

“A musical idea ... is not only an object of intrinsic beauty but also an end in itself, and not a means of representing feelings and thoughts. The essence of music is sound and motion.” (Eduard Hanslick).

Discuss.

The argument regarding whether music truly has the power to convey emotions has long been a subject of debate, coming to prominence in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, with Hanslick presenting the ‘absolutist’ argument that music expresses only itself and is incapable of conveying emotions. Is music therefore merely an art form to be admired for its beautiful nature or does it have the power to transcend this state and evoke an emotional response?

In order to determine the “intrinsic beauty” of music, one must first establish the essence of beauty in music itself. Music which follows conventions regarding harmony and tonality could be considered beautiful, however the beauty of music can also be enhanced if it defies these conventions, adding to the sense of excitement. For example, the *Well-Tempered Clavier* by J.S. Bach was one of the first works to utilise the full range of tonality, by writing Preludes and Fugues in all twelve major and minor keys. Bach’s *Prelude & Fugue No. 6 in D minor (WTC I)* demonstrates mastery of musical techniques such as harmony and



counterpoint, therefore could be considered to possess “intrinsic beauty”, however, according to Hanslick, it is not intended to provoke an emotional response. Heinrich Schenker would perceive the overall voice leading as  $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$  and the overall harmonic progression is heard as I-IV-V-I-V-I, which is conventional harmony, supporting the idea

that it follows the traditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Therefore, it could be viewed to display “intrinsic beauty” since it follows the expectations of the listener, functioning as a work to demonstrate Bach’s mastery of the conventions of the time.

In the Classical period, conventions developed in terms of structure and tonality, such as Sonata Form (as it came to be known many years later). Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40 in G minor* follows the typical structure of Sonata Form: the Exposition, with the first subject in G minor and second subject in the relative major, Bb major; the Development with

**First Subject**

**Second Subject**

modulations to a variety of rather remote keys such as F# minor; and the Recapitulation, which repeats the first subject in G minor and remains in G minor for the second subject. This structure was not yet an established convention, however it was a typical framework for a symphony at the time and would have met the audience’s expectations, perhaps causing them to be satisfied with the symmetry and balance of the work, factors which were considered to give music “intrinsic beauty” in the Classical period. The work was widely appreciated, called a work of “lightness, grace and charm”<sup>1</sup> by Schumann.

However, other composers defied the conventions established by previous composers, as we hear in Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 1 in C major*. In the introduction to the first movement, Beethoven experiments with tonality and harmony, leading the listener to doubt the true tonal centre. It begins with a C7 chord, establishing a sense of uncertainty, before resolving as a perfect cadence in F major (V7-I) in bar 1 and an interrupted cadence in C major (V7-vi) in bar 2. The harmonic rhythm then halves, giving a further sense of instability: bars 3-4 make up a grander perfect cadence of G major (V7-I). The cadences in contrasting keys create a sense of uncertainty about the true tonal centre, reinforced by the dynamics, marked *forte* on each dominant seventh chord and *piano* on its resolution, decreasing the sense of finality about each resolution. Hopkins calls this introduction “extremely unusual” and an “abuse of convention”<sup>2</sup>. However, the fact that Beethoven does

<sup>1</sup> Rosen, Charles, *The Classical Style*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1971), p.324

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins, Anthony, *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven*, (Travis & Emery, London, 1981), p.11

**Adagio molto \*)** Ludwig van Beethoven

\*) Beethoven's metronome marking of 1817 / Beethovens Metronombezeichnung von 1817: ♩ = 88

not follow established conventions could enhance the “intrinsic beauty” of his music, creating more drama and adding an element of the unexpected as the listener is unsure of the tonality until the first subject appears in bar 13. Therefore, music can be considered to have “intrinsic beauty”, whether it follows traditional conventions or defies them, as this can add to the excitement and interest of the piece.

In order to establish whether music is truly “an end in itself”, we must examine its extrinsic effects on the listener as well as its intrinsic qualities. Hanslick writes that Bach’s music “aims at nothing beyond itself”<sup>3</sup>. This could be considered true regarding his *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which demonstrates the full range of tonality and arguably was not necessarily intended to provoke an emotional response from the listener. However, Bach’s religious compositions convey a more meaningful and allegorical message. Goethe remarks, regarding Bach’s music: “It is as if the eternal harmony were conversing within itself, as it may have done in the bosom of God just before the Creation of the world. So likewise did it move in my inmost soul.”<sup>4</sup> This idea is portrayed in Bach’s *St John Passion*, which conveys the betrayal and torture of Jesus in the events preceding the Crucifixion. For example, in the aria *Es ist vollbracht* meaning “it is finished”, Bach writes music which possesses “intrinsic beauty”, with a lyrical melody for the viola da gamba, using appoggiaturas expressing

<sup>3</sup> Hanslick, Eduard, *The Beautiful in Music* translated by Cohen 7<sup>th</sup> Edition (Novello, London, 1885), p.43

<sup>4</sup> Berger, Karol, *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow, An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*, (University of California Press, USA, 2007), p. 128

**Part 2**  
No. 30 "Es ist vollbracht"

**Aria**  
Molto andagio  
Va. da Gamba

dissonance then resolution and plaintive falling phrases. However, in order to realise the full impact of the music, we must consider the extrinsic effects of the music on the listener. For example, the viola da gamba, which has a veiled, mournful tone, could perhaps create an atmosphere of sorrow and contemplation, and the appoggiaturas and falling phrases in the melody might convey the idea of Jesus' resignation to his fate (particularly if the listener is familiar with the story of the Passion), combined with the melancholic key of B minor. Perhaps even without knowledge of the context of the work, the listener might still resonate with a sense of sadness and longing created by the minor key and appoggiaturas.

However, whether this can really be established from the intrinsic qualities of the music is unclear, since arguably it is merely based on culture and convention. For example, it is highly unlikely that tribal communities would also resonate with the concept of B minor being melancholic or falling phrases being sorrowful, this is merely an idea which convention imposes upon the listener. Similarly, the contrasting livelier *Vivace* tempo in the B section of the *da capo* aria, the D major key and the arpeggiated fanfares in the string

**vivace**

col Continuo vivo al %  
Der Held aus Ju-da siegt mit Macht, der Held aus Ju-da  
col Bassono grosso, piano

accompaniment do not themselves connote a sense of triumph. The listener merely resonates with this idea since they are accustomed to this being the case, such as the key of D major depicting glory and triumph in *Zadok the Priest* and the *Hallelujah Chorus* by Handel. Also, the words clearly add to the intended response: "our Hero battles on with might", suggests that Jesus is victorious despite his death, reinforcing the triumphant atmosphere. However, although the intrinsic qualities of the music do not themselves provoke an emotional reaction, it is likely that composers would be aware of the conventions, such as major keys predominantly conveying joy and minor keys being perceived to convey a sense of sadness. This can be seen by the palindrome structure of the *St John Passion*, which contains a tonal shift from flat keys on the left of the cycle of fifths to sharp keys on the right. Perhaps Bach is seeking to portray the idea that sadness at the approach of the Crucifixion, portrayed by the minor keys which are perceived to connote sadness, was transformed into hope and joy at the salvation of mankind, as conveyed by the shift to major keys which conventionally connote a sense of joy. Therefore, the intrinsic qualities of music do not have the power to arouse emotions. Only the interpretations of typical conventions such as falling phrases connoting sadness and fanfares connoting a

sense of joy are able to convey emotions. Ultimately, the listener only perceives the intrinsic qualities of the music to convey particular emotions because their culture has instilled these ideas within them.

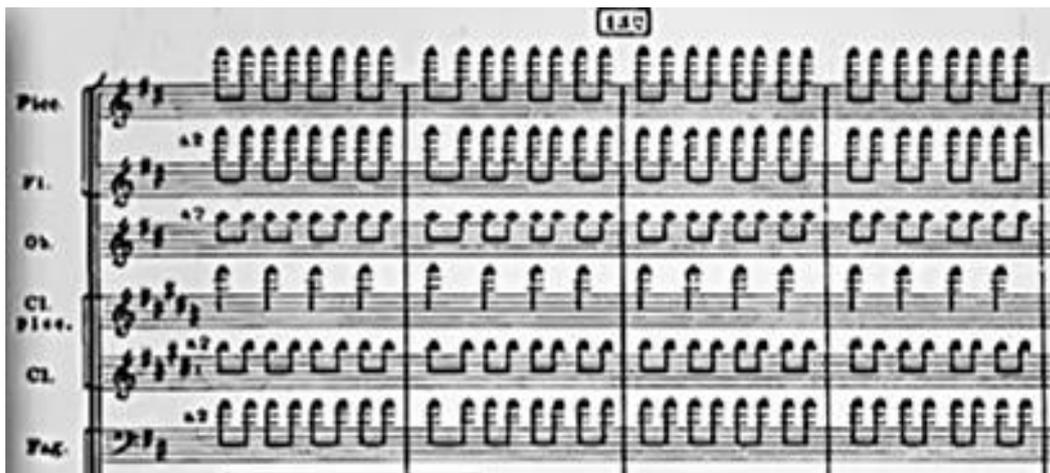
The idea that the intrinsic qualities of the music do not themselves convey emotions is demonstrated by comparing the melody and key in two works by Handel: *Unto Us a Child is Born* from *Messiah*, and the secular duet *No, di voi non vo' fidarmi*<sup>5</sup>, meaning "No, I do

The image displays two musical excerpts. On the left is the beginning of 'Unto Us a Child is Born' from Handel's *Messiah*. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody starts on a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and D5. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef, starting with a half note G3 and a half note F#3. The dynamic marking is *p* (piano). On the right is the beginning of the secular duet 'No, di voi non vo' fidarmi' by Handel. It is marked 'Andante con moto' and features three staves: Soprano, Alto, and Piano. The Soprano part has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: 'Nò di voi non vo' fi - dar - mi, / No, oh nev - er will I trust you,'. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The dynamic marking is *p* (piano).

not trust you". The fact that an identical melody and key is used both to convey joy at the birth of the Saviour of the world and also a petty tale of love implies that the music itself does not necessarily connote the impression it will have on the listener, since two pieces with similar intrinsic qualities can convey completely contrasting atmospheres. Ultimately, the meaning of music is not wholly conveyed by the intrinsic qualities but also the meaning given to the music by the words and the performance.

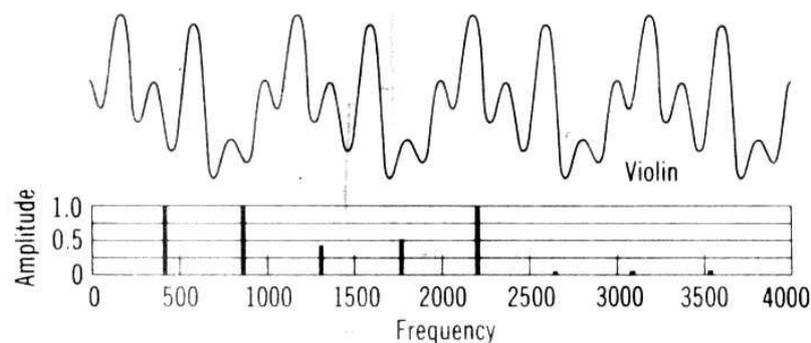
Therefore the interpretation of the composer's intentions by the performer deeply affect how it is perceived by the listener. This can be seen in the music of Shostakovich. Since he was not free to express his discontent about the purges in the USSR under Stalin, he concealed these motives within the music itself. In his fifth symphony, Shostakovich conceals his despair beneath the generic crowd-pleasing melodies. For example, he uses a folk song in the first movement to celebrate Slavic culture, which would be approved by official mandates, but he gives the traditional melody a minor feel, implying, according to the conventional perception of the minor key, a discreet sense of doubt beneath the surface of admiration. This is also seen at the end of the first movement, when the music lurches into a militaristic theme, barely concealing the return of the sad melodies from the beginning. The third movement provoked an overwhelming emotional response from the audience, referencing traditional hymns from the Russian Orthodox Church, causing the audience to weep during the first performance. Therefore this also conveys the idea that the intrinsic qualities of the music and how they are perceived by the audience according to their culture and convention does have the power to move people and is capable of "representing feelings and thoughts", since it has the power to move emotionally an entire audience. In the fourth movement, a slow march begins, contrasting the traditional quick march usually expected at this point in a symphony, altering the expected structure and therefore seizing the attention of the audience. The last movement also refers to *Boris Godunov*, an opera in which crowds are forced to praise the Tsar, implying the rejoicing of

<sup>5</sup> Hanslick, Eduard, *The Beautiful in Music* translated by Cohen 7<sup>th</sup> Edition (Novello, London, 1885), p.67



the fifth symphony in praise of Stalin is in fact forced, also depicted by the repeated As in the strings and upper woodwind and the shrill, unnatural sound of the finale. Therefore, this symphony could be interpreted in very different ways. For Stalin it could be seen as patriotic, due to its references to Slavic culture and militaristic themes, whereas to an audience member suffering from the horrific consequences of the purges, it could resonate with the suffering they were experiencing, as portrayed by the alterations to give the music a minor feel and the implication that the rejoicing is forced. Therefore, music is not an “end in itself”, despite the fact the intrinsic qualities of the music do not themselves provoke an emotional response, the extrinsic qualities and the interpretation of music can vary depending on the listener. The musically educated might notice the reference to *Boris Godunov* and realise the ironic nature of the finale, whereas others might interpret the militaristic themes and loud chorus as joyful and patriotic. Ultimately, the interpretation of music deeply affects how it is perceived by the listener.

The idea: “the essence of music is sound and motion” is fundamentally true. The essence of music is essentially sound created by motion, such as a bow pulled across a string or vocal cords vibrating. When an instrument is played, it creates sound which can be viewed as a wave where the frequency corresponds to the pitch of the note and the amplitude shows the dynamic level. Different instruments have different timbres due to the varying sound waves they produce.



Arnold Schoenberg sought to convey the meaning of his music through sound and timbre, without relying on traditional tonal conventions. Schoenberg experimented with expressionistic ideas in his music, challenging the idea of tonality, instead writing atonal music, such as his *Opus 19 Six Little Piano Pieces*. The intrinsic qualities of *Opus 19 number 6*, such as the *sehr langsam* tempo marking, meaning ‘very slow’ and the dynamic marking

6. *Sehr langsam* (♩)

remaining very quiet throughout, varying from *pppp* to *piano*, can convey a sense of beauty in their own way without the composer needing to follow certain established tonal conventions. According to Willi Reich, the sixth movement was “sketched out immediately after Schoenberg returned home from Mahler’s funeral; it is a picture of sound, based on three chords, of an extreme tenderness, testifying to unbound grief”<sup>6</sup>. With this knowledge, a listener might be more informed about the meaning of the music and the emotions it is intended to arouse, according to cultural conventions. For example, the intense atonal harmony could convey Schoenberg’s pain, and the quiet dynamic and slow tempo could convey a sense of introspection as Schoenberg struggles to come to terms with his grief. This supports the idea that music is a “means of representing feelings and thoughts” and

<sup>6</sup> Reich, Willi, *Schoenberg a critical approach*, translated by Leo Black (London, Longman Group Ltd, 1968), p.55

does not have to follow conventions in order to portray the emotions of the composer. Therefore, an understanding of the context in which a musical work was composed can influence a listener's interpretation of the music. Schoenberg expresses music as so much more than simply "sound and motion" in this music, conveying the suffering he was personally experiencing and deep grief at the loss of his friend.

Music is indeed an "object of intrinsic beauty", created purely by "sound and motion". However, this does not mean that it is an "end in itself" and not capable of "representing feelings and thoughts". Although the intrinsic qualities of the music cannot themselves convey emotions, extrinsically the listener may still give meaning to the music according to how their culture has taught them to perceive certain features within the music, such as minor keys evoking a sense of sadness. Ultimately, music is indeed "an object of intrinsic beauty", but music can convey so much more, it can depict dramatic changes in atmosphere, spirituality and religion, and even hidden social discontent.

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