What Music Isn’t and How to Teach It

Introduction

Unlike the other arts, music has no direct connection with the rest of the human world. True, there are bird songs and natural “melodies” in the gurgling of brooks, but these are hardly the materials of music in the way that landscape can be the subject-matter of painting or the human body the material of dance. And no natural sounds can stand alone as quasi-artworks the way that the deeply eroded limestone blocks from China’s Lake Tai can be admired as abstract sculptures. Music demands to be understood on its own terms. This is not a new requirement, for others, from Hanslick to Copland, have urged us to focus on music as experience that is intrinsically and only musical. Still, false analogies are convenient, none more so than the platitude, “Music is the language of emotion.” Music as emotion that is linguistically structured! What happened to music as its own intrinsic, full experience—auditory, somatic, multi-sensory, sensible experience?

What music isn’t

Let me start by dispelling the characterization of music as language. The basis for the comparison is simple and obvious. Both music and language have a formal structure, a syntactic structure of units whose order is guided by rules and an overall structure that observes certain formal requirements. Just as words can be combined into phrases, phrases into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into written compositions, so musical tones can be shaped into motives

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1 I want to acknowledge with appreciation the many useful suggestions of Wayne D. Bowman, Riva Berleant, Tom Rogalski, and anonymous readers.
and phrases, phrases into periods, and these into sections that are ordered depending on the larger formal structure that has been chosen: sonata-allegro, rondo, theme and variations, etc. And since sentences and their combinations are presumably the bearer of meaning, so musical meaning is likewise assumed to be embedded in music’s formal structures.

Simple, yes, but not so simple, for problems remain. Apart from the fact that the logic of analogy has merely suggestive force of, there is the specific problem of syntactic meaning. At best, analogies can be illuminating in the parallel they offer. That is the extent of their logical force: not proof but suggestion. The question of meaning is a question of a different order. What kind of meaning resides in linguistic formations and what kind in music? This is no simple question because many different kinds of meaning have been attributed to language. Linguistic syntax follows certain well-understood rules germane to a particular language, and governs the relation of subject and predicate, the modifying function of adjectives and adverbs, the relational function of clauses and phrases, and the order in which all these must be presented. The established use of these conveys assertions, questions, exclamations, and the like.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century Western music does exhibit syntactic and formal patterns, but these are followed loosely and are often deliberately breached. In fact, strict conventionality in music such that everything is predictable is the key to colossal boredom. In the classical canon, phrase length often deviates from pairs of four measures each, harmonic surprises regularly occur in the expected chord progressions of cadences, meters shift from simple to compound, key changes may be unexpected and abrupt, and so on. The music of Haydn, for example, is a treasure trove of ingenious deviations from the expected, and by the early twentieth century, the desire for refreshing musical experience led to much innovation and experimentation, from Richard Strauss’s distinctive harmonic palette extending Wagner’s continuous harmonic sequences almost to the point of losing
any sense of tonality, to Arnold Schönberg’s deliberate obliteration of any vestige of tonality whatsoever. While breaking with grammatical conventions in language at the very least obscures meaning and often renders it incoherent, formal innovation has the effect of stimulating and invigorating musical experience.

When the language in question is prose non-fiction, we may confidently say that we can locate cognitive meaning in the sense of verifiable propositions. At the same time, it is often acknowledged that cognitive meaning does not exhaust the meaning content of literary compositions. Even in the non-poetic use of language, there may be inuendos and other such subtle and indirect shades of meaning that may not even be capable of articulation but reside in the choice of particular words and their order, not to mention the use of tropes and the extra-linguistic features of spoken language, such as gestures and inflection. Poetic language poses its own challenges to meaning and, of course, the meaning of meaning is a major question in linguistics.

The kind of meaning that inheres in prose fiction is an issue aestheticians continue to debate. One can even ask whether the question of meaning is the appropriate question to ask in understanding fiction. And of course this still says nothing about other uses of language, such as in poetry and rhetoric. Questions of meaning are problematic enough in the language arts where they might be considered more germane to the medium. In the case of music, an analogy with language raises more difficulties than it dispels and, indeed, dispels none, for I think that it starts the inquiry on the wrong track and is thus instantly misleading.

To bring the matter of meaning into music is, I think, to acknowledge the importance of musical experience. It recognizes that music is not always delectation and that some music affects us profoundly. The question at issue is how to account for its force. The usual, trite answer is to appeal to emotion. This seems plausible initially, for music can be deeply affecting. The emotional power
of music has long been understood. Even though Plato admitted its usefulness in education, he found it a troublesome factor in a well-ordered state. Music’s social utility continues to be exploited in martial and patriotic music and in sacred music, both functions effectively combined in national anthems. Even music’s palliative effects have their utility for retail merchandising and customer management in the ubiquitous canned music in supermarkets to doctors’ offices.

Emotion is often cited as the answer to musical meaning. That music has emotional power says more about music than it does about emotion, for we are still left with the question of what emotion is. Here we encounter still more difficulties. It is hard to take issue with the claim that we may have emotions while listening to music. Yet emotion is not the only feeling we may have: We may feel languorous, erotic, resolute, energetic, or belligerent, all states of body-mind and not what is generally meant by what are called emotions such as happy or sad, the usual candidates for music.

Obviously the explanation of emotion is itself greatly problematic. Without expecting to resolve the not-so-simple question of what emotion is, we can still point out that the word is a short-hand term for an inchoate experience whose manifestations are invariably unique and hence not repeatable, exchangeable, comparable, or even classifiable by any but the most insipid categories. The common words we use to identify emotions, such as ‘happy’ and ‘sad,’ are impoverished, high-order abstractions and clarify little about such experiences beyond offering a conventional, vapid classification.

Discussions that attempt to relate music and emotion incur underlying assumptions that further vitiate their arguments. The assumptions are many, beginning with the idea that there is an identifiable something called emotion that is present in music. This is clearly an anthropomorphic projection and leads to claims that music expresses something apart from what it itself is. Music is said to express this something, or the composer or performer are said to express that something, and
further, these supposed expressions are the right way to talk about what is going on in the music. This way of internalizing musical experience is part of the irrepressible tendency to psychologize emotion and so to characterize musical experience as subjective. On the other hand, as long ago as the late nineteenth century, psychologists began to credit emotions to physiological changes emanating from the autonomic nervous system (the James-Lange theory of emotions), while more recent theories find emotions resulting from physiological arousal joined with cognitive factors such as an appraisal of the surroundings (Schachter and Singer's two-factor theory of emotion). The tendency to translate aesthetic experience into emotion is prevalent in the common misunderstanding of the arts in general but even more pernicious in the case of music, which has nothing external on which to pin it, as painting has to the landscape or the novel to a plot.

Because it is common for people to experience emotion when listening to music, the assumption is made that music is emotion or is about emotion. An insidious logical error often seeps through discussions associating music and emotion. The error consists in taking the effect, emotion, for the explanation. This is a type of common pre-scientific explanation of phenomena that occurs when the effect is taken as the cause, as in claiming, to use one of John Dewey’s examples, that the heat in fire is caused by fire’s calorific power. This is a false explanation or, rather, a non-explanation, since it is merely a tautology; that is, it “explains” something by merely citing itself in different words. In this example, ‘calorific’ means “productive of heat,” thus the so-called explanation only says that the heat in fire is caused by the power to produce heat! This is a kind of thinking still prevalent in social thought, as when selfish behavior is explained by saying that it’s human nature to be selfish. In other words, people are selfish because people are selfish! So from the fact that people have an emotional response to music, the inference is made that music originates in feeling or, in Langer’s generalized version, that art is the symbol of sentience.
But let us consider how we experience music. Sound is produced, usually from an external source except, of course, in the case of vocal sounds. It is activated by a person or device usually different from the listener and, when physical or electronic equipment is involved, often separate in time as well as space. The sounds themselves are physical events in the form of atmospheric vibrations. It is unnecessary here to enumerate the multiple factors involved in the production of music, but it is useful to remember them when confronted by the many commonplaces that try to turn music into a personal, private, inner, subjective emotion. Such accounts fail to recognize that music is not only a physical occurrence but a social phenomenon involving a community of composers, performers, and listeners and that it has a history of performance practice and of valuing.

Listening to music incorporates (I use this word literally) all the factors I have listed, and considering music in this way makes it into a physical, social, situational, and even historical art. The listener’s participation in the perception of sound is physiological social psychological, as if any of these could be separated. “[T]he social mind (Mead, Dewey, Peirce) always conditions perception selectively – it doesn’t just automatically register stimuli.” Much more could be said on the subject but what I have offered is enough to situate and correct the bald misunderstanding that is assumed in regarding musical experience as a subjective and emotional experience. Music could better be described as a social-environmental art. Of course such an account does not fully answer the question of what musical experience is but it sets us in the right direction. More on this question in a moment.

A corollary to the error of assigning music an emotional meaning lies in maintaining that music expresses that emotion. In its naïve use this mistaken insistence projects the human capacity to

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2 Communication from Wayne Bowman, Sept. 18, 2008.
feel and express emotion into the musical sounds themselves. A more sophisticated version argues that the expression is *in* the music or that music has expressive properties. Apart from the anthropomorphism implicit in such assertions, the very language reifies emotive phenomena that are fluid and intangible. In one way or another, music is taken to express emotion.

It is undoubtedly true for most people, musicians and non-musicians alike, that listening to music may evoke experience replete with feelings. What, then, is the relation between those feelings and the music? Often a parallelism and perhaps even an identity is proposed between the listener’s emotional experience and the emotion the music is purportedly expressing. But it is hard to grasp in any but the vaguest sense how a feeling, itself elusive and indeterminate, can be compared with or be assimilated to another, equally indeterminate feeling. Other difficulties emerge when attempting to distinguish components in emotion: a cognitive object, a physiological state, and the corresponding expressive behavior. When the fact that one has feelings while listening to music is used to claim that the music is expressing those feelings, what we have is more likely a projection of the listener’s experience onto the music itself than anything in or true of the music. Stravinsky excised this issue neatly when he commented, “Music expresses nothing. It can express itself only.”

Much of the difficulty here stems from the common connotation of the very word ‘music.’ The term is usually taken to mean that there is some *thing*, an auditory event called ‘music.’ In fact, the word *music* is actually a shorthand way of speaking of an entire experiential situation. Understood purely as sound, the word ‘music’ is a synecdoche, taking a part of the entire auditory situational experience as if it were the whole. “Music itself” is thus synecdochic, since musical sound is

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inseparable from an agent who produces and one who hears it. (Obviously they may be the same individual.) Moreover, whatever emotion we feel in listening to music is culturally conditioned; it is not found in the music but is, at best, projected onto it.

All such misleading assertions could be avoided by recognizing that music is the human experience of certain sonorous phenomena. And any emotional expression that might be claimed of it occurs in the experience of those phenomena but resides neither in the sounds alone nor in the listeners themselves. Indeed, ‘expression’ is hardly the appropriate word to account for such experience. For, whatever else may be said — and this is of central importance — it is experience whose focus is on its very self as experience, not on the listener’s interior feelings or response, which is what is implied by ‘expression.’ Indeed, experience is badly misconstrued if it is taken as subjective. As I hope to have made clear, experience in general and musical experience in particular is a complex phenomenon involving a number of factors, events, and collaborating conditions. Language, emotion, and expression are poor, misleading surrogates for that experience.\footnote{It is indeed difficult to avoid thinking of music in terms that do not rely on or recall emotions. Undoubtedly music has a powerful psychic effect and evokes responses that may be emotionally powerful. I take no issue with this. The danger, however, lies in attributing this capacity to the music itself and in failing to keep the emotional factor where it resides, that is in the experience of the listener and performer and not in the music. Despite all his efforts to keep music “pure” and distinct from all extraneous features, even Peter Kivy eventually succumbs to the force of the emotional explanation. See his \textit{Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience} (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.193 ff.}

Once these misrepresentations have been avoided, it is still no easy task to give an authentic account of musical experience. But at the same time, such experience should stand at the very center of music education, and something must be said and done about it. For unless we consider music education to consist entirely of technical, theoretical, or historical information, we must necessarily
turn to the ways music may be experienced. Theory, history, and analysis are not substitutes for or alternatives to musical experience but must derive from and can enhance that experience. Understanding better what that experience is and what it involves is necessary before determining what and how to teach music.

**What can we teach?**

Having said what music isn’t, we are left with the task of how to teach it. And since all we have are musical experiences, socially and culturally situated, and nothing else, what can we teach? Without language or emotion to rest on, is there anything we can say about music? All we can talk about is musical sound in its many modes and styles and with its indefinite boundaries. Can we teach experience? Not an easy undertaking.

Early in the process of music education must come re-education: the task of dispelling pernicious misapprehensions of the sort I have been describing. But once we expose their seductive misdirections, a rich and complex range of experience lies before us. We can encourage and lead others first to focus on musical experience directly and without intermediary and to recognize its many dimensions and transformations. Then we can assist them in developing skill in engaging in the experience.

Let me offer some suggestions on how to structure and direct this process. What I propose here is hardly new, but I hope that, in its present context, these ideas may serve to help others engage with music on its own terms more directly and with greater satisfaction and fulfillment. The key is to attract and hold attention on musical experience itself by exposing students to the many ways by which musical sounds are shaped, organized, and developed so that they experience them and begin to recognize their nuances and transformations. How to do this?

Articulating musical *meter* and *rhythm* in body movement, as in Dalcroze Eurythmics, is an
One can be taught to feel physically the pulse of different meters such as the common 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/8 and to experience how they are embedded in musical forms, such as the waltz, mazurka, polka, tarantella, and march. Engaging in such experiences would transform these forms from conceptual distinctions into physical events with distinctively different experiential (metrical and physical) characters. Actually learning to dance in these different meters is an excellent corrective to subjectifying or abstracting their distinctive identities. Moreover, translating into bodily movements such musical devices as the anticipation, suspension, the resolution of a dissonance, and the pedal tone, and the persistent repetition of a rhythmic pattern or melodic motive, as in Ravel’s Bolero, the Allegretto second movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, or a distinctive rhythm, such as the Scotch snap, can help make them concrete. An inventive instructor could even choreograph some musical works as movement alone.

Other dimensions of education in musical experience include dynamic properties, melodic understanding, harmonic structure and movement, and musical form. Here a talented instructor can find illustrative materials and help students learn to hear and detect perceptual differences. Included among the dynamic properties of music are volume, intensity, and changes in volume and tempo, sensing melodic intervals and harmonic textures, and noticing the movement of pitch. Differences in texture can easily be illustrated by the dense chords frequently found in Beethoven’s piano works, the thin, diaphanous sound at the beginning of the Intermezzo in Cavalleria Rusticana, and the wide spatial texture of the opening of the Sibelius Violin Concerto, my favorite example of musical spatiality.

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5 In writing of vocal music, Barthes emphasizes the participation of the body, and he finds this in other musical genres, both in the performer and the listener: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.” Roland Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York:: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 188.
Detecting the movement of pitch is probably one of the easiest perceptual changes to convey, shifts from low to high and the contrast between simple lines and florid passages. This can lead eventually to skill in following polyphonic textures and apprehending contrapuntal techniques. Repetitive patterns could be a part of developing pitch awareness, leading perhaps to the capacity to recognize melodic repetition in a ground bass and in sets of themes and variations. Examples of masterful jazz improvisation can be studied to illustrate pitch variation. Such changes could be combined in different ways to further develop perceptual acuteness.

Less obvious but just as revealing are harmonic movement, such as the different effects of typical harmonic progressions. Cultivating this sensibility may be more difficult for those without musical training but I think an elementary capacity to notice such changes can be developed. One could start with examples of harmonic movement in works built primarily of chord repetition and sequences, such as the melodic and harmonic repetition of E-flat at the beginning of Chopin’s Etude op. 25 no. 1 (“Aeolian Harp”) and the widely familiar harmonic sequence of Bach’s Prelude in C major, Well-Tempered Clavier Bk. I, No. 1. Grasping harmonic patterns and movement can lead students eventually to the chaconne and passacaglia.

Finally, perceiving musical forms requires greater perceptual sophistication but there are simple levels of apprehending musical structure by noticing dramatic changes within a movement, such as the Intermezzo Interotto in the fourth movement of Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra, and the chorale Es ist genug quoted in the last movement of Berg’s Violin Concerto. Recognizing the repetition of a section in baroque binary form and in Schubert’s Moments musicaux requires somewhat more skill. Noticing the contrast between movements of larger works might lead eventually to recognizing the prospective termination that identifies a coda. Students could be led from noticing the contrasting character of different sections of a movement to learning to recognize the return of musical materials in the three-
part song form, the rondo, and the recapitulation in a sonata-allegro movement.

It is tempting to begin the process of leading students to musical experience by recourse to the *imitative use of music*, something that occurs in many musical genres: classical, folk, rock, jazz, and pop. Although this actively encourages the listener to attend to the ongoing sounds and to relate them imaginatively to what descriptive source the composer has used as a stimulus to musical imagination, it actually can subvert our intent, for it can easily lead the listener to substitute a cognitive experience for a musical one by focusing on a narrative and trying to identify sounds by the non-musical features or events they purportedly represent.

The temptation to have recourse to imitation is great. Many avid listeners were first captivated by the ability of music to represent stories in sound in such works as Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Danse macabre*, Paul Dukas’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, and especially that classic of fairy tale narrative, Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*. The traits of people, things, and situations can be rendered in sounds that are easy to recognize, as Mussorgsky revealed so ingeniously in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Debussy’s music exhibits many descriptive opportunities, from the more obvious (“The Sunken Cathedral”) to the less obvious (“Goldfish” and “Gardens in the Rain”). These could be followed by descriptive music that requires more abstract imagination to grasp, such as Debussy’s *La Mer* and Mussorgsky’s *Night on Bald Mountain*. Examples of this sort can be varied with works that use or imitate sounds that normally occur outside of music, such as bird song (Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*), a locomotive (Honegger’s *Pacific 231*), and traffic (Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*). Similar imitative sounds occur in the works by Debussy and Saint-Saëns mentioned earlier. If imitation is used, however, it is important to make clear that the sounds are suggestive and evocative only and that they do not get their significance from their imitative association. At the same time, such cases can make us aware
that no sharp boundary can be drawn between musical and non-musical sounds.⁵

These examples are only illustrative and reflect my interest in the classical repertory, but there is no end of examples available in other genres, and imaginative instructors may enjoy finding illustrations from folk music, jazz, pop, and other genres of musical literature. Developing and refining an informal curriculum in musical listening could easily become an exciting pedagogical project with a personal stamp, for interests and knowledge of the musical literature are invariably individual. And getting students to supply examples would serve a double purpose.

We end, then, with music, only with music, with musical experience.⁷ But that is precisely where we should begin if we wish to avoid characterizing music by what it isn’t. Let me conclude this section by contradicting the title of this essay and urge that we resolve to speak only of what music is.

**Music as an environmental art**

How, then, are we to understand music? How can we understand music in its own terms? The question has often been asked, especially since Hanslick and still debated.⁸ Let me approach the question indirectly by locating music rather than by describing it, as I have just done here, or by speaking of its manifestations and workings as in composing and performing music. We can do this by thinking of music as an environmental art, not by referring to environmental music or to music in

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⁵ See the preceding essay, “What Titles Don’t Tell.”


environment but of environment as a way of characterizing musical experience.

First let me say that music does not exist in the abstract. Indeed, it is perhaps the most concrete, present, site-specific art. That is, music occurs; it occurs in space-time. Its direct manifestation is immediate, and as an event it is always contextual, in other words, environmental. Scholars have engaged in interminable debates over what constitutes the musical object: the ephemeral sound, the score, performance tradition, and the like. But I think the question is misstated, for there is no musical object; there is no aesthetic object; there is no object as such. To speak in this fashion is to offer an abstraction in place of an experience, to hypostatize the experience. Furthermore, the tendency, indeed the implication in introducing the idea of a musical object (or any object, for that matter) is that there is some thing out there, independent of us, to be located and identified, some thing separate and apart that needs to be understood.

But music is not an object, just as environment is not a place, separate from ourselves. Indeed, the common notion of environment as outside, as surroundings, involves the same objectifying process as in taking music as an object. I have long been trying to explain environment as a contextual field that includes the human participant, not as a separate part but as an integral factor. 9 Similarly, as participants in musical experience, we become part of the music or, to speak more precisely, we are participants and, as we engage in the musical process we contribute a creative function.

We can, in fact, think of the musical environment as a perceptual field, an aesthetic field in

which the various functions in appreciation are carried out. Four principal factors function in the 
musical situation or field: The creative one is, of course, the activity of the composer in shaping the 
(primarily) auditory experience. This may be focused in a musical score, a plan for listening that has 
been created by the composer. Or it may be in the sound itself, played or recorded directly using 
electronic technology. And for music to be heard it must be performed or activated at some time and 
in some way, so a performative factor accompanies the creative and focusing ones.¹⁰ A fourth factor 
is active listening, so involved that fulfills the auditory possibilities the composer has embedded in the 
 musical score or in the actual sound, and their realization by the performer. This is the process of 
appreciation.

These four functions – the creative, the focused, the performative, and the appreciative are 
factors in every situation in which musical appreciation is fulfilled. These functions must not be 
thought of separately. Each involves and requires the others, and all of them together constitute an 
aesthetic field, a musical situation, a musical environment.¹¹ What makes such a situation aesthetic is 
that it centers around appreciative experience that is primarily perceptual, involving all the senses, not 
only the auditory one, mediated and shaped through the manifold of cultural factors that affect all 
perception, and valued principally in itself for its own sake. To call a situation aesthetic thus identifies 
the kind of complex normative experience we engage in, here with music, elsewhere with other arts, 
and still elsewhere in other domains of experience.

¹⁰ One could speak of focusing as an objectifying factor, referring to the musical work that is created. But this way of 
speaking encourages one to slip into the mistake of thinking of a musical object, a misunderstanding that must be carefully 
avoided.

(http://cybereditions.com/spis/runisa/dll8VeyTheBooksTmp.)
Perhaps we can teach students to engage in appreciative listening in this way so that their aesthetic engagement involves the conscious participation in this fourfold process of creating, focusing, performing, and appreciating. For this to be possible they must learn to listen to and participate in the maneuverings of sounds, and this is both a challenge and a discovery for both teacher and students.