterious intensity of expression which we see in the faces of Rossetti's latest pictures has something of the same appeal as the insatiable crying-out of a carnal voice, somewhere in the depths of Wagner's latest music. . . . The beauty of this particular kind of acting and staging is of course the beauty of convention. The scenery, for instance, with what an enchanting leisure it merely walks along before one's eyes, when a change is wanted! Convention, here as in all plastic art, is founded on natural truth very closely studied. The rose is first learned, in every wrinkle of its petals, petal by petal, before that reality is elaborately departed from, in order that a new, abstract beauty may be formed out of those outlines, all but those outlines being left out. (Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music* 301, 305–6)

Still, Symons never fully articulated his views on Pater's notion of "ideal form" or on the faculty of "imaginative reason" in the course of his music criticism, and despite its clear influence on his manner of critique in this context, there seems to be a niggling discomfort in Symons's comments on Wagner's music that what is being awakened in

the critic is not a purely musical but rather a literary sense. In this way, once again, we can see Symons departing from Pater as someone who is committed to interrogating aesthetic questions particular to the music itself, rather than using music merely as an aesthetic ideal: “If anyone tells me, as people still sometimes do, that he only cares in music for Wagner, I have a strong suspicion that he does not care for music at all” (Symons, “Music Among the Arts” 361).

The notion of “ideal content” can similarly be seen to be reflected in the passage from *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* quoted above, where Symons views the process of veiling or maintaining mystery as serving to bring us closer to nature, or to reality, or to the essence of things. In this respect, Symons can be seen to accept the Kantian proposition of our limited access to knowledge of reality. For Symons, such access can only be attained through reflections and echoes, and is revealed to us only out of the corner of your eye, so to speak, in flashes of illumination. The function of art for Symons, then, is to offer these reflections or echoes (or symbols) of reality rather than attempting to *represent* or directly explicate the illusory appearance of material forms. This manner of perceiving essence through veiling, according to Symons, brings us closer to our own humanity, so the function of art is to act as a “symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible” (10).

This view of the function of art as a veiled lens through which the essence of things can be intuited is what lies behind Symons’s conception of musical meaning. As he pronounced so clearly in his article on the music of Strauss, Symons saw music as a play of sensations as opposed to the expression of abstract ideas. And by “sensation” Symons was referring not to something physicalized, trivial, transitory, or frivolous, but rather a “disembodied ecstasy” that gave a glimpse to a “world which has not yet subdivided itself into finite ideas” (81). The ability to provide this glimpse through the medium of sensation then, according to Symons, was a specifically musical function. It was music alone that could achieve this heightened level of veiling that allowed for the most *intimate* experience of reality. Here we see Symons’s epistemological theorising as directly informing his conception of music:

music speaks no language known to us, has nothing of ourselves to tell us, but is shy, alien, and speaks a language which we do not know. It comes to us a divine hallucination, chills us a little with its “airs from heaven” or elsewhere, and breaks down for an instant the too solid walls of the world, showing us the gulf. (*Plays, Acting and Music* 240–1)

A final powerful example of the way in which Symons’s symbolist aesthetics allowed him to rationalize the paradox of music’s autonomy with its capacity to reflect the infinite can be seen in his handling of Beethoven’s *Pastoral* and Ninth symphonies respectively. The first of these includes descriptive titles and explicit musical references to bird-call and a storm, and the second admits voices and text into its final movement, both presenting a direct challenge to Symons’ preference for music without concept. Undaunted, Symons presents Beethoven as the archetypal autonomous musician, whose genius lay in his ability to feel and embody universal nature, without being “contaminated” by his own life and subjective desires (Symons, *Studies* 193, 200). Symons concedes that Beethoven’s *Pastoral* Symphony “leads, now and then, to what has been taken for something quite different from what it is: an

apparent aim at realism,” but nevertheless contends that this impression is not conveyed through direct representation, but through a:

feeling, constantly at the roots of his being, and present in some form in almost all his music, [which] came for once to be concentrated a little deliberately, as if in a dedication, by way of gratitude. All through there is humor, and the realism is a form of it. (*Studies* 211)

Symons was not unaware of the contested legacy of Beethoven, and his influence on the development of perceptions that instrumental music had exhausted its expressive possibilities, writing that:

it would be curious if these humorous asides, done with childish good-humor, should have helped to lead the way to much serious modern music, in which natural sounds, and all the accidents of actual noise, have been solemnly and conscientiously imitated for their own sakes. (*Studies* 211–12)

In an attempt to further distance Beethoven from his program-oriented Wagnerian successors, Symons makes a sharp distinction between the combination of words, action and music in Wagner’s music drama, and Beethoven’s use of chorus and text in the final movement of his Ninth Symphony. Symons accuses Wagner of “subordinating his music,” and thereby adding a “firmer link to the chain which holds music to the earth” (*Studies* 213). Contrasting Beethoven’s approach, he writes that the use of Schiller’s “Hymn to Joy” in the Ninth Symphony “might be replaced by meaningless vowels and consonants” and that the voices are treated rather as instruments in themselves. He asks:

may there not be also a music more and more “absolute,” of which voices may indeed form part, but voices without words, adding an incomparable instrument to the orchestra. Why need music, if it is the voice of something deeper than action, care to concern itself with drama, which is the ripple on the surface of a great depth? As it dispensed with the stage, or the conscious exercise of the eyes, so it will dispense with words, or the conscious exercise of the mind through hearing, and in an equal degree, with the intrusive reasonings of a programme, at the best but misleading footnotes to a misinterpreted text. (*Studies* 213–14)

Music as Sensation and Experience

According to Symons’s symbolist aesthetics, art’s special function presupposed both a material component (namely the symbol, in the form of a word or image for example) and a veiled component (namely, the elemental idea to which it gave access). Equally, the process for *interpreting* art similarly involved a material element, such as a knowledge base, as well as the operation of intuition, or sensibility. This conception of the function of a critic resonates directly with Faulk’s description of Symons’ adoption of the mode of an *aficionado* in his essays on music-hall, which he describes in the paradoxical terms of simultaneous distance and engagement. Faulk casts this pose as having the effect of an egalitarian humanizing of the expert’s “studied pose of distance” (175), and enabling the co-existence of interpretation and experience, ultimately using this concept to critique Pierre Bourdieu’s derision of intellectualism. Herzog makes a similar point about Pater’s demarcation of “ideal content.” She

observes that the notion of “ideal content” emphasizes the role of a particular kind of critical act or pose—namely one involving “imaginative reason”—in interpreting such content, referring to this as “a full fledged phenomenology of the aesthetic” (131).

These notions of interpretation and experience see the work of the critic as itself involving a creation of a new work of art, a conclusion most notoriously forwarded by another of Pater’s disciples, Oscar Wilde, in his essay “The Critic as Artist” (1891). In Symons’s writings on music we see this view radically extended, this time to music performers, signalling once again an ontological shift in the conception of music as a sounding event rather than a text. While Symons’s treatment of the performer as a critic-artist may have sat comfortably with literary aestheticism, it was not a view customarily associated with proponents of musical autonomy. Indeed the deification of the composer as the creative source of music, and the corollary institutionalization of the musical “work” as a closed textual artefact was, until recently, considered to be one of the central tenets of nineteenth-century music historiography and aesthetics—and one that has largely conditioned the score-based and composer-centred focus of the modern discipline of musicology.¹² By this account, Symons’s adherence to the notion of “absolute music” through his understanding of purely musical meaning, yet simultaneous valorisation of the performer as a locus for musical expression, is rather unusual, and may quite rightly be attributed to his transplanting of his understanding of literary autonomy and an underlying investment in sensual experience.

While musicology’s formalist foundations have been under sustained attacked since the 1980s, the more recent “practice turn” has called into question our understanding of the nineteenth-century privileging of the conception of the musical “work” as the expression of individual creative genius, and whose meaning lies in the score alone, through studies into nineteenth-century performance theory. For example, Doğantan-Dack has sought to demonstrate the existence of a “parallel history” which viewed “the music” as existing only in performance, thereby undermining the ontological primacy of the score.¹³ Significantly, this alternative construction was not necessarily in conflict with formalism, as Doğantan-Dack notes:

since form and (expressive) content are identical in music, the communication of one of these dimensions in performance would guarantee the communication of the other as well. Consequently, when the performer shapes the musical phrase so as to render its form comprehensible to listeners, he or she at the same time and through the same means makes it expression. Phrasing reveals both the form and the content of music. Furthermore, formalism only pointed to the source where the performer should seek solutions to issues of expression in performance: the musical elements and structures, constituting the music itself. (17)

Doğantan-Dack pointed to Hanslick’s neglected reference to the necessity of “play[ing]the phrase itself” in order to discern its content in *On the Musically Beautiful*, and indeed the burgeoning excavation of views on performance have led an emerging revision of nineteenth-century discourses on “absolute music” generally, including in the writings of such paradigmatic writings such as Hanslick and E.T.A. Hoffman.¹⁴ This shift seems to signal an emerging recognition that “absolute music” and related notions of autonomy and formalism have not always necessarily implied a negative view of the value of experience and sensation.

In the context of Symons's overarching aesthetic schema this view of the performer's role in the creation of new works of art allows critics and performers alike to be agents in the revitalization of symbols gone cold, which through re-interpretation and translation into new forms can be kept alive. Faulk's casting of Symons in the function of a translator—someone who crosses borders between high and low culture and thereby facilitates what he believed to be the transformative power of the arts—certainly applies to the function he played on the border between the literary and musical spheres, just as it does to his multi-lingual engagement with French aesthetics. He sought a “universal science of beauty” (Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* vi). This manoeuvre once again sees Symons taking an activity that may be considered transitory, temporal, or secondary to the work of the artist, and gives it an exalted, universal, or immortal quality. Despite its ephemeral nature, the performer's interpretation, which he construed as akin to the interpretative act of critic, attains the status of a new work of art.

Symons's literary training allowed him to view music as a kind of ecstatic experience of the senses that literature could not attain, informing Symons's view of music as an art of performance. Flowing from this conception of music, one of the most striking tropes in Symons's writing on music is his experience of sound through non-aural senses. This is particularly prevalent in his earlier text *Plays, Acting and Music* (1903). For example, in a section titled “Mozart in the Mirabell-Garten” he writes “I listened, with the full consent of my eyes, to the lovely music, which played round the story like light transfiguring a masquerade” (291–2). Similarly, later in the same text, in his description of a rendition of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata by the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, he wrote:

As the music came, an invisible touch seemed to pass over it; the heavy mouth and chin remained firm, pressed down on the violin; but the eyelids and the eyebrows began to move, *as if the eyes saw the sound*, and were drawing it in luxuriously, with a kind of sleepy ecstasy, as one draws in perfume out of a flower. (234–5)

And in a poem evoking the performance of Russian-German pianist Vladimir de Pachmann:

The sounds torture me: I see them in my brain;
They spin a flickering web of living threads,
Like butterflies upon the garden beds,
Nets of bright sound. I follow them: in vain.
I must not brush the least dust from their wings:
They die of a touch; but I must capture them,
Or they will turn to a caressing flame,
And lick my soul up with their flutterings.

The sounds torture me: I count them with my eyes,
I feel them like a thirst between my lips;
Is it my body or my soul that cries
With little coloured mouths of sound, and drips
In these bright drops that turn to butterflies
Dying delicately at my fingertips? (249–50)

And finally from a description of Wagner's music:

The music itself has the abstract quality of Coventry Patmore's odes. I cannot think of it except in terms of sight. Light surges up out of it, as out of unformed depths; light descends from it, as from the sky; it breaks into flashes and sparkles of light, it broadens out into a vast sea of light. It is almost metaphysical music; pure ideas take visible form, humanise themselves in a new kind of ecstasy. The ecstasy has still a certain fever in it; these shafts of light sometimes pierce the soul like a sword. (300)

Symons's evocative sensual descriptions may be easily construed either as convenient poetic analogy, or as aligned with Baudelaire's notion of "correspondences," which of course have metaphysical and epistemological implications that were crucial to the development of aestheticism and ideas about aesthetic autonomy generally. But significantly, there is also a hermeneutical position that Symons marks out for himself by fixing upon the sensual character of music in this way. The status of music as an art of sensation alone—through which no abstract ideas can be expressed, and existing as a sounding phenomenon that plays upon mind and eye as well as the ear—is central to its role in his aesthetic schema as the art most adept to fulfilling the symbolist mandate of providing access to noumenal truths through veiling. It is also therefore key to Symons's translation of the concept of autonomy to the sphere of music. The presence of abstract ideas conveyed through music, according to Symons, introduced an aberrant textual and conceptual (i.e. non-aesthetic) phenomenon into the purely sensual realm, representing an undesirable deviation from the type of aesthetic experience that only music could provide. Understanding the connection between Symons's sensuous conception of music—the view that "music can express emotion and suggest sensation"—and his advocacy of musical autonomy—namely, that it "can neither express nor suggest an idea apart from emotion or sensation" (*Studies in Seven Arts* 302–3), reveals a degree of underlying theoretical coherence to his ideas about the function and nature of music and the role of the composer, performer and music critic.

The conceptualization of music as transient sensation is crucial to upholding the notion of its autonomy (and therefore, ironically, its exalted function) because for Symons, as for Pater, an artwork's sensuous form should be indistinguishable from its expressive content: "Music has no subject, outside itself; no meaning, outside its meaning as music" (Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music* 230). If the form of an artwork is indistinguishable from its content, then it follows that there can be no translation of content between different sensuous forms, or different types of art. Following this logic it was of course inevitable that Symons would reject the compositions of Strauss, and program music in general, as these are defined by their intermingling of ideas from different artistic forms. These may be seen as similar to other artistic styles that treat the form as a means to an end, such as realism or other forms of representation (similar, in fact, to Hanslick's conception of language, quoted above). In the case of representation in art, the content is clearly distinguishable from the form, and therefore can be translated across different art forms. If however, one holds that in an artwork that is performing its true function the content should not be distinguishable from form, then the intermingling of content from different forms in a new art form is a logical impossibility. So again, it may be argued that Symons's

critique of this type of music is not that it is talentless or inept, but that it should not in fact be considered music at all in terms of the function of music within his symbolist schema.

Performance and Pose

The idea of form not being treated as a means to some other end (for example to serve content or representation) is also the reason why Symons was so derisive of overstated technique or craftsmanship, as revealed in his criticism of Strauss's music earlier. In relation to performance, this extends to a derision of virtuosity. Symons describes his views on virtuosity in music performance via an extraordinary extension of the Kantian notion of "disinterestedness" in aesthetic contemplation. The ability to engage in aesthetic contemplation and thereby be able to perceive new forms of beauty is crucial to the activity of the critic, but also, according to Symons, crucial to the music performer, who is also engaged in the interpretation of works. For example, in an unofficial obituary published only nine days after the death of Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim, Symons wrote:

In Joseph Joachim we have lost a great artist, the most disinterested artist of his time [...] others have surpassed him in magic, in passion, in rarity, in qualities of human emotion. But no one else can have thought so much on music as music, or understood it so well, or so completely subordinated a whole nature to the great task of interpretation. He seemed always to be playing as if no one was there to listen, applaud or distract [...] If there is any platform or any audience, he is unconscious of either; he is conscious only of Beethoven. Note how Sarasate dandles the violin. It is a child, a jewel, He is already thinking of the sound, the flawless tone, not of Beethoven. ("Joachim and the Interpretation of Music" 231)

The empty transience of virtuosic performance was therefore to be distinguished from the exalted transience of true artistic performance, according to Symons, because in performance, the sensuous essence of the aesthetic realm is most fully realized, and the transient nature of that disinterested moment of intuition was crucial to its intensity—it allowed for or embodied a fleeting glimpse of a universalized human nature. And so in his writings on musical performance we once again can view the underlying interdependence of Symons' core points about autonomy and interpretation. Musical performance presented Symons, in fact, with a living model for the ideal function of art itself:

Like the art of Verlaine, the art of Pachmann is one wholly of suggestion; his fingers state nothing, they evoke. I said like the art of Verlaine, because there is a singular likeness between the two methods. But is not all art a suggestion, an evocation, never a statement? Many of the great forces of the present day have set themselves to the task of building up a large, positive art in which everything shall be said with emphasis: the art of Zola, the art of Mr. Kipling, in literature; the art of Mr. Sargent in painting; the art of Richard Strauss in music. In all these remarkable men there is some small, essential thing lacking; and it is in men like Verlaine, like Whistler, like Pachmann, that we find the small, essential thing, and nothing else [...] There is nothing human in him, and as music turns towards humanity it slips from between his hands. What he

seeks and finds in music is the inarticulate, ultimate thing in sound: the music, in fact.

It has been complained that Pachmann's readings are not intellectual, that he does not interpret. It is true that he does not interpret between the brain and music, but he is able to disimprison sound, as no one has ever done with mortal hands, and the piano, when he touches it, becomes a joyous, disembodied thing, a voice and nothing more, but a voice which is music itself. To reduce music to terms of human intelligence or even of human emotion is to lower it from its own region, where it is Ariel. There is something in music, which we can apprehend only as sound, that comes to us out of heaven or hell, mocking the human agency that gives it speech, and taking flight beyond it. (*Plays, Acting and Music* 248–52)

Symons' clear affinity for musical feeling and his sensitivity to being duped by what he considered to be insincere musical craftsmanship, either in composition or performance, presents a strong challenge to Ernest Newman's accusation that he did not possess a "musical brain." His music criticism is distinctive in the turn-of-the-century English context in that it represents a genuine and systematic attempt to apply the concept of autonomy to music itself, rather than as a mere ideal. His writings on music are also significant in his conceptualization of music as performance, rather than as text, and his exploration of the phenomenological and hermeneutic implications of such a conception through ideas about the role of the critic and performer in creating new works of art. Symons's contribution to music criticism is unabashedly as a passionate amateur, but it is clear that therein lies its strength, because it was arguably the combination of his sensuous engagement with the sounding art of music on the one hand, and the intellectual detachment afforded by his knowledge base in the area of literary autonomy on the other, that allowed him to develop a distinctive understanding of music aesthetics.

Symons achieved what few other English aesthetic critics attempted to do in explicitly drawing the concept of autonomy into the sphere of music. He engaged with music on its own terms rather than as a poetic ideal, he dealt with musical materials and considered directly questions of their ontological status based on his passionate experience of the sounding art. His application of the concept of autonomy to music would certainly have come from his experience with this notion in the literary sphere, though it seems almost as if his literary background gave him a heightened sensitivity to deviations from the musical ideal. He was primarily concerned that his passionate response to music was in no way due to the excitement of his literary sensibility, and any inkling of its presence resulted in a sensation of deception on his part: "If I cared more for literature than for music, I imagine that I might care greatly for Strauss. He offers me sound as literature. But I prefer to read my literature, and to hear nothing but music" ("The Music of Richard Strauss," 86).

Notes

¹ The significant function of certain critics as "circulators," rather than progenitors, of literary cultures has been explored by Sydney Janet Kaplan in the context of modernism, particularly with reference to John Middleton Murry (*Circulating Genius*). Similarly, Chris Snodgrass has noted that Symons

was “personally responsible for sustaining, if not promulgating, many of the myths and legends of the ‘yellow nineties’” (61).

² Newman had published his first major treatise arguing for greater objectivity and rigour in critical judgments about music nine years earlier; see Newman, “The difficulties of musical criticism” (1894). For further information on Newman’s intellectual development and influences see Watt.

³ For more on the influence of Wagner’s writings on Victorian aestheticism and French Symbolism respectively see Emma Sutton and Heath Lees.

⁴ Indeed so scathing was Newman’s assessment in this work that William Blissett described Newman’s approach as driving a “bulldozer through the underbrush of German ideology” (316). Newman went on to publish *Wagner Man and Artist* (1914) and the four-volume *The Life of Richard Wagner* (London 1933–47), demonstrating his ongoing fascination with the topic, despite his derisive passages.

⁵ See for example Jane Pritchard and Susan Azar Porterfield.

⁶ For an earlier account of Symons’ aesthetic pose see Francis Gribble.

⁷ Symons continued his assault on Strauss in “Notes on Richard Strauss and Beethoven.”

⁸ For more on the history of the phrase “absolute music,” its antecedents, the aesthetic debates that attended its usage, and reference lists for contemporary discussions about its continuing legacy in music scholarship and education see Bonds, *Absolute Music*.

⁹ Pederson gives a good overview of these issues.

¹⁰ For more on the recent revisions to our understanding of Hanslick see Grimes *et al.*

¹¹ See for example Symons, “Music Among the Arts,” where he writes on the one hand that “I should like to be able to think that the art of music is the one universal art” but that yet there are “subtle barriers of sound. So that when Brahms writes music it is different from Chopin’s, not only because he is of a different genius and temperament, but because the one is an Hungarian and the other a Pole” (360). Also, in an essay on Beethoven from 1904, reprinted in *Studies in Seven Arts*, Symons contrasts Goethe (“excellent in all things, supreme in none; and German beauty is not universal beauty”) with Beethoven, with whom “music becomes a universal language, and it does so without ceasing to speak German. Beethoven’s music is national, as Dante’s or Shakespeare’s poetry is national” (220).

¹² The classic statement on this crucial shift in music history continues to be Lydia Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, despite there being ongoing critiques of this thesis.

¹³ See for example Doğantan-Dack.

¹⁴ See for example Johnson and recent revisions of Hanslick and the history of the phrase “absolute music” in Grimes *et al.*, Bonds, and Grey.

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