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What We Do When We Ask What Music Is

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ABSTRACT. This essay states the differences between possible approaches to the ontology of music and definitions of music. I start by characterising the most important approaches in current philosophy of music as relying on a concept of “sound structure” and on a certain idea of how we come to know about them, that is, by hearing them (1.). This empiricist and realist conception has been criticised by drawing attention to the fact that music is not simply there, but has been made. It is a culturally constituted entity, and an ontological approach to it must take this fact into account: We have to know certain things about music which we cannot hear (2.). These criticisms point into the right direction, but they are not radical enough. I sketch a fresh approach to the ontology of music in order to point out that it can rely neither on hearing / listening nor on knowing alone, but has to accommodate a concept of interpretation (3.).

I.

In this paper I address the endeavour of “defining music” and the closely related field known as “ontology of music” by explaining its interdependence with a second endeavour which concerns the meaning of music and its understanding. Ontology is understood as the very general discipline which asks what something is and what its essential properties are. I start by sketching the basics of one classical view which defines music in terms of “sound structure”. This view is generally non-contextualist, and it lays one part of the foundations of formalism in music. The definition of music as a sound structure involves a positive and a negative principle.

The positive principle tells us *what* music consists of: sounds having definite pitches and definite durations, resulting in melody (and eventually harmony) and rhythm. (In order to do justice to contemporary music

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which makes much use of non-pitched ‘noise’, the thesis must be amended in various ways, but this is not my point here.)

The negative principle tells us that the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic structures are self-sufficient insofar as they do not depend on some material object or mental state they would represent or express. Accordingly, *understanding* a sound structure is not referential, but merely structural. This negative principle allows to draw one fundamental difference between the understanding of music on the one hand and the understanding of language and depiction on the other hand. The latter presupposes the knowledge of the fact that the (written or spoken) signs of language transport a meaning or that the visible surface of a depiction represents something which is part of a world beyond this surface.

The view of the nature and the understanding of music which rests on these two principles forms the backbone of much philosophical thinking about music over the past two centuries, including the largest currents in the discipline known as “analytic philosophy of music”. The supportive function of this theoretical backbone supposedly depends on the reciprocal relationship between ontological and epistemological suppositions. But this is where problems start; and I try to point out what follows for the “sound structure”-view if we inquire into these problems.

The easiest question to start with might be the following: How do we come to *know* that music is a sound structure? More formally: By means of which epistemic faculties could we establish that music should be defined above all in structural or formal terms? It is surprising to notice that a question of this sort is rarely raised explicitly in theories on the ontology and the definition of music. But a superficial look at much philosophical writing on subjects like meaning or expression in music makes clear that an answer to it has been presupposed from the start: We *hear* what music is (albeit our hearing / listening must have been educated in order to grasp many structural features appropriately), and we hear what it is not. I call this presupposition, however clumsily, the “hearing principle”.

The “hearing principle” is a principle which claims the validity of immediate experience. Let me try to illustrate it by showing how it is applied in a favourite field of inquiry: expression and meaning in music.

Music is very frequently described in emotion terms. What does this mean? Could it mean that it communicates a state of mind, for instance

the composer's, in the way a diary or a letter might communicate it? Think this way: If a letter communicates a state of mind, how do we know that it does? Silly question: just focus on what is written. If you know what reading means, you will see that there is no way of reading which would not communicate something to you – however inarticulate or insincere the written utterance might be. – Now focus on the music, which is supposed to be expressive. Applying the “hearing principle” means to ask: Can you *hear* if the music communicates a state of mind? If yes, tell me what it is – and I will show you that I do not *hear* it; or that I ‘hear’ a different state of mind; or no state of mind at all; and you will have no evidence for convincing me of the objective validity of your experience. Rather, we can do without hearing the music as a communication of meaning. Mostly, this line of thought is accepted as a confirmation of the negative principle: that music essentially is made of sounds without referential function. The same line of thought leads to the positive principle: The least problematic way to hear music – the way about which debate seems to be settled easily – is to hear it as a structured sequence of sounds.

To sum up: The “sound structure”-approach finds confirmation or evidence in the epistemological presupposition that (educated) listeners can decide about what music is and what it means or does not mean by describing what they *hear*. Diverging descriptions are taken by the philosopher as evidence that the described properties and structures are not really there, but pertain to personal associations or misleading practices of interpretation. Thus, they give no clue about what music *is*. This judgement, again, rests on the following rule of thumb: The least controversial theory or understanding must be the most evident one.

2.

“Sound structure” approaches have frequently met with a certain type of criticism in the past decades and again in recent publications.¹ Briefly, the critical remark formulates a requirement: Definitions and ontological

¹ Some of the more recent publications which make use of the following critical argument or parts of it include: David Davies 2009; David Davies 2012; Stephen Davies 2012; Kania 2008a; Kania 2008b; Thomasson 2005.

inquiries in the field of music must not neglect the fact that music is a human-made, cultural entity; they must take the cultural context of the entity which is to be defined into account for their ontological position. I abbreviate this as the “cultural entity requirement”. However frequently this requirement has been pointed out, little has been done in the philosophy of music in developing its consequences for some most basic principles and problems like the ones I sketched above (1.). I will dedicate the main part of this essay to a tentative explanation of this requirement and its consequences for the philosophical endeavours mentioned in the beginning, that is, for the inquiries into ontology and meaning and for the epistemological foundations they need. In order to make my own explanation clearer, I start by sketching another, common explanation of the “cultural entity requirement” which, in my opinion, misses the point of this requirement.

This explanation simply adds up the notions of culture and intention to the “sound structure”-principle. Thus, not every “sound structure” must be viewed as music, but only such sound structures made with a certain knowledge and a certain purpose, excluding, for instance, the sounds produced by a cat walking on a keyboard. Furthermore, acknowledging the fact that the composition of sound structures has developed through time adds a historical perspective to formalism without questioning its basic principles. They remain firmly in place; they are just complemented by further conditions upon which something may count as music and as a real property of it.

This is a well-known and quite obvious move in approaches to a definition of music. It adds a note of context-dependence to the ontological enterprise. However, I would like to argue that it does not meet, or at least does not exhaust, the “cultural entity requirement”. It may seem to succeed in defining music in a way sensitive to cultural context and productive intentions by saying that music is a sound structure produced with certain intentions and/or in certain contexts of cultural practice.

But remember that the definition in question is bound up with an epistemological standpoint, which now is the “hearing principle” *plus* some extra conditions. It is not sufficient to hear or to listen; we are required to *know* something about the sounds we hear in order to decide if they are, so to speak, real music or just an accidental sequence of sounds, and the

knowledge in question is the knowledge of the relevant extra conditions. For instance, there is an escalator in the Südkreuz railway station in Berlin which used to squeak quite accurately the first five notes of a minor scale. Mere listening would leave open the question if we were in front of a large mechanical musical instrument; *knowing* that escalators usually do not count as musical instruments gives us a reason to decide that the structured sound we hear is very probably not music.

A close look reveals that these extra conditions are, speaking in terms of epistemology, mere defeaters. They work in the following way: First, the “hearing principle” applies as it did before. We hear certain sounds with certain properties and have an immediate impression that these sounds must be music, endowed with, for instance, a certain kind of expression or even the property of being a certain work. (The latter is a way of talking one can find in ontological writings on music; I do not subscribe to it.) On the basis of this intuition, the defeaters work by uncovering that certain intentions or contexts are lacking and by thus undermining our initial intuition. Therefore, the position I am sketching does not undermine the “sound structure” approach in general; it takes the set of sound structures as given and defines music as a certain subset in this set.

The problem is that on this account the fact of being a cultural entity and the ensuing extra conditions play only a limitative role for the ontology of music. They do not make any positive contribution to it. In other words: They defeat or confirm intuitions which must have been there independently – intuitions whose content is generally understood as the presence or absence of structural, expressive or even “semantic” properties (in the case of music, the first two are taken to be present, the latter one to be at least problematic). Thus, acknowledging that music is a cultural entity contributes to definitions of music as *a certain kind of* sound structures, but paradoxically, it does not contribute to understanding what music *is as a cultural entity*. Being a cultural entity seems to remain external to the ontological and epistemological core problems.

3.

It remains to be seen what a positive role of the “cultural entity requirement” might look like. We have noticed that there is no positive role for

this requirement if it simply *follows* intuitions founded on the “hearing principle”. A different and more important perspective opens up if we ask if the “cultural entity requirement” forces us to revise the “hearing principle”, upon which the “sound structure”-approach is epistemologically based. I argue that this is indeed the case.

Questioning the “hearing principle”, however, bears directly upon the possible ontological or definitional positions: If we accept epistemic faculties different from auditory perception as starting points for establishing what music is and what properties it may have, we may find out that it is something other than what the “sound structure” approach allowed it to be.

Hence, if we accept the “cultural entity requirement”, we are bound to specify which epistemic faculties are constitutive for the discussion of essentially cultural entities. From this point, a fresh approach to the ontology of music is possible. This is a complex research programme of which I will only sketch one way how to proceed. The first step consists in making explicit the epistemological background required to do justice to cultural entities, that is, in asking how we can know what such entities are essentially and how we grasp their features (3.1). In a second step, I try to show what can be said to *be there* in the light of this particular epistemic access (3.2). As a tentative result, I finally would like to give a name to the ontological difference between music as conceived by the “sound structure”-approach and as conceived if the “cultural entity requirement” is taken seriously (3.3).

3.1.

The first step is based on a distinction between the ways of knowing involved in, on the one hand, the “sound structure”-approach and, on the other hand, an approach towards cultural entities. I have pointed out that the “sound structure”-approach appeals to the “hearing principle”, which, in turn, implicitly involves a certain conception of what perception is. In contrast, I propose to turn to the notion of “understanding” in the field of culturally constituted entities.

The “sound structure” approach favours the view that understanding music consists largely in the ability to *identify* its properties, which include properties like expression and higher-level formal events like closure, re-

capitulation, variation on a theme etc. These properties are said to be universally identifiable by (educated) listening alone. Epistemic access consists in the possession of a certain kind of perception. The function of perception, however, is equated with the identification of properties.

Let us discuss an example: the contested nature of something like “dramatic” or “narrative content” in music. I sum up how a “sound structure”-approach, exemplified by some arguments in Peter Kivy’s recent books, deals with this problem, so that an alternative way of dealing with it appears more clearly.

Kivy asks for the basis required for narrative content and says: the basis must be a semantic function. Semantic function, in turn, is understood as a property: a property which is there in language, but not in music, since it cannot be identified univocally. The test for the identification of semantic content consists in asking for “disambiguation” concerning “the ‘who’ and the ‘what’” (Kivy 2009, p. 148). This test may result either positive or negative, as Kivy writes, referring to Plato’s *Phaedo*: „[...] something cannot be more or less a soul – it is one or it is not. And the same, to be sure, is true of something’s being or not being a semantic artifact. Either it is or it is not; it does not come in degrees.“ (Kivy 2012, p. 176) If we try to disambiguate semantic content in music based on listening alone, we are likely to end up with unclear and ambiguous statements; but ambiguity is equivalent to an entirely negative result of the test. It follows for Kivy that music generally does not possess semantic content and, for that reason, cannot be narrative or dramatic in a strict sense.

This test on semantic content, and more generally, on the meaning of music, is used in the “sound structure”-approach as evidence against the view that music could be correctly analysed in terms other than structural ones. That it counts as evidence, however, rests on the assumption that the problem of deciding what there is in music calls for answers which have the form of propositions saying that a property X is there – or not – and that it can be analysed and classified according to an ontological framework of substances and properties.

Can the understanding of culturally constituted entities (in our case, of artworks) be captured by analysing it as the identification of formal, expressive or semantic properties? What do we really do if we ‘listen with

understanding' to some music; or if we 'read with understanding'² a piece of poetry?

If we take a culturally constituted entity seriously as such, it cannot be the case that we approach it in order to identify its properties and nothing more. This cannot be the case *for the reason that the thing in question has been made*. It is this 'making' we have to take into account when we try to describe our epistemic access to culturally constituted entities. The way of taking into account the making is directed to the intentions and purposes which have brought a certain "sound structure" into existence. It may suitably be called *interpretation*. In reaching for interpretation, we go beyond the identification of what is there. But where do we go? Answering this question is the second step on the way towards a fresh approach to ontology.

3.2.

Basically, the answer is very simple: we go for meaning. Meaning³ is that towards which interpretation is directed. The philosophical project which is required might then be described as an epistemology of interpretation and an ontology of meaning. I will leave open for the final section the question if such a project still may be called ontology; before that, it might be useful to pick up again the discussion on features like semantic content.

We have seen in Kivy's discussion that meaning, under the heading of "semantic content", is conceived as a property which can be discovered or not. This is in line with a position I have criticized for being an inadequate type of contextualism. There I objected that it merely adds the fact of being culturally constituted to an entity which essentially is already present. The same is now valid for the role of meaning. It is a feature an

² You might notice that the way I have just been talking picks up several concepts used by Roger Scruton. His discussion of musical understanding bears similarities with mine, but I won't discuss my relation to his theory in detail here. Readers acquainted with Scruton will note important differences in what follows.

³ Using the word "meaning" is not the best choice if we consider that it has mostly been considered in the sense of semantic value or propositional meaning. In German, I use the word "Sinn", which allows a distinction to the more narrow "Bedeutung". "Sinn" could be translated in some way with "sense", which, however, is far from being established as a philosophical term in English, except for associations with "sensualism". But this would be precisely the wrong association.

entity might have or might have not, while the entity remains essentially unchanged, since it is defined and identified by its *formal* properties, that is, by the properties of a sound structure.

If the adequate – and the only adequate and therefore unavoidable – epistemic access to culturally constituted entities is interpretation, and if the formal object of interpretation is meaning, a different way of discussing meaning is required. Now, meaning must not be conceived as a property which can be present or absent. It is there in any case because the process of making an artifact involves intentions, thoughts and backgrounds of cultural practice. If the process of making is constitutive for an artifact, those intentions, thoughts and cultural backgrounds *are part of what that artifact is*. They are constitutive for the meaning of the object in question; and they are sufficient conditions for meaning being there.

Thus, meaning does not stand among or besides other, formal properties. Instead, meaning is a function which essentially transforms the properties and the relations between properties in an artifact. Concerning music, that means that the properties which the “hearing principle” could have uncovered to us cannot enter our full understanding just in the guise of properties *as such* or *for themselves* (*an sich*). They pertain to our understanding only in the guise of properties *being where and how they are for a certain reason*, that is, being in place *for us*. The function “being there for a reason” or the function of meaning changes the ontological position of the entire object in question. Let me now sketch the consequences of this thought for the basic questions of ontology and epistemology: the questions of what there is in music and how we know.

In the “sound structure” approach, as exemplified by many elaborations in analytic aesthetics, the possible answers to these questions are quite straightforward: They are about properties which are ‘real’. The reality of properties is the basic thought, even though it is often qualified by some notion of “response-dependence” or dependence on other circumstances, like the one of being part of a cultural practice. ‘Reality’ comes in degrees in a certain way: for instance, talk about supervenience of aesthetic upon physical properties implicitly introduces such degrees. But everything is about reality and objectivity nevertheless. (This is another way of putting what I have been talking about before.) We know about these realities through perceptions and intuitions, which, more or

less schooled by the circumstances, identify those properties. This is the way we can know what music is and what there is in music, because if we ask what music is, that means to ask what is there.

The transformation of these basic questions through the function of “being there for a reason” yields the following idea:

The question what music is transforms into the question for the reasons for appearing the way it appears. But asking for reasons is not a matter to be settled through some kind of intuition or perception, although they may lead us for a part of the way. It is a matter of discourse: a discourse of interpretation. Thus, on a close look, the epistemological problem – how we can know what music is – transforms into a meta-epistemological question, that is, it becomes subject to a critical approach. Accordingly, interpretation is not an epistemic access on the same level as the “hearing principle”. It is not one epistemic access among others. Rather, it is a reflective and critical capacity which precludes the supposition that a certain epistemic principle, such as the “hearing principle”, may be decisive for the definition or the ontology of music taken as a culturally constituted entity. Interpretation involves that every method which leads to a statement about music can be questioned concerning its validity and its results.

3.3.

I announced that I would try to give a name to the difference between the ontological standpoints I have confronted with each other. The respective epistemological standpoints are, on the one hand, empiricist, and on the other hand, a critical hermeneutical standpoint. If they take music as their object, music is ontologically different in the one and the other case. In other words: music is a different ‘*thing*’ for each of them. In the first case, music is approached as *material*; in the second case, music is approached as that which is made from that material.⁴

Talking in terms of sound structure, the standpoint I have tried to bring to light would give the following answer to the question what music is: Music *is* not a sound structure, just like a painting *is* not a canvas and

⁴ I borrow the term “material” from Adorno (1970, p. 222) and the recent elaborate continuation of this concept of Adorno’s by Gunnar Hindrichs (2014). Of course, the Aristotelian background of this terminology must not be forgotten.

colours on it. Canvas and colours are what a painting is *made of*. In the same way, sound structures are what music is normally made of: They are the material of music, not the music itself. Accordingly, the two principles I mentioned in the very beginning – the principle that music is essentially a sound structure and that it is adequately describable in purely structural terms – may count as principles for musical material; but they are sublated through the personal and cultural use of the material.

But what name can be given to “that which is made from that material”? I admit that this is no easy question. One name which recommends itself due to the partly Aristotelian roots of the ontological problem we are confronted with is “form” (*eidos*). However, confusion is imminent, since “sound structure”-approaches abound in notions of “form” which are dimensions away from what I want to say. Here, formalist “form” is simply an aspect of material.

According to what I said before, a second name would be “meaning”. Meaning is the result of the composer’s and musician’s work with musical material. A prominent third name, favoured for instance by Hindrichs or by Albrecht Wellmer (2009), would be “work”: musical material is formed into a work. Taking these three proposals together gives the following idea: A musical work is the form given to the material, and the form of the work is its meaning, that is, the complex of thoughts resulting in the work’s being the way it is.

What kind of ontology do we end up here? It is obvious that the conceptual apparatus of recent analytic metaphysics is not sufficient to grasp the notion of “form” or “work” I just have mentioned, since it is a conceptual apparatus of objective entities and properties, but the concepts of work, form and meaning just sketched involve the activity which works with a material that might be grasped in terms of entities and properties. Thus, we end up with an ontology of human action in a broadly Aristotelian tradition.

But we also would have to go beyond it, since what is involved is a philosophy of the meaning of human action – the meaning which is manifested in artworks, among other things. The idea is that if we push ontology far enough into the realm of culturally constituted entities, we reach beyond ontology and become part of a project which has been given the name of “philosophical hermeneutics”, a project launched by philosophers unjusti-

fiedly forgotten in the analytic tradition such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Misch, Helmuth Plessner and others.

At this point, we are beyond ontology in the sense that the entities to be dealt with are meaningful entities. But if their meaning is part of what they are, and if meaning is constituted in the interaction between an artist, the material he can use and the systems of practices of understanding and interpretation he is always confronted with, the entities constituted through meaning are in a certain sense fluid: there is something about them which essentially changes with the context from which they are looked upon. That means that epistemology and ontology are interdependent: the way in which such an entity can be understood makes it, at least partly, what it is. We are beyond ontology in the sense that an ‘ontology of meaning’ is no more an independent and self-sufficient discipline, since the entities it deals with are not independent and self-sufficient. They are entities *for us* and for our understanding.

But although being beyond, we are still connected with ontology since the background question still is: what music is and what there is in music.

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