

Understanding Music
Philosophy and Interpretation

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Introduction

Aesthetics emerged as an articulate branch of philosophy in the eighteenth century, and the study of music was made part of it by the Abbé Charles Batteux who, in *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (1746), argued that music, like the other arts, derives its significance and its appeal from the imitation of nature. Batteux's analysis was thin, and his pivotal concept of imitation unexplained. He gave few examples, and left it to the reader to nod his way to acceptance of a thesis that was more metaphor than argument. And in this Batteux was typical of his time. By the end of the century a contest was being fought on behalf of absolute music (*absolute Tonkunst*) by those who thought that music's significance as an abstract art was being diluted by ballet, opera and song. But the concepts deployed in this contest—imitation, expression, form, representation—remained as vague as they had been in the writings of Batteux, and the whole debate was conducted in metaphorical regions, seldom coming to earth in a clear example.¹

The subdued aftermath of that contest continues to this day, and it provides one of the themes of this book. The dispute is between those who affirm, and those who deny, that music has a meaning other than itself. Words like 'imitation', 'representation', 'expression', 'content' are used fast and loose by both sides to the dispute, and only occasionally do the protagonists pause to consider what seem to me to be the true subjects of musical aesthetics: sound and how we perceive it, the relation between sound and tone, the nature of melody, rhythm and harmony, the standards of taste and judgement. Common sense would suggest that no theory of musical expression will be illuminating if unaccompanied by an explanation of those basic things. Yet even Hanslick—with Edmund Gurney the most competent of the nineteenth-century writers in this field—failed to see that he had not given such an explanation and that, without it, his theory of music as an 'absolute' art was as unwarranted as the romantic idea of music as 'the language of the emotions'.

Consider Hanslick's definition of music, as *tönend bewegte Formen*

(forms moved in sounding).² Hanslick offered this as a literal description of what music is and does, one from which to mount a refutation of the theory—increasingly popular in the wake of E. T. A. Hoffman's music criticism and Schopenhauer's 'Metaphysics of Music'³—that music is an expressive medium, whose purpose is to give voice to the inner life. But what does it mean to say that the forms of music 'move' or are 'moved'? It is fairly widely recognized that, at some level, the reference to musical movement is inescapable, and I explore the consequences of this in Chapter 4. (What would it be like to abolish 'high' and 'low', 'fast' and 'slow', 'far' and 'near', 'approaching' and 'receding', from our description of musical experience? The result might still be a description of sounds, but it would not be a description of the music that we hear in them.) It is also fairly widely recognized that this reference to movement is in some sense figurative. For nothing in the world of sounds (nothing that we hear) moves, in the way that music moves.

If that is so, however, a theory which tries to explain music in terms of musical movement is not a theory of music at all: it 'explains' its subject only by blocking the path to explanation. If we allow Hanslick to get away with assuming the existence of musical motion, why not allow his opponent to assume the existence of musical emotion? For although Hanslick is right to say that what we hear is neither a sentient thing, nor anything like a sentient thing, it is also true that it is not a thing in motion, nor anything like a thing in motion.

Or consider Batteux's concept of imitation. It is well to argue that music imitates the movements of the human soul, or the gestures of the body, or whatever. But if the only grounds for saying so are that music moves in a similar way, then these are no grounds at all. For music does not move, and therefore does not move 'in a similar way'. Or rather, it does move, but only in a manner of speaking, which is just as unhelpful. (You might as well say that Batteux did prove that music imitates, but only in a manner of speaking, or that I have refuted him, but only in a manner of speaking.) At almost every point in traditional discussions this problem emerged, and in *The Aesthetics of Music* I set out to develop an account of metaphorical perception that would be a basis for a theory of musical understanding. This account informs the argument that follows, and I revisit it, and also slightly amend it, in Chapter 4.

The raw material of music is sound, and music is an art of sound. There are other arts of sound, such as poetry (the art of phonetic sound) and soundscape art (one part of garden and fountain design). Poetry

depends upon the prior organization of sound as language. Fountains depend upon the relation between sound and its physical context. Music relies neither on linguistic order nor on physical context, but on organization that can be perceived in sound itself, without reference to context or to semantic conventions. The first step towards understanding music, therefore, is to understand sounds as objects of perception. This I set out to do in Chapter 2.

Sounds, I argue, are secondary objects, which is to say objects whose nature and properties are determined by how they appear to the person of normal hearing. They are produced by physical disturbances, but are not identical with those disturbances, and can be understood without reference to their physical causes. Furthermore, sounds are 'pure events', things that happen, but which don't happen *to* anything. A car crash is something that happens to a car. You can identify a car crash only by identifying the car that crashed. Sounds, by contrast, can be identified without referring to any object which participates in them, and it is precisely this feature that is seized upon by music, and made into the template on which the art of music is built. Because sounds are pure events we can detach them, in thought and experience, from their causes, and impose upon them an order that is quite independent of any physical order in the world. This happens, I suggest, in the 'acousmatic' experience of sound, when people focus on the sounds themselves and on what can be heard *in* them. What they then hear is not a succession of sounds, but a movement between tones, governed by a virtual causality that resides in the musical line. Only a rational being—one with self-consciousness, intention, and the ability to represent the world—can experience sounds in this way; hence, although *we* can hear music in the songs of birds, whales and bonobos, they themselves are deaf to it. Nothing is to be learned about music and its meaning, I contend, from studying the sounds made by animals.

That statement raises an important question however. There are people for whom music means nothing; but they are randomly scattered among populations which, viewed as a whole, accord a significant role to music. The particular musical syntax that children learn may be the product of their culture; but the disposition towards music is a trans-cultural constant. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that music, like language, is a human universal. In which case, the evolutionary psychologists argue, musicality must be an adaptation—a trait which we acquired because it enhances our reproductive fitness.

But how do human genes benefit from the musical life of their carriers? Comparisons with bird-song, conceived as an element in

sexual display, give rise to the suggestion that music might have emerged through the process of sexual selection.⁴ Maybe by singing and dancing a man testifies to his reproductive fitness, and so conquers the female heart, or at any rate the female genes. Or maybe through music people spontaneously 'move with' other tribal members, reinforcing the impulse towards altruistic cooperation. Or perhaps music originates in the lullaby—the sing-song with which mother and child seal the bond between them, so increasing the chances that the child will survive. Take any feature of music, boil it down until it is all but indistinguishable from a feature of animal noise, rewrite both in Darwinese and—hey presto—you have a perfectly formed functional explanation of the musical life.⁵ Facts which are difficult to accommodate – that women too become attractive through their music; that music develops beyond any biological function, acquiring a complex syntax, a field of reference and an accumulating repertoire; that music comes to fruition in church and synagogue, in the concert hall, in listening quietly at home, or in other contexts far removed from our sexual endeavours—all such facts are set aside as secondary, to be brought within the purview of the theory as soon as their derivation from the primary adaptation is understood.

The evolutionary psychology of music invariably describes music as pitched and metrically arranged sound, of the kind that might be produced by a bonobo or a gorilla. However, even if it is true that music, as we know it, emerged over time from such sounds, it is not in fact reducible to them, any more than language is reducible to the warning and mating cries of the pre-lapsarian tribe. There is a metaphysical chasm—a 'transition from quantity to quality' as Hegel would put it—which separates musical organization from sequential sounds. The objection raised by Chomsky to the view that language is a gradually evolved adaptation applies equally to music: semantic organization is an all-or-nothing affair: a repertoire of noises either has it or not, and the attempts to identify 'proto-languages' which have a part of semantic order without the whole of it are doomed to failure.⁶ Likewise attempts to identify a proto-music in the songs of baboons and nightingales will always end by misdescribing the phenomena. Music exists when rhythmic, melodic or harmonic order is deliberately created, and consciously listened to, and it is only language-using, self-conscious creatures, I argue, who are capable of organizing sounds in this way, either when uttering them or when perceiving them. *We* can hear music in the song of the nightingale, but it is a music that no nightingale has heard.

Hence, although music may have emerged from an evolutionary adaptation, it cannot be understood by referring it to its supposed genetic function. Music belongs to another order of experience and another order of explanation from the cries of animals. It is to be understood in terms of the life that moves in it—a life that is perceivable only to a rational being, who can organize sounds in terms of the spatial metaphors that transform them from inert events to actions, joined by a virtual causality in an imagined space of their own. Such, at any rate, is the thesis that I defend.

I claim that sounds heard as music are heard in abstraction from their physical causes and effects, and assembled in another way, as individuals in a figurative space of their own. Sounds heard as music are heard as tones, and tones are animated by a continuous movement in a one-dimensional space. I describe this 'acousmatic' experience as central to musical understanding. Even if we are aware that music is a performance, and that in listening to music we are hearing the real actions of real people, putting themselves into the sounds that they produce, this awareness must be registered in the musical movement if it is to be musically significant. When a violinist strains to produce Bach's great D minor Chaconne, it is not the strain in producing sounds that we appreciate, but the legacy of that strain in the virtual world of tones.

That approach to musical aesthetics has been doubted. Certain commentators—notably Andy Hamilton⁷—have objected that the account does not give sufficient emphasis to the way in which the physical reality of sounds enters into the experience of them, when we hear them as music. The acousmatic experience does not, it is suggested, account for timbre. It does not give sufficient weight to the performers and their physical actions or to the ways in which we must attend to the physical location of sounds if we are to hear their full musical potential. Fully to understand music, Hamilton suggests, we must hear the sounds both acousmatically, in terms of the virtual causality of the melodic and rhythmical line, and also acoustically, in terms of their physical place and causality. It is no more correct to say that you can understand a musical work purely in terms of the virtual movement contained in it, and without reference to its physical 'embodiment' in a sequence of sounds, than to say that you can understand a Van Gogh as a figurative image, and without reference to the brush-strokes that compose it and which implant in its surface the visible residue of human action.

It is of course true that the acoustical properties of the sounds in which we hear the organized tones of a musical line are relevant to our

experience, just as the brush-strokes are relevant to the experience of a painting. Someone who saw the image in a Van Gogh but took no interest in the brush-strokes and the way in which the image is deposited by them, would have missed something truly important. But compare the person who sees *only* brush-strokes, and no image, with the one who sees only the figurative image, and no brush-strokes. The first is not in fact understanding what he sees, however aesthetic his attitude, while the second is *seeing figuratively*, and therefore with the kind of understanding to which the medium is addressed. Likewise, compare the person who hears only the acoustical properties of sounds—their position, loudness, physical causes and effects—and is deaf to the virtual causality of the musical line, with the one who is absorbed in the musical line, but has no idea of where the sounds are coming from or how they are made. The second is hearing music (even if also missing something), while the first is not. Such considerations suggest the centrality of the acousmatic experience to the understanding of music. And it is only from the premise of that centrality, I argue, that we can build a true theory of music.

It has been said in this connection that the emphasis on *what we hear* imports a cultural context, and that this context is by no means the universal condition under which music has been produced and enjoyed. At a certain moment there arose in European society a habit of organized listening and—as a by-product of this habit—the establishment of public and private concerts. In other words there was a point in history when audiences *fell silent*. Thereafter music took on a new meaning, as an act of solemn communication, occurring in another space from the space of everyday life. Instead of being a background, something that was never more prominent than when being danced to or sung, music became an object of attention for its own sake, a ‘real presence’ before its own hushed congregation. And with this transformation came another, which was the shift of attention from performer to composer, and from improvised songs and dances to fixed musical works. The emergence of the ‘work concept’ has therefore been described as distinctive of ‘Western art music’.⁸ Other cultures see music as a kind of performance, improvised around recurring material, but not organized into distinct musical works, certainly not works to be listened to as unique acts of communication between composer and audience. By confining our attention to musical works we not only fail to see what is common to music in all traditions; we also misrepresent the music of those who lack that concept or treat it as marginal.⁹ And we give undue prominence to our own tradition—or to that part of our

tradition which is contemporary with the Romantic movement and its aftermath—misleading ourselves into thinking that a transient application of music is really the essence of music in all its forms.

That argument lends itself to a certain kind of *political* dismissal of musical aesthetics. It is argued that by elevating the concert-hall experience to the paradigm of musical appreciation, and the musical work to the paradigm musical object, we confer a kind of necessity on the listening culture. And to make permanent and unassailable in this way, what is by its nature transient and questionable, is not philosophy but ‘ideology’. By ‘privileging’ the concert-hall experience we make ‘bourgeois’ attitudes part of the very fabric of music, and so protect them from criticism—a criticism ever more necessary now that most music exists outside the concert hall.

That kind of argument might be levelled by the defender of popular music against the classical tradition; by the advocate of ‘mechanical reproduction’ against the traditions of musical performance; by the ethnomusicologist against the defender of ‘Western art music’; by the believer in song, dance and improvisation against the denizen of the concert hall. In all its forms the argument adopts and adapts a standard move in the Marxist criticism of culture, exposing as ‘ideology’ what claims to be disinterested thought. And it shares this move with what in other respects is the polar opposite of those critical responses to the listening culture: Adorno’s radical defence of atonal music against the ‘ideological’ products of the tonal system.

In giving a theory of music we are accounting for a certain human experience and the interests that have grown from it. This experience is an aspect of our rationality. It can be educated, brought under conscious control and emendation, subordinated to religious, moral and social uses. It may therefore be subject to cultural fluctuations, and the interests that have grown from it may not be everywhere the same. There is improvised music, as well as music written down and ring-fenced against change. There is music for dancing and marching; music for listening, music for worshipping and ‘music while you work’. There are traditions like ours, in which the repeatable work has emerged as all-important, and in which a developed system of notation enables people to compose without performing, and to leave permanent records of what they have invented. And there are traditions like the Indian, in which melodies and their elaborations are memorized, but in which notation is schematic and incomplete.

This does not mean that there are no ‘works’ of Indian classical music. There are plenty of them: but they are not identified through

scores. The Indian raga comprises four elements: a mode, a rhythmic cycle or *tāla* which allots time-values to successive notes, a melody occupying an entire cycle, and a sequence of diminutions or *raginas*, born from the basic phrases of the work. Traditional notation was never sufficient to encompass the result, which might last for an hour or more, and astonishing feats of memory were required of traditional musicians—feats made possible only by the absorption of the raga into religious worship, and by the religious discipline of the musicians. Nevertheless, even though imperfectly notated, the ragas have existed, some of them for centuries, as individual works, realized, to be sure, in contrasting performances but, like musical works in our tradition, the foundation of a listening culture. And although many of these works are anonymous, not a few are attributed to specific composers like Tyāgarāja (1767–1847), whose works, memorized by his pupils and disciples, have been passed on and revered not merely as interesting musical objects, but as the creations of an interesting soul.¹⁰

When the first attempts were made to write down some of the ragas in Western notation they were already on the verge of being lost, however, and the All-India Musical Conferences were established in 1916 in order to rescue and perpetuate the classical repertoire. This episode in musical history is of considerable importance in illustrating the inner connection between memory and musical structure. Complex musical structures require strenuous acts of recuperation; and outside a religious discipline and the contemplative state of mind that it induces, the Indian style of melody would be difficult or impossible to memorize.

The collective failure of memory which threatened the survival of Indian classical music threatened also the survival of plainchant, and until the work of Dom Prosper Guéranger and his monastic community at the Abbey of Solesmes in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was no real agreement as to how the medieval manuscripts should be read. Here too the efforts of the Benedictine communities have been devoted to recovering not just a tradition of performance, but the *works* which have been and—thanks to recent scholarship—still are performed in it. Jazz too makes room for the work concept, even if the work is often used as the starting point for a series of improvisations. The jazz standard, in which a strophic song is reduced to a melody and a chord sequence, and notated in a lead sheet, is still a work of music, though one that can be performed in many different ways.

We should therefore respond with a certain measure of scepticism to those who dismiss the work concept as a fleeting and in some way

accidental imposition on the endless flux of musical inspiration.¹¹ It is of course true that the status of the musician has changed over the centuries, that musicians are of many kinds, and that other epochs have been more interested in performers than composers and often barely able to distinguish the two. Nevertheless, even if it is true that other traditions either marginalize or make no mention of the 'work' concept, the distinction between work and performance grows spontaneously in the practice of acousmatic hearing. There is a peculiar experience of 'same again' which is fundamental to musical organization. There could not be meaningful improvisation without this experience, and the emergence of works from a tradition of spontaneous performance is exactly what we must expect when people listen, and therefore recognize what they hear as 'the same again'. 'Play it again' is the mark of acousmatic joy, and one that is by no means confined to 'Western art music' or the concert-hall culture.

Almost all musical traditions therefore have named melodies—named usually from the song that is sung to them. Many have notated classics. The notation may be (like that of the Indian ragas and much classical Chinese music) more ambiguous than the Western classical tradition would countenance. But in all traditions, ours included, notation under-determines performance and identifies works of music only when read in the context of a performance tradition. Many 'baroque' classics—and most of the Bach cantatas—are notated with a figured bass, leaving the instrumentalists to work out the accompanying voices for themselves. Nevertheless we love and admire these works as *works*, make the same distinction between work and performance as we would in the case of a Strauss tone-poem or a Schubert song, and study the sources in order to know how best to compose out the middle parts.

Of course, when improvisation by the performer is a fundamental component in what the audience enjoys, the work takes on another character—less the music itself than a template for producing it. And since the invention of recording, and the mass reproduction of the result, individual performances can acquire a kind of eternal and transcendent character comparable to that of the classical masterpieces. There then arises a new kind of work—the work composed *as* a template for improvisation, of which perhaps only a few recordings achieve the status of classics. An obvious example is Thelonious Monk's 'Round Midnight', rightly esteemed for its authoritative harmonic sequence and soulful melody, but existing in countless performances, some by Monk at the piano, some by the Monk Quartet, some by other

musicians using other forces, all differing in every respect that the tradition of jazz improvisation allows and encourages. Only some of the extant versions of 'Round Midnight' achieve the heights, or depths, of melancholy soulfulness that Monk coaxed from the piano, and all listeners will have their favourites. Nevertheless there really is a musical work which is 'Round Midnight', and the work concept is as usefully applied in such a case as in the case of a Mozart symphony. In the case of 'Round Midnight', however, much more is left to the performer's discretion than is left by the score of a Mozart symphony, and a talent *of the same kind* as the composer's is needed, if the performance is to be truly successful.¹²

Hence we might usefully distinguish template works, like the jazz classics and the classical Indian ragas, from 'filled in' works, such as those of the Western concert-hall tradition. Questions of musical ontology arise from this distinction—questions every bit as scholastic as those which animate so much of musical aesthetics in America.¹³ But they have no bearing, it seems to me, either on the centrality of the work concept, or on that of the listening culture. From its very inception jazz has been as much part of the listening culture as has the symphonic tradition. And as for the Indian raga its whole *raison d'être* is to be listened to, with the kind of rapt attention that requires years of training if it is to be perfected, and which is not fully separable from a tradition of meditation and worship.

Indeed, even if there are sound ethnological reasons for believing that music originated in dance and song, listening, I maintain, is the heart of all musical cultures. You cannot sing or dance if you do not listen to the music that you are singing or dancing to. Maybe listening *in motionless silence* is a sophisticated latecomer to the repertoire of musical attitudes. But it might, for that very reason, provide us with the laboratory conditions, so to speak, in which we can best study what is involved, when rational beings *hear sound as music*. Such, indeed, is my contention, and I have found nothing in the writings of those who advocate 'other musics', or who dismiss the Western classical tradition as deviant, to persuade me that I am wrong.

But this raises a question of great importance, namely, the question of tonality. In *The Aesthetics of Music* I defended tonality, not as the only way in which music can be organized, but as a *paradigm* of musical organization. The account I gave of tonality was not intended to exclude modal music, nor did I mean to imply that atonal music is impossible. What I did imply is that, if atonal music is addressed to the same interest as tonal music, then it must be heard as moving forward

in a similar way, unfolding an audible argument that moves in a perceptible direction. Moreover, I tried to show that successful experiments in atonality recreate, often in defiance of the theory which allegedly inspires them, quasi-tonal melody and harmony, moving towards definite points of closure that are understood in terms of their tonal resonance. Nevertheless, I freely admit that my discussion was incomplete, and it left many readers wondering as to the precise connection between tonal order and the acousmatic experience which I identify as the heart of musical understanding.

There is a way of arguing for the primacy of tonality which I think arrives too easily at its foregone conclusion. This is the argument from 'natural' harmony—an argument that has its roots in Pythagorean mysticism, and which achieved a resounding endorsement from Helmholtz's researches into the overtone series. Whenever a string or a column of air is made to vibrate—as in the instruments that are familiar to us—then subsidiary vibrations are set up, whose frequencies are whole-number multiples of the frequency of the fundamental tone. As one ascends the overtone series the subsidiary vibrations become ever fainter, and as a rule only the first four are noticeable, and even then only by the trained ear. However, these first four overtones spell out the notes of the major triad on the fundamental tone. The theory of overtones, beating, and undertones can be elaborated to form something like a complete physics of natural harmony,¹⁴ and the fact that it coincides at so many points with our Western chord grammar has sometimes been taken as proof that the system of triads is a system of 'natural' harmony, independent of musical convention. Even in musical traditions that avoid triadic chords the octave, fourth and fifth are recognized as defining the space in which the notes of music move. There is no musical culture that I know of that does not recognize the octave as equivalent to its fundamental, and most traditions acknowledge the fifth as a metastable position on the scale, and the drone on the fifth as a stabilizing harmonic accompaniment.

There is another route, equally astonishing, and equally fertile, to the idea of a natural music, and this route lies through melody rather than harmony. The interval of the fifth, when inverted, gives a fourth: from these two intervals we construct the major second, by subtracting one from the other. If we then fit into the scope of an octave all those tones which are no less than a major second apart, and which are related as fifth or fourth to other tones in the octave, the result is the pentatonic scale. It is a scale that never inflicts a semi-tone or a tritone on the ear, so all its notes stand in genial



Example 1

relations to their neighbours. Ethnomusicologists have found that this scale exists almost everywhere as a primary melodic resource, familiar in Celtic folk songs, in Negro spirituals, in the music of the Australasian aborigines, in Burmese temple chants and in the old country music of China. Once again, therefore, we seem to have arrived at a 'natural' music, and one which respects the intervals familiar to us from our tonal tradition.

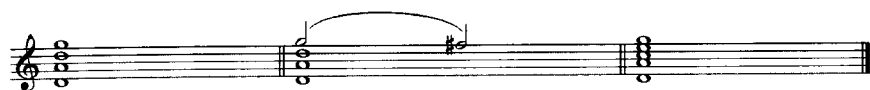
It doesn't need much critical thought, however, to realize that this search for natural music is already on a collision course. The most important tone in any melodic scale, after the tonic, is the leading tone—the tone which leads upwards to the tonic and so facilitates closure. If we arrange the pentatonic scale so that its intervals permit the tonic to be harmonized with the 'natural' triad on the tonic, then the result, as in the first scale in Ex. 1, is the pentatonic scale without a leading tone—one that permits only hollow melodies. If we allow the leading tone, by contrast, the result is a pentatonic scale in the minor key, in which the minor third takes on dominating melodic significance, as in the second scale. Combining this natural melodic scale with the natural harmonies of the overtone series, we arrive at the 'blue' notes that emerged from the American Negro spiritual tradition: notes which result from the clash between the melodic demand for a minor third and the harmonic demand for the major interval that conflicts with it.

Of course, in one way those facts could be seen as confirming the underlying pressure towards 'natural' tonal order—a pressure which here produces the clash that was so happily resolved by the Blues. But it also suggests that, as soon as people begin to sing creatively, convention displaces nature, and shapes what we hear according to laws of its own. The 'natural' relations among tones are at best raw material, from which scales, modes and harmonic devices emerge by habit and experiment. The order that we learn to hear is permeated by the traditions that have shaped our ears. And these traditions vary from culture to culture, as is evident not only from the findings of ethnomusicology but also from the theoretical texts on music that have come down to us from ancient Greek and Arabic sources, many of which endorse the Pythagorean system of natural harmonics, while imposing

on that system scales and modes that are all but unintelligible to the modern Western ear.¹⁵

True though that observation is, it does not imply that there are no limits to musical conventions. There are *a priori* constraints on musical syntax that derive from the very nature of musical movement. Pitched sounds present us with the experience of musical space, of up and down, rising and falling, fast and slow, towards and away, hollow and filled. These are inevitable features of the musical *Gestalt*. We cannot hear musical movement without seeking for points of stability and closure—points towards which the movement is tending or from which it is diverging, and to which it might at some point 'come home'. We inevitably distinguish phrases that 'follow on' from those that make a new start; phrases that 'answer' from phrases that question; phrases that imitate, repeat or comment from phrases that stand alone. These audible relations are the raw material of musical order, and are furthered by the syntax of tonality in ways that justify the belief that tonality is a kind of paradigm. In his attempt to break with tonality Schoenberg ended by imposing a serial organization on the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. But this search for a permutational order in place of the elaborational order of the familiar tonal syntax is profoundly anti-musical. Schoenberg's music, whose merits I would be the first to acknowledge, is almost invariably heard *against* the serial organization, by listeners who search for closure, repetition, imitation and elaboration, and who strive to hear harmonic progressions rather than sequences of 'simultaneities'.¹⁶

This does not mean that all music is tonal, or that tonality is a single, unitary system, the same in every epoch and every style. Tonality is an evolving tradition, arising from the modes of medieval music and evolving through medieval and Renaissance polyphony to the contrapuntal idiom of the Baroque and thence to the four-square triadic syntax of the classical style. It is a tradition in which there have been genuine *discoveries*, such as the well-tempered scale. This scale reconciled triadic harmony with the chromatic intervals, and thereby facilitated what has perhaps been the greatest advance in all music, which is the emergence of tonal centres, and persuasive modulations between them. All this is familiar to the historian, and there is no need to emphasize it. However it is worth pointing out that the serial organization introduced by Schoenberg is entirely dependent on the well-tempered scale, whose rationale lies in the harmonic vistas that are opened with each successive semi-tone. These vistas are there in the melodic line of the Violin Concerto, in the agonizing tone-row of *Moses*



Example 2

und Aron, and in the delicate textures of the last two quartets. And it is only by an effort of will that Schoenberg was able to close them off.

Although tonal music is not the only music that there is, therefore, tonality should not be regarded as a fleeting, arbitrary or merely *stylistic* episode in the history of music. It tells us something essential about music—in particular about the nature of musical movement, about the dimensions in which movement operates, and about the way in which vectors combine, so as to change music from a monologue to a conversation. It is not tonality, but the seeming rejection of tonality by Schoenberg and his followers, that should be seen as fleeting and merely *stylistic*. At the very moment when Schoenberg was dismissing tonality as an 'exhausted' idiom, a wholly new form of it was breaking forth on the musical horizon—one influenced not only by the principles of classical harmony, but also by the modes and rhythms of Negro music, by the harmonic experiments of Debussy and Ravel, and by the discovery of sequences consisting entirely of dissonant harmonies, in which nevertheless progression towards closure could be heard. Adorno, as is well known, hated this new tonal idiom, and had outraged things to say about it. But—while reserving judgement for the moment as to the merits and deficiencies of jazz—I am convinced that it provides a perfect illustration of the centrality of tonal thinking in the understanding of musical order. Moreover, it shows the way in which tonality *remakes* itself, by proposing new relations between voices, and new kinds of voice-leading from chord to chord.

To take a very simple instance. The first chord in Ex. 2 is, in the contrapuntal tradition of classical music, the tail end of a suspension, in which one voice—the high G—has yet to move to its 'proper' place, something which, as a rule, immediately happens as G moves to F sharp and the chord resolves on to the major triad of D in root position, as shown in the second part of the example. But that is not how jazz musicians treat the chord. For them it is, and has always been, a new harmony, one in which the third is replaced by a fourth so that each note stands bold and clear and affirmative, and none is subject to the

gravitational pull of the tonic. In due recognition of its classical origin they call the first chord of Ex. 2 the 'sus' chord on D, but they construe it as a stable harmony, with a pungent quality all of its own. Moreover, add the 7th and 9th, and the sus chord on D becomes identical with the A minor 7th over a D pedal, as in the third chord of Ex. 2—in other words not a tonic chord at all, but a chord on the dominant. A completely new harmonic perspective then opens, as we come to understand sus chords on the tonic as supporting improvisations on the dominant. Moreover, sus chords do not, in the jazz idiom, demand resolution, so a piece might consist entirely of sus chords—as in Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*. One simple emendation to a classically occurring harmony, therefore, opens the way to another kind of music. Yet it is music that shares the ruling characteristics of tonality in all its forms: voice-leading, polyphony, melodic closure, harmonic sequence, and scales in which a tonic and a dominant exert their controlling influence.

Much contemporary pop music is modal—using the various church modes as melodic devices, supported by stacked chords, such as the so-called 'phrygian' chord (a minor ninth on the tonic) which incorporates a flattened supertonic into the melodic minor scale. This device is familiar from Heavy Metal, and can be heard at its most exhilarating in Metallica's 'Master of Puppets'. The minor scale with flattened supertonic is identical with the Phrygian mode. But the mode, introduced in this way, is contained within an adverse tonal template, emphasized by the phrygian chord, which anchors the deviant super-tonic to the tonic and forbids its escape. Once again we see the force of tonal thinking, and the way in which tonality lends order and closure to new idioms, new ways of singing, and new uses of the musical line.

Perhaps the greatest mistake involved in the marginalizing of tonality, however, has been the failure to perceive that tonality is also a *rhythmic* system. This I argue at greater length in Chapter 6, but folk songs and pop songs make the point sufficiently clearly. All such music is strophic in organization, and strophes can be understood only in terms of the experience of closure, which divides the music into repeatable sections. The presence of a tonic generates the background rhythm of a song, by permitting the singer and the listener to come home to a specific pitch, and to seek refuge in a particular harmony. It is from that background sense of 'home' that the small-scale closures derive their force, and without scales, whether diatonic or modal, strophic organization is virtually impossible to achieve. And scales, even when modal, provide both tonic and the leading tone that points to it.

To invoke jazz and pop as proof of the enduring relevance of tonality opens me to the objections made by Adorno. If your only examples of a renewed tonality, he would say, are the improvised and grammarless sequences of jazz and pop, then you merely confirm my point—that tonality has become ‘fetishized’, part of the ‘ideological’ approach to music which prefers sugar and spice to real musical thinking. It is not *this* that will vindicate tonality as a rival to the ‘developing variation’ made possible by Schoenberg’s new musical grammar.

It is impossible to proceed far into the aesthetics of music without encountering this argument, and it is the aspect of Adorno with which I am most in sympathy. In the last chapter of *The Aesthetics of Music* I tried to say something about the difference between musical culture and musical kitsch. In Chapter 13 I return again to this theme, conscious of the enormous dangers it presents to an author, in a world where pop-addiction is all but universal and where the tedious tap-estries of routine jazz muffle the walls of so many communal spaces. Even if nothing else in Adorno deserves our sympathy, we must surely admire his courage in pouring scorn on mass culture. The strange thing is that he believed American popular music to be the enemy of the people, when it is was the people who had produced it, and who had found in its glittering surface the true mirror of their soul. To understand this episode in cultural history is, I think, essential, if we are to theorize about music as it is today. And if I tread warily across this territory, then this is not because I share Adorno’s contempt for the old American songbook, but because I feel its pull too strongly, and know that there are deep questions to be asked, concerning the nature of musical temptation, and the discipline that might help us to resist it.

Notes

- 1 The leading texts have been collected and extracted by Peter Le Huray and James Day in their *Music and Aesthetics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, Cambridge 1981.
- 2 E. Hanslick, *Vom musikalisch-Schönen* (Leipzig 1854, revised 1891; *The Beautiful in Music*, tr. Payzant, New York 1974.) Edmund Gurney’s *The Power of Sound*, London 1880, has been reissued by the University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- 3 See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. E. J. F. Payne, New York 1969, vol. 2.
- 4 See Geoffrey Miller, ‘Evolution of human music through sexual selection’, in Nils Wallin *et al.*, *The Origins of Music*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000.
- 5 This process of reducing explanandum to the terms preferred by a favoured explanans has been eloquently ridiculed by David Stove in *Darwinian Fairy Tales*, New York 2002.
- 6 See especially *Language and Mind*, New York 1968, p. 62, in which language is described as ‘an example of true emergence—the appearance of a qualitatively different phenomenon at a specific stage of complexity of organization’. Chomsky has been taken to task by, for example, John Maynard Smith and Eörs Szathmáry, *The Major Transitions in Evolution*, Oxford and New York 1995, pp. 303–8. However, it seems to me that the arguments of such writers miss

the point, which is that the emergence of language involves a transition from one ontological predicament to another—like the emergence of a face from an array of dots when the last dot is added. Of course the process is one of gradual change: but one that leads to the emergence of a new order of experience and a new kind of explanation. See Roger Scruton, ‘Confronting biology’, in Craig Titus, ed., *Philosophical Psychology: Psychology, Emotions and Freedom*, Arlington, Va. 2009.

- 7 *Aesthetics and Music*, London 2007.
- 8 See Charles Rosen, Review of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, reprinted in *Critical Entertainments*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000; Carl Dahlhaus, *Aesthetics of Music*, tr. W. Austin, Cambridge 1982, and *The Idea of Absolute Music*, tr. R. Lustig, Chicago 1989; Edward Saïd, *Musical Elaborations*, London 1991; Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Oxford 1992.
- 9 See Lydia Goehr, ‘Being true to the work’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1989.
- 10 Some of Tyāgarāja’s works are set out (in embryo form) in Ethel Rosenthal’s excellent treatise *The Story of Indian Music and its Instruments*, London 1929, Chapter 4. This book also contains Sir William Jones’s prescient essay ‘On the musical modes of the Hindus’, written in 1784 but not published until 1799 in the Transactions of the Asiatic Society, Bengal. It is worth mentioning this work as indicating (*pace* Edward Saïd and others) that Indian culture today owes much to the British Indians and their enthusiasm for things ‘other’ than themselves.
- 11 Further pertinent observations are made by some of the contributors to Michael Talbot, ed., *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, Liverpool 2000; see especially the contribution from Reinhard Strohm.
- 12 Peter Kivy has gone further, arguing that, in every tradition, the performance is a work of art, independent of the work of art that is performed. See ‘*Ars Perfecta: Towards perfection in musical performance*’, in *Music, Language and Cognition*, Oxford 2007.
- 13 See, for example, the disputes surrounding the question whether works of music are or are not types, universals, sound structures, sound structures as specified by a person at a time, compliance classes specified by notation, and so on: see Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Oxford 1969, Chapters 4 and 5, and Jerrold Levinson, ‘What a musical work is’, in *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, Ithaca NY, 1990. I have discussed these theories in *The Aesthetics of Music*, Chapter 4, where I argue that they all make an impregnable molehill out of an easily conquered mountain.
- 14 See Hermann von Helmholtz, *On the Sensation of Tone*, tr. Alexander J. Ellis, London 1885.
- 15 See M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music*, Oxford 1992; Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* (Big Book on Music), Cairo 1923.
- 16 Of course, it would be begging many questions to suppose that the debate over atonality and serialism, and what they require of us, is in any way closed. The debate about this issue is never ending, as can be seen from the pages of *Musical Analysis*. See in particular, Julian Horton, ‘Schoenberg and the “Moment of German music”’, *Musical Analysis* 24 (2005), 235–62.