Musical Beauty

Negotiating the Boundary between Subject and Object

Férdia J. Stone-Davis

 CASCADE *Books* • Eugene, Oregon

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Cascade Books
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www. wipfandstock.com

ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-557-8

Cataloging-in-Publication data:

Stone-Davis, Férdia J.

Musical beauty : negotiating the boundary between subject and object / Férdia J. Stone-Davis.

xviii + 210 p. ; cm. 23 — Includes bibliographic references and index.

ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-557-8

1. Music — Philosophy and aesthetics. 2. Boethius, d. 524. 3. Kant, Immanuel, 1724–1804. I. Title.

ML3845 .S78 2011

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

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Introduction

> Although of course it [the art of tone] speaks through mere sensations without concepts, and hence does not, like poetry, leave behind something for reflection, yet it moves the mind in more manifold and, though only temporarily, in deeper ways.
>
> —Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §53, 5:328, 205.

> Indeed no path to the mind is as open for instruction as the sense of hearing. Thus, when rhythms and modes reach an intellect through the ears, they doubtless affect and reshape that mind according to their particular character.
>
> —Boethius *De Institutione Musica* 1.1.181.

That music means is beyond dispute. How it does so is not. For at some level we can say what music is, namely the temporal organization of tones generated by vibrations of air.[1] We can examine how it impacts upon the human person as well as tracing its social and cultural functions. At another level, however, the musical mechanism remains elusive, resisting definite articulation. Hence the exploration of the nature of music, its "quiddity" so to speak, is found within a variety of spheres: scientific, socio-cultural, philosophical, and theological, as well as amidst the flux of music practice. This book is not situated within any one of these domains in particular but is concerned rather with something foundational to them all. It is an ontological enquiry and as such is concerned with musical quiddity in a simple sense, that is, with music *qua* music. Specifically, it is concerned with the structure by virtue of which music exists *as such*. That is, it is concerned with music *as physical*,

1. In defining music thus, I am attempting to be inclusive of different forms of music whilst maintaining a distinction between music and sound-art. The tones used in music are structural in nature: they are shaped by means of rhythm, melody, and harmony. It is this that differentiates music from sound-art. On the complexity of defining the concept of music, see Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music*, 40–65.

specifically, music as sound and as embodied practice. For it is here that music's first-order mode of being reveals itself.

Attending to the physicality of music may seem an obvious task. It is not. Contemporary philosophical modes of discourse regarding ontology remain at some level of detachment from it. Such discussions often focus on musical "works," centering upon the conditions distinguishing one sort of "work" from another.[2] Yet more abstractly, they focus on "whether musical works are classes, types, or kinds, over whether they are universals or particulars, over whether they are created or discovered, and over whether musical works, as well as performances, consist of sounds."[3] There are exceptions to this, such as that presented by Bruce Ellis Benson who, approaching music phenomenologically, shows how the notion of "work" breaks down in music practice. Indeed the relationship between composer and performer proves far more dynamic within the activity of music-making than their categorization implies.[4] My own purpose is different. I will explore music not simply as manifest through its practice, although this will be essential to the enterprise, but will examine music's physical mode of being (ὤν), the way in which it *is* as physical.

Attending to the meaning latent within music's physicality is not unproblematic, since a priori frameworks of meaning often obscure some of its crucial elements. Given its indefinable nature, witnessed to by the variety of meanings within the different spheres outlined above, frameworks are often imported from elsewhere in order to throw a halo around musical meaning. Such frameworks include analogies with phenomena that are more readily intelligible, key elements of which are then transferred into the realm of music for exploration. One clear example is the analogy of music and language: their common ability to evoke,

2. Davies distinguishes three types of musical "work": works for live performance, works that emerge as masters from which copies are replicated (typically tapes, discs, MP3's), and works that emerge within a studio environment (employing technologies that are not normally available in live performance). Davies, "Music," 495.

3. Ibid., 496. See also Thomasson, "Ontology of Art"; Davies, "Ontology of Art"; Goodman, *Languages of Art*; Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art*; Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*; Ingarden, *Work of Music*; Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*; Kivy, "Platonism in Music"; Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music*.

4. Benson invokes the idea of improvisation (as found within renaissance and baroque music practice) in order to subvert the idea of "work" and to better describe what occurs in practice. *Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*.

express, and represent suggests a connection between the two. Indeed, linguistic metaphors are valuable to our understanding of music. It is for this reason that they have become ingrained within our language about musical meaning: "passages in music are conceived as sentences, with individual notes or clusters of notes taken to be equivalent of words."[5] Likewise, we talk about musical ideas, musical sentences, propositions, punctuation and musical questions.[6] Some accounts of musical meaning, however, have been governed entirely by the analogy and assert that music *is* a kind of language. Thus, within Deryck Cooke's controversial book *The Language of Music*, he takes music's capacity to express and evoke emotion as his starting point. He claims that similar melodic phrases, harmonies, and rhythms found within the work of different composers within the tonal tradition are used to communicate identical emotions. On this basis he suggests that music can be considered a language, since it has idioms affording specific meanings.

Analogies are, of course, structurally advantageous since they have the capacity to preserve the integrity of the concerned parties, recognizing which connections obtain and which do not, which are helpful and which hinder. In this respect analogy has the ability to prevent reduction or totalization. In practice, however, one partner often becomes dominant, the understanding of one negatively affecting the other. This, in fact, has often been the case with the analogy of music and language, resulting especially from the frequent presumption that determinate and verifiable content underpins linguistic communication.[7] Against this criterion, to which music does not measure up, "it is erroneously concluded that music is a second-class citizen of the intellectual world."[8] This is the case with Peter Kivy's use of the analogy. In brief terms, Kivy favors the content provided through language and thus fails to acknowledge the possibility that music has content because it does not comply

5. Johnson, *Meaning of the Body*, 235.

6. See Johnson's treatment of the metaphor of "music as language." Ibid., 235.

7. See Leo Treitler on the relationship between music and (particular understandings that underpin) language in "Language and the Interpretation of Music," 23–56. The emphasis upon determinacy is brought out in relation to beauty by Paul Guyer. In particular, he relates the destabilization of the concept of beauty within philosophical circles to the verificationist theory of meaning and the positivist equation of scientific explanation and prediction. Guyer, *Values of Beauty*.

8. Johnson, *Meaning of the Body*, 260.

with the nature of everyday (and poetical) linguistic content.[9] Music is thus viewed simply as pleasure since it is non-propositional. At the other extreme, but on the very same basis (most notably within the Romantic understanding) music has been thought to surpass words, communicating the ineffable.[10]

The nature of musical meaning, considered through its physicality, is also often clouded by frameworks built upon aesthetic categories and principles. These provide a lens through which the arts in general are viewed. Such broad-sweep approaches tend towards a certain homogenization across their range and thereby result in distortion within accounts of individual arts. The uniqueness of the arts is not fully attended to. The specific category that will provide the focus for the task at hand is beauty. Beauty features within current aesthetic and theological discussion (standing more peripherally within the domain of philosophical aesthetics).[11] Historically, however, it has been a dominant concept, acting as a cipher for underlying presuppositions that themselves comprise broader frameworks, both philosophical and theological.

It is on this basis that the two central figures of our narrative present themselves: Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c.480–c.525) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Both are of immense significance within Western intellectual history, contributing to the development of accounts of the arts and advancing the theory and practice of music. An examina-

9. Kivy, "Kant and the Affektenlehre." We will return to Kivy's understanding of music in chapter six. Theodor W. Adorno states that "Music resembles language," but maintains that anyone who takes the resemblance literally "will be seriously misled." "Music and Language: A Fragment," 1–6. We will see that Kant upholds the connection between music and language. The latter dominates his conception of communication and his understanding of the fine arts. Music suffers as a result.

10. Discussing the Romantic understanding of music Carl Dahlhaus says: "If instrumental music had been a 'pleasant noise' *beneath* language to the common-sense estheticians of the eighteenth century, then the romantic metaphysics of art declared it a language *above* language. The urge to include it in the central sphere of language could not be suppressed" (*Idea of Absolute Music*, 9).

11. Until quite recently the majority of philosophical discussion has centred upon the notion of beauty: it is now marginal although not without advocates. These include Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* and Zangwill, *Metaphysics of Beauty*. See also Guyer, *Values of Beauty*, chap. 13. Within theology the attention paid to beauty has been consistent. This is due in large part to the objective ground for beauty provided by belief in God. Recent works include: Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God*; Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, Aran Murphy, *Christ and the Form of Beauty*; Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*; Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*; Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*.

tion of their respective accounts of beauty will allow the frameworks underpinning them to be *de*ciphered. For their contrasting conceptions of beauty are intrinsically connected to their understandings of the nature of physicality and its capacity to offer knowledge of the world, conceptually understood. In this way, epistemological concerns surface, for it is within the space that the concept of beauty opens up that the boundary between the perceiving subject and the perceived object is negotiated and, thereby, that the relationship of the self and the world is constituted. In addition, it will show how their particular understandings of beauty mold their evaluation of music. As a result two aspects central to music will become clear. These ultimately devalue music within both the Boethian and Kantian schemes but are not only central to music ontology but provide a means through which music acquires its variety of meanings and functions. These features are the *physicality* of music (its existence as sound) and, its corollary, *indeterminacy* (that is, the absence of propositional knowledge from music's physicality). Attention to music itself will draw these features out.

Before sketching an outline of the path that our exploration will take, a word is needed about the music which Boethius and Kant have in mind for it would be wrong to presume that both thinkers are concerned with the same type. Indeed, to talk about music in its non-specificity would be to perform an abstraction. Hence, a glimpse at the history of Western music reveals the difference between the types of sounded music that Boethius and Kant have in mind. There are two major developments that are relevant here. The first is a progression from the sequential tone-pattern (exemplified in chant) to the polyphony of the sixteenth century and the second is a movement away from "Pythagorean tuning" towards "equal temperament."[12] Hence, whereas for Boethius music emerges horizontally from the melodic sequence of tones, using a musi-

12. The Pythagorean scale gave way to tempered versions because of the disproportion inherent within its construction. Stuart Isacoff notes, "The fact is, octaves and fifths, when created with Pythagoras' pure mathematical ratios are incommensurate: The further they move away from a common starting point, the more the structures built from these 'perfect' intervals diverge." Thus, in the production of a scale, a series of octaves or fifths will never be exactly in tune with one another. Isacoff, *Temperament*, 40–42. A good summary of the shift from Pythagorean tuning to forms of temperament, including "meantone tuning" and the "just scale," is found in Backus, *The Acoustical Foundations of Music*, 134–60. Cf. also Rasch, "Tuning and Temperament," 193–222. A brief historical survey of other forms of early music tuning is found in Covey-Crump, "Pythagoras at the forge," 318–20.

cal scale that is tuned according to the octave (*diapason*), fourth (*diatessaron*), and fifth (*diapente*), for Kant music is conceived vertically as well as horizontally, in the harmony that contextualizes a melody, using a musical scale that tunes according to the octave and therein consists of equal semi-tone intervals. Even though these changes are substantial and the types of sounded-music that Boethius and Kant have in mind are different there is enough continuity to justify their juxtaposition for the purposes of this discussion, namely the continuity that derives from music's existence as *practice*. Thus, although sounded-music is the embodiment of different practices that vary according to time and place, in each case there is something commonly recognizable as music, namely the temporal organization of tones.

Initially, then, we will start with Boethius for whom the world is knowable and for whom, as a result, the physical world is of value. Here, within an integrally theological framework, beauty is understood as harmony and as such is constitutive of the world: it is the principle by which the world coheres as a whole and a property of the material world. I will show how granting beauty this objectivity allows it a cosmic meaning or "resonance" which extends both between and beyond subjects. I will then demonstrate how the Boethian account of music illustrates his understanding of the material world and beauty. Considering beauty as the principle of harmony grants music significance in relation to both the intellectual and the material for, as physical sensation, music offers knowledge of the world. However, I shall show that ultimately Boethius stresses the intellectual to the detriment of the material, using the physical experience of music as merely a stepping-stone to intellectual perception through form (with form finding its ideal location in God). By virtue of the satisfaction and pleasure imparted by music's physicality, Boethius' attention is re-invigorated and he is encouraged to re-focus on the world and, specifically, himself as part of the world. Ultimately, however, musical indeterminacy gives way to and is surpassed by the conceptual truths of reason.

I will then turn to Kant who displays a mistrust of sensory knowledge, which can never be guaranteed. The world-in-itself remains beyond human comprehension. This unknowability, and the understanding of the physical, material world as an occasion for its "appearance," leads Kant to deny beauty as, to put it simply, an objective property of the material. It causes him to assign to it a merely descriptive capacity through its

reference to the harmony of the cognitive powers within the subject, the locus of aesthetic response. I will demonstrate how understanding beauty thus permits it a merely inter-subjective meaning, or "resonance," one extending between subjects but not beyond them. Thereafter I will show how Kant's account of music exemplifies his view both of the material world and of beauty as well as exploring the ambiguity of music's status within his account of the fine arts. Positively understood, the conceptually indeterminate nature of certain forms of music allies it with nature, rendering it paradigmatic of beauty. However, negatively understood, music lies on the margins of the Kantian understanding of beauty (and the fine arts) since judgments about beauty necessarily concern only a harmony of the intellectual powers. Ultimately, for Kant, the physicality of music precludes it from engaging the mind and involvement with concepts (albeit in an indeterminate way), reducing it to mere pleasure.

Finally, given this particular history of the concept of beauty and its intrinsic connection with epistemological concerns (and the implicit tendency demonstrated thereby where non-musical frameworks are imposed upon music in order to ground its significance) we will explore the physicality of music as manifested in its practice and reception. I will show how music *as sound* facilitates the suspension of the boundary between subject and object, self and world, such that each becomes open to the other. In doing so we will thereby impact upon an understanding of beauty epistemologically (but non-propositionally) understood. I will suggest that musical beauty refers to the occurrence of a pre-reflective stance towards the world wherein one focuses outwards and experiences an abundance of meaning that is not self-generated but is presented from without whilst 'resonating' within. Experienced as a sense of richness or fullness I will suggest that music can thus be said to encourage what might be called an "enchanted" mode of attention.