

The Question of Music: Reflections on Roger Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Music*

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Preliminary Reflections

Music remains a puzzle to the philosopher. This is the case despite countless philosophical investigations and discussions. The presence of the puzzle appears unsatisfactory. Naturally, the puzzle calls for a solution. The philosopher remains doubtful about providing a solution to the puzzle. He fears that a solution will only move the puzzle out of view and hide it. The continued presence of the puzzle is vital to him provided the puzzle remains a genuine puzzle because the puzzle may say more about music than any of its solutions.

The genuine puzzle does not just exist. It is brought to light by the proper questions. The puzzle appears in the questions of the philosopher; the philosopher appears in the puzzle. To lose sight of the puzzle of music is to lose sight of the philosopher.

Music is made and heard. The musician, the person hearing and making music, hears and knows the difference between mere noise and music. Music does not just exist. The hearing and making of music leads to its appearance; in turn the musician appears through music. However, what is music? The musician need not concern himself with this question; he makes and hears and in this making and hearing remains within immediate understanding. Music becomes a question to the observer of the musician and music. How can music be observed? If it is observed as music the observer will need to know what he is looking for. The way in which music is observed may decide if it is questioned. To observe music, and to ask what music is, may not lead to questions about music. Why not? Music may have already disappeared from view where the hearing and making are no longer present.

The question of the musical work

In his recent book *The Aesthetics of Music*, Roger Scruton presents a wide-ranging investigation of music.¹ Reflection about its complex details would require a secure ground from which we could confidently assess the validity of Scruton's claims and theories about music. However, it does not seem that such a ground can necessarily be presupposed. It appears rather that it is the responsibility of philosophical questioning to expose this ground in the first place, not to assume it. Accordingly, the following reflections are, in some sense, not an engagement with Scruton's theories. They are rather an attempt to question the groundedness of his approach. Much of the detail of Scruton's exposition will remain unreflected. It is, in any case, irrelevant to the question of the philosophical groundedness of his approach. Questioning the approach and its foundation may appear evasive. The integrity of philosophical questioning, however, the desire to understand, inevitably directs our attention away from *what* a thinker says to *how* and *why* he says it.

This initial indication of a lack of confidence in the foundations of the subject matter contrasts with Scruton's own approach. The author is confident, boasting an impressive level of musical expertise and knowledge. He claims to philosophise about music. How do we think and write philosophically about music? How are we to approach such a complex topic philosophically? Scruton has little sympathy for such procrastinating questions. Instead, he argues that music is best approached by looking at the 'central instances of the art':

So, how do we begin to define our theme? Such questions have bedevilled aesthetics in our times – and unnecessarily so. For they are empty questions, which present no real challenge to the philosopher who has a full conception of his subject. Whatever it is, music is not a natural kind. What is to count as music depends upon our decision and it is a decision made with a purpose in mind. That purpose is to describe, and if possible to extend, the kind of interest that we have in a Beethoven symphony. Other things satisfy that interest; and there is no

way of saying in advance which things these will be – not until we have a clear idea of what exactly interests us in the Beethoven. The question whether this or that modernist or postmodernist experiment is a work of music is empty, until we have furnished ourselves with an account of our central instances of the art. Only then do we know what the question means. And even then we may feel no great need to answer it. (pp.16-7)

The philosopher may indeed have a 'full conception' of the subject matter. However, as a philosopher he will need to remain sceptical of its claims and its truth. He will attempt to put his 'full conception' into question. His radical commitment to the truth of the subject matter requires that the starting point and possibilities of his inquiry be investigated. Accordingly, the philosophical question of what music is, is avoided if we understand it as an invitation to look at something we believe to be music in order to gain a description or definition. The question is posed when the conditions and assumptions of such an invitation are faced.

The philosophical question of what music is, is not the same as the question what counts as music. The latter is based on a number of assumptions and involves, to be sure, a decision. What counts as music is not a philosophical question. It is a musicological or culture-historical one which applies an understanding. The philosophical question asks about the understanding which is applied itself. It puts the account of music into question. The decision 'to count' something as music presupposes an account of music, even though the latter remains unarticulated. Scruton suggests that such an account could be derived from looking at the 'central instances of the art'. However, in relation to which gravitational centre are certain instances 'central' to the art? Why and in which sense do we refer to it as an 'art'?

Scruton approaches music as a topic of aesthetic theory in a way that has been the academic custom since the foundation of the subject of aesthetics by Baumgarten. The decision to follow in the footsteps of academic tradition has a number of consequences: speaking about music, Scruton speaks

about the 'musical work'. The musical work is an 'intentional object' with qualities and characteristics, structures and features which can account for its meaning. Any performance (composition, hearing) which makes the work audible is seen to be fundamentally separate and additional to the work (p.405). Music consists of works and their performances. Is this likely to lead to an account of music?

Already when it comes to the question of improvisation in music, the naive division between performance and work becomes problematic. Scruton's own characterisation of improvisation makes this clear. In the case of improvisation the 'work consist[s] in what the performer does. The performance rules the work, even if it is recorded or written down' (p.111). Why should the performance of a work, of a 'central instance' of the art, be significantly distinct from an improvisation in this respect?² It hardly appears to be so if we consider two points. Firstly, performance in the essential sense (presentation through inner hearing or sounding realisation of any kind) is necessary to recognise any aspect of the supposed work in an authentic way. In Scruton's own academic terminology one could say: music requires 'first person' acquaintance (listening) in order to be present as music in the first place. Without performance, music remains silent. However, what remains of a 'work' if it relies constitutively on performance?

Secondly, a performance has potentially infinite possibilities to concretely define or transform the characteristics of a supposed work, even in instances where works are supposedly written down in scores. Until all possibilities of performance and interpretation are explored the work remains undefined. Naturally, this can never be the case. The question of whether a performance rules the work or the work the performance (see Scruton's characterisation above) is misplaced until what both are in themselves is clarified. Performance appears constitutive of the work. If performance and work are thus intimately linked, the work can no longer be understood as

an autonomous 'object'. How, then, can we refer to a work of music?

A possible answer to this question is that we refer to a musical work because music is 'at work'. The 'working' (*energeia*) of music remains if the performance and musical work (*ergon*) are separated conceptually. What exactly this 'working' is and, more importantly, which question may give us access to its understanding will require further analysis.

The division between work and performance becomes even more questionable when we contrast Scruton's identification of the work as the 'intentional object' of music with some of his descriptions of music. For Scruton, 'music . . . exists only as heard' (p.451); music, like dance, is 'a way of "being together" which achieves the absorption in the present experience and the saturation of interest' (p.357); music is a reflection of human life (p.500). One of the fundamental characteristics of music appears to be its 'process' character, transcending the traditional metaphysical subject-object division through its immersion in transitory temporality. The musical flux is a process of essentially unique unfolding. Music is not ready-to-hand and defined beforehand. It only comes into being with every instance of music. It does not follow rules nor is it clear how its aspects of material objectivity (tones, melody, score, and so on) ultimately relate to music itself. Music is essentially (as Hans Keller notes) characterised by unpredictability.³ How does such a characterisation of music as process comply with the supposed substantiality and thus fixedness implied by the objectivity of the work?⁴

It seems that the work of music and its presumed (intentional) objectivity are not readily understandable phenomena. Some authors have argued that the musical work is not ontologically absolute and is in fact a 'regulative concept' which has emerged in the history of a particular musical practice.⁵ Scruton takes issue with such explanations, asserting that historical explanations of practice do not solve the questions of philosophy (p.98). In this he appears to be right: while ontological claims may need to conform to

historically observed phenomena and practice, philosophical questioning does not remain content with historic description of practice and cannot expect the latter to give satisfactory answers to its questions. Philosophy ultimately asks about the ontological foundations and presuppositions of practice and historical understanding. In this regard, an historical analysis and description is preliminary to exposing the phenomena which are to give rise to philosophical questions.

Nevertheless, the work of music becomes questionable in the context of the fact that music, for its existence, requires a process of making. Music is not simply present as a collection of intentional objects, of works or performances. Music *occurs* in the performance of making and listening when undertaken in a particular, that is, *musical* way. Without such listening and making, music is simply not present. Does Scruton's assigning a 'tertiary objectivity' to music – 'The mystery of musical meaning lies partly in this: that it is a tertiary quality of a tertiary object' (p.161) – presuppose the autonomous ontological presence of music in the realm of intentionality? If it does, what constitutes this presence? If not, how do we maintain the objectivity of the object here?

If we conflate music with the current cultural practices of so-called 'high art', the experience of going to concerts and listening to certain 'works' which are said to exist independently of their performative realisations seems indeed to imply that 'intentional objects' exist autonomously within the intentional realm. However, it is not at all clear that this experience, considered in itself, is an actual experience of music as music. Music, regardless of cultural practice, is subject to temporal characteristics (as event) which appear first and foremost to elude any kind of objectification. From this point of view, the musical work and cultural object is primarily 'at work', a happening. What does this 'at-workness' entail in more concrete detail? Does the absence of 'objectivity' imply that music is subjective, then, that it is entirely historical or a product of trend and fashion (style)? What is the relation of making music to its thing-like products and substances? Is music mere play in which man is

the measure or does it demand meaningful, serious participation because it aims at some Good?

The question of musical meaning

The above questions have resulted from an inquiry into the musical work and its relationship to, and presence within, performance (making and listening). This investigation now renders questionable any account of musical understanding in terms of musical reception. Crudely put, the traditional position is this: the musical work exists and is perceived (more or less adequately), presented or performed (more or less adequately). Its meaning is established through a meaning-giving substance, structure, and so on. If the presupposition of the existence of the musical work has become questionable, the assumption that meaning is recognised in the work can no longer be sustained without further questions. What, then, is the meaning of music? How (where) is meaning achieved?

Scruton dedicates a substantial part of his investigation to the question of musical meaning and its various aspects (expression, representation, tonality, and so on). As we have seen, he believes that meaning is a tertiary quality of a tertiary object. However, he considers this question originally from a perceived distinction between sound and tone. According to Scruton

music begins when people listen to sounds that they are making, and so discover tones. Of all musical experiences, there is none more direct than free improvisation (whether vocal or instrumental); and this should be understood as a paradigm of listening – the form of listening from which music began. (p.217)

Two issues appear to be important. The first is the fundamental distinction between sound and tone. The second is that the specific meaning of music is achieved within the context of the activity of listening. The activity of listening is paradigmatically understood as improvisation. What are the implications of Scruton's characterisations?

With the distinction between sound and tone, Scruton wishes to explain two distinct experiences: the purely acoustic experience of hearing sounds – any kind of sound, including those belonging to language and noise – and the experience of hearing musically meaningful entities (*Gestalten*, phrases, melodies, movements, works). The transformation of sound into tone is associated with the activity of meaningful listening:

A tone is a sound which exists within a musical 'field of force'. This field of force is something that *we* hear, when hearing tones. . . . It may even be that the transformation from sound to tone is effected within the act of hearing, and has no independent reality. But it is a transformation that can be described, just as soon as we forget the attempt to 'find something in common' to all the works that critics have described as music. (p.17)

It is important to note that the transformation of sound into tone is not attributed to any property of sound itself. It is the entry of this sound into a field of 'meaning' that provides such a transformation. Becoming part of a musical organisation of some kind, the sound ceases to be mere sound and becomes tone. The order constituting this field of meaning is an intentional one. It is an 'order of action' in which one tone 'creates the conditions which make the successor a right or appropriate response to it'.

The identification of 'action' as a modality of musical order is noteworthy. It can reveal a number of additional and closely related observations. As 'active' music never repeats itself. Even where a supposed work is repeatedly performed, the fundamentally active nature of musical order excludes the possibility to present anything but a unique process to us. Strictly speaking, it does not allow any fixity and determinable objectification. Action fixed as a repeatable act has become devoid of 'life' and its active principle. It ceases to be action. Action is only as long as it is at work. Already the identification of action in its particularity, the substantive identification of *this* action, fails to reach the actual characteristics of action. An authentic description or grasp of action would need to show, evoke, or induce a sense or experience

of *this* action. But even then such an experience can naturally only be indirect. The essentially transitory and unique character of a particular action eludes the grasp and condensation within the analysis of consciousness.

What are the implications of these reflections? The reference to the order of action does not only restate the question of the musical work and its ambiguous temporality. It also indicates that any supposed meaningful features of music ('structural' or otherwise) will need to be considered in regard to its activity and not primarily in regard to its properties or qualities. When considering the question of musical meaning further below, we will not only need to remember that objectifiable qualities of an act say nothing about the concrete order of action, but that the two answer a different question: the former becomes the subject of a substantive inquiry ('what-ness'); the latter is a question of modality ('how-ness').

In relation to the second aspect, it seems quite clear why Scruton identifies 'free improvisation' as the paradigm of listening. A free improvisation is essentially a unique event. Like the performance of music, listening constitutes an involvement and participation with that which did not exist and will not endure. The improvisation itself – as improvisation – is not repeatable or re-creatable. Its singularity implies an essential inability to fully reconstruct it in description or analysis. The essential character – the suspense towards a yet to be realised and unpredictable future; the transitory creation and leaving behind of a musical trace in both material sense and spiritual experience – elude comprehensive description. Listening is essentially a process in which expectations of substance and definition are both fulfilled and disappointed. It occurs in flux. Any resulting perceptions are already a denial of this transitoriness. Listening appears to require a sustained performance in which the outcome is, within the context of certain expectations, undetermined.

Faced then with the fact that music is not a 'given' and is subject to a particular temporality, how then is any understanding of it possible? Does understanding not require in the

very least a potentially finite and definable content to allow intersubjective referencing? Scruton approaches these questions again with reference to the intentional character of the musical object:

What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object: the organisation that can be heard in the experience. In listening to music, we are attending to an appearance, not for the sake of information, but for its own sake. I have no other reason for attending to the music, than the fact that it sounds as it does. (p.221)

The understanding of music occurs through 'the apt organisation of the musical Gestalt – the organisation which makes it live for us and which causes us to perceive tones moving in musical space, rather than mere sequences of sound' (p.229). It is the perception of tone which provides 'the foundation for all higher musical experiences, including those of thematic structure, development and form' (p.230).

There appear to be two levels of understanding here: the understanding which always already knows and hears the transformation of sound into tone, and the understanding which eventually more or less competently wishes to understand the 'higher musical experiences'. Scruton is ultimately interested in the understanding of 'higher musical experiences' – that is, musical works and organisation. While this interest receives much attention, the starting point – the presupposed understanding of the sound/tone transformation – is not illuminated and itself put into question. However, it is this starting point which gives rise to philosophically important questions. Is the meaning of music responsible for the sound/tone transformation or is the sound/tone transformation responsible for the meaning of music? If we take the case of musical works, is the work understood as an aesthetic object because it is characterised by transformations of sound into tone or does the transformation of sound into tone occur because of the presence of a musical work? What is the supposed 'field of force' which effects the transformation of sound into tone?

One could argue that Scruton attempts to reach this level of the question by referring to the autonomy of the intentional level in musical understanding. Although the concepts which describe the intentional order are themselves not 'part of the normal "description under which" music is heard' – they refer beyond the intentional realm – the process to which they refer is clarified indirectly by their use. They 'do not merely record our intentional understanding, but also amplify it, by showing exactly *what* we hear when we hear a melody return to its starting point, or a sequence of dissonant harmonies resolve' (p.233). This seems to explain that we can, albeit indirectly, reach the level at which the concepts of musical understanding of aesthetic objects are formed.

However, the explanation is not satisfactory. Again, the issue appears to involve the assumption that listening to music is receptive and that music is a given object. The question must immediately be how this object gives itself and what constitutes its objectivity. One may argue that Scruton gives an answer to this in his account of the metaphorical dimension of music. The metaphorical experience of music – the suspension of the two aspects of the intentional object which is achieved in the exercise of the imagination – can reveal something about the intentional object. Its peculiar 'double intentionality' which takes 'sound as its object, and also something that is not and cannot be sound – the life and movement that is music' accounts for 'what we hear when we hear sounds as music' (p.96). However, this is ultimately not an answer to the question of the objectivity of the object itself. It presupposes it. The question is not which secondary or tertiary qualities attach to which secondary or tertiary object, the question is why – on what grounds – the secondary or tertiary object or quality is identified as an object or quality.

The crucial question in relation to Scruton's analysis is his reliance on investigating music and musical meaning through an investigation of 'substance' ('Our world is a world of substances – things, organisms, and people; events and proc-

esses are what happens to those substances' [p.10]). This investigation is the result of the interpretation of the question of what music is in traditional metaphysical terms. (Not surprisingly, philosophers who have emphasised the importance of music most have also been most critical of 'substance' metaphysics, like Nietzsche, Heraclitus, Heidegger, and to a certain extent Schopenhauer.) As has been shown, music understood as 'action' and as determined by the ontology of listening makes these terms questionable. Some of Scruton's own characterisation of music as 'dance' indicates this (pp. 354-7). It appears that the question of what we hear and understand, and the corresponding theories that explain this 'what', need to be further investigated by referring to the fundamental characteristics of the making and hearing of music. This would transform the question of what music is into the question of how music occurs.

The question of tonality

The fact that the substantial question appears to transform itself into the modal question of music appears remarkable to me. It is common to ignore this transformation and to conflate the question of what music is with the question of how it occurs. The fact that the question of the substantiality of music leads with some necessity to the question of its modality may give us some insight into music.

Despite Scruton's failure to see the relevance of this transformation, he nevertheless spends a large part of the analysis on the question of how music works – that is, how the meaning of music appears to be achieved. The results of this investigation are bound to be the most controversial aspects of his inquiry. In essence, critics will particularly take aim at Scruton's view of tonality as the 'force of nature' in music. His discussion of serial and atonal music comes to the following result:

The possibility remains that tonal music is the only music that will ever really mean anything to us, and that, if atonal music sometimes gains a hearing, it is because we can elicit within it a latent tonal order (p.308)

The criterion of meaning given here – the transformation from sound into tone – is Scruton's own. Scruton argues that neither atonal nor serial music achieve this transformation autonomously or compellingly. In the case of atonal music, we are left with the search for tonal associations to provide a sense of meaning. In serial music, we are unable to hear the movement of the music as a result of the serial ordering (p.304).

In addition to the discussion of tonality as a framework for musical meaning, Scruton discusses some associated culture-critical questions which may well shed further light on the question of musical meaning. The transition from tonal to atonal and serial music in the history of music is accompanied by a number of political, culture-critical, and ideological controversies which are claiming the phenomenon of music for their ideological purpose. Scruton consequently takes aim at Adorno and the postmodernists who have claimed the demise of tonal order to be symbolic of revolutions in world view and ideology. Adorno's point that the new music of Schoenberg purifies and emancipates the individual in a 'fetishised', bourgeois culture is refuted by the view that the revolution itself has become a 'fetish'. According to Scruton, however, the social reality is that avant-garde music is supported, not by emancipated masses, but by an elite of concert-going, bourgeois intellectuals. The masses take to popular, aesthetically inferior music full of clichés and formulas. Its success has 'less to do with the triumph of capitalism than with the triumph of democracy' (p.470). The even more radical challenge presented by the postmodern classification of tonality as a 'style' is addressed by Scruton as follows: hearing as we hear, we need to do justice to the absolute role of tonality as a 'force of nature'; tonality is not a style, it is the basis for musical style.

The postmodern interpretation for Scruton points ultimately to a moral dilemma, the dilemma of nihilism. Music as art

involves some affirmation, however qualified, of the actual. The faint sarcastic smile of the postmodernist is as incompatible with greatness as is the helpless nostalgia of a Havergal Brian

or the sentimental sweetness of a Rodrigo. Postmodern irony is simply a more sophisticated way of avoiding the question of modern life – the question of what we are to affirm in it, and what deny. If art ceases to affirm life, then it loses its point: after all, life is all that we have. (p.493)

There are two interesting points in this comment: firstly, one cannot help suspecting that Scruton's moral and cultural pessimism is responsible for formulating his criterion of the meaning of music.⁶ To be sure, this appears initially otherwise. It seems that the question of tonality is approached via the question of musical meaning and on the basis of the definition that music involves the transformation of sound into tone. However, Scruton's critique of postmodern culture (which may well contain much accurate analysis and description) and his discussion of the question of tonality as a moral question suggest that, in truth, the argument is not a search for, but a defence of, the meaning of music. The musical masterworks of the past, which are understood and appreciated, form the empirical basis for a criterion of meaning to which music of other times and kinds does not (or no longer) conform.

Secondly, the insistence on affirmation in music, if taken as a defining criterion, restates the need to recognise that music demands an active, participative engagement with it. Accordingly, an aesthetic theory which relies on work-receptive assumptions about music will be troubled by serious questions and quite possibly fail to reach a philosophical dimension at all. The question of to what extent tonality is responsible for musical meaning is not a question about the given. It is a question about how music is made and heard (essentially a unified process) and how it is in this making and hearing discovered. To listen to music is to be invited to participate in its discovery. This invitation may be of a different kind – different, yet equally compelling and meaningful if music is discovered – whether it is issued by Beethoven, Schoenberg, or Boulez. The tricky question of meaning resurfaces when the suspicion arises that no

meaningful invitation is issued, or when the invitation cannot be followed because the message appears incomprehensible.

For the musician the question of meaning is not necessarily puzzling. Living within the confines of an art – a *techne* – the musician lives within and works on a horizon of meaningful practice which is defined through the past and expanded towards the future. The unpredictable invitations which music offers will always present challenges to his hearing and making. Whether or not an invitation is followed is dependent on understanding the invitation *as* a challenge. Listening and making evolve in dialogue with makers and listeners. An invitation that seemed outrageous, meaningless, and abysmal becomes accepted, meaningful, and finally familiar through this dialogue of making and listening. The movement and meaning made, heard, and discovered as music is of a manifold, overwhelming kind. Analysis and articulated understanding pretend to uncover a defined – and *a posteriori* predictable – relationship between technical device and profundity of meaning. Such a relationship neither exists nor is it pre-given to the making and listening. It is worked at and achieved in living performance. The musical meaning rests on ‘a clearly implied conflict between that which you hear and that which is being contradicted by what you hear’.⁷

The unpredictable nature of musical movement is familiar to the musician. To the philosopher it remains a puzzle, albeit one of utmost significance. The philosopher suspects that truth may in essence be unpredictable. If his intuition is correct, truth needs to show itself through itself and may elude the confident analysis and grasp of the expert. The philosopher’s task is to ensure that the question of music unfolds in its own, unpredictable way. He needs to remain its servant and to contemplate, not solve it.

¹ *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

All subsequent references to Scruton’s book will appear in the body of the article.

- 2 Gérard Genette draws attention to the similarities in the practice of improvisation and performance of pre-existing works. The former is shown to be a more complex, but not necessarily categorically distinct (that is, 'purer') state of performance; see his *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p.61.
- 3 Hans Keller, *Essays on Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 123.
- 4 Scruton's understanding of the musical work as an intentional object is not new. A well known account of the musical work as intentional object is advanced by Roman Ingaarden in his *The Work of Music and the Problem of its Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Ingaarden's characterisation of the composed musical work as an intentional object, a 'schema ... a determined multiplicity of possibilities designated by the areas of indeterminacy of the schematic product' (p. 150) would need to face similar questions.
- 5 Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- 6 'The postmodern world is not merely democratic; it is irreligious, since that is what life in the present moment requires ... the human psyche itself has been thrown out of orbit, as the world is swallowed by its own representations. The television screen has ceased to be a summary of distant episodes, and become the criterion of reality itself. Events are real to the extent that they can be captured on a videotape and made available in playback. But when the really real is endlessly repeatable, nothing truly happens. The river of time ceases to murmur in the psychic background, and a zombie-like disengagement spreads like a fungus over the human will. Life becomes episodic, like a soap opera ... The social world ... becomes sentimentalised' (p. 506). Lydia Goehr argues this point in more detail in her review of Scruton's book in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52: 2 (Summer 1999), pp.398- 409.
- 7 Hans Keller, *Essays on Music*, pp.121-5.