Music as sound and idea

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Despite the serious obstacles that stand in the way of discussing such questions as what constitutes a piece of music, the papers by Miss Carpenter and Professor Crocker deal sensitively with the issue and make useful and important observations. My comments are intended to assist in clarifying and furthering these discussions. Let me proceed by identifying and then applying two demands that this sort of question calls forth, the first conceptual and the second substantive. There is opportunity here to develop only some conceptual suggestions, and I shall merely be able to indicate the direction in which a substantive contribution might proceed.

When one faces the task of talking about music, as about any art, one encounters a double dilemma. Either you remain silent and safe, or you make use of words which, as a foreign medium that is used here primarily for a nonaesthetic end, must necessarily differ in kind from the art one is speaking of. If you do elect to communicate, you run headlong into a different problem,
for the language available for talking about art is remarkably unsatisfactory. Such language is almost always an unsuitable medium, composed generally of metaphor and evocation, and grounded usually on false analogies with linguistic functions (such as communication), with psychological explanations (such as catharsis, sublimation, and expression), or with intellectualistic attributes (such as symbolism, meaning, and truth). Furthermore, if one wishes to avoid these pitfalls of conventional terminology, one is faced with the awesome task of devising new, more directly descriptive concepts.

The problem is especially difficult in the case of music. Unlike literature and the fine arts, music employs materials not commonly associated with language and the conceptual process, and it suffers most from being talked about. Often the most that is done is to apply to music the alien speech of another, more easily verbalized art.

Yet this difficulty, which music shares with the literary arts, actually helps us avoid a confusion to which the theory of literature is especially prone. Because it is directly and immediately perceptual, music raises the insistent demand to be taken on its own terms as experience. Moreover, music sharpens for us the differences between the ways in which art is experienced and the ways in which those experiences are understood and conceptualized. By noting and applying this basic distinction between the full perceptual experience of music and the concepts and linguistic medium through which that experience is codified and explained, we may thus hope to avoid the first dilemma, that which results from the need to talk about an art that is basically non-linguistic.

In applying this distinction to the notion of a "piece of music," then, we must make clear the differences that exist between the musical object as a perceptual whole and the musical object as a conceptual whole. For music comes first and foremost as experience. Indeed, in certain respects it epitomizes the perceptual qualities of all art, for in comparison with other artistic media the musical experience is less fraught with resemblances, relationships, and associations which distract and mislead us. This problem, unfortunately, occurs in the visual arts and is particularly grave in the literary ones.

In the directness of our experience, music appears as a phenomenal object. Here it is a
perceptually congruent grouping of sounds, silences, and secondary visual, kinesthetic, and other active-passive sensory events. In this form, music is grasped in its intuitive experiential immediacy. When we proceed to describe and understand musical experience, we can employ broad perceptual categories such as sound and motion, or more specific ones such as pitch, timbre, dynamics, tonal succession, and juxtaposition. These categories are the musical concepts with which the composer works. However, music may also be described in conceptual categories like sonata-allegro form, harmonic rhythm, thematic relationships, style, and so forth. These are the concepts that the musicologist and theorist use in analyzing a musical work. It is certainly true that the perceptual and conceptual categories can and do overlap; yet the difference between them lies in the primary reference either to immediate auditory-experiential qualities or to the activities of analysis and organization. These categories resemble one another, however, in that they comprise referential symbols that are conceived apart from the actual perception of music and that depend on language rather than on sound. The composer occupies an ambiguous position a worker in musical materials he operates in the phenomenal medium of musical perception; yet when he pauses to reflect on or to explain what he is doing, he shifts to perceptual (and occasionally to conceptual) categories. Still, there is a striking consistency in the testimony of creative artists about their reliance on purely perceptual qualities for making creative decisions. They simply "like it that way" because "it sounds better."

There is, I believe, a good deal of evidence that favors the adoption of this distinction in the musical object between the experiential and the categorical. The history of music abounds with examples of ingenious technical bravado incorporated into a musical work which simply does not succeed in performance. And we all recognize how the aural integrity of a musical piece need not necessarily correspond with a unity that can be discovered by analyzing the work. If we wish, then, to be clear about what a musical piece is, we must decide whether we mean the object as heard or the object as analyzed.

Professor Crocker's paper offers several illustrations of the difficulties that result from the failure to notice and observe this fundamental distinction. His discussion is knowledgeable and illuminating through the range of illustrations he brings forward to test various proposals for locating the musical
piece. Yet it shifts between the piece as an experienced unity, which he describes by referring to time span (five minutes plus or minus), and the piece as a structural entity (multi-movement works, sonata form, motet, aria). Similarly, he moves from the formal units through which we are exposed aurally to a composer's extended composition (the acts of operas, the movements of symphonies) to our knowledge of who he was and the intentions he had (as in our unwillingness to part from our conviction that a piece should have only one composer) for purposes of questioning whether the multi-movement trope and introit can be considered a single piece. The same ambiguity pursues Professor Crocker's discussion of Chopin's Preludes Op. 28 and Webern's Op. 5, for while we often hear the individual pieces which comprise each opus played straight through (perhaps changing the order in the case of the Chopin), neither of these works was intended as a multi-movement composition. The same perceptual-conceptual distinction is overlooked when we are led directly from considering the beginning, middle, and end of a piece as they sound, to the search for a canon of form, perhaps unknown, but nonetheless there. Our pursuit of the musical piece might be aided somewhat if we knew what it is we were seeking—sound or idea. I would opt for locating the primary sense of the notion of "musical object" or "piece" in the perceptual experience, and assigning the significance of formal, stylistic, intentional and other features to their effects on the musical experience. In
analogy. For our understanding of music has, I think, long been impeded by the tendency to assimilate it to the other more familiar and readily verbalized arts, just as our understanding of art in general has been sorely handicapped by our propensity to explain it in the light of concepts and objects of a wholly different and foreign sort. I have elsewhere\textsuperscript{ii} used the concept of "surrogate theories of art" to denote attempts of this sort, and the notion applies equally to the substitution of the conceptual object for the perceptual one, and the visual experience for the musical one. Once a path is charted around these pitfalls, we must devise concepts and categories that are taken from musical experience. Only in the light of these can we hope to acquire a clearer understanding of the musical object. It would be presumptuous to do more than suggest a direction here, but perhaps that will be sufficient to provide a positive close to this discussion of two thoughtful and provocative papers.

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