

Music, Universality, Emotional Character & Authenticity

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In my view, which I have expounded in some detail elsewhere,¹ the essential significance of music resides in its capacity to expressively arouse feelings, including what would be standardly referred to as emotions: this capacity is realized, I believe, without recourse to any form of representation, imitation, description or convention, and without the mediation of beliefs. Music, I would maintain, is the natural, direct voice of feeling: it expresses a feeling for some listener by or in directly arousing and shaping that feeling in him.

There may be several contentious elements in this brief presentation of my view of musical expression but the most obviously contentious claim is that a piece of music may expressively arouse a feeling in a listener *objectlessly*, even when that feeling is one which would, in extra-musical contexts, necessarily take an object. I have attempted to explicate and defend this claim elsewhere² and it is not my purpose here to do so again. Instead I want to explore some of its implications and those of the wider claim of which it is a part, *viz.*, that music is an unmediated mode of the expressive arousal of feelings. For it seems to me that my view does help to explain certain certain well-entrenched, but seemingly unexcogitated beliefs that many people have, and have had, about music.

First, and perhaps most obviously, it helps to explain the widely-held belief that music is the most *intimate* and *inward* of the art-forms. Music does not present or represent parts of the world as a way of arousing or expressing feelings; it moves directly to the inner life of feelings and gives it an immediate shaping voice. I believe that no other art-form can do this. It is undeniably true, of course, that a literary or visual work may in some sense express feelings directly or spontaneously, but, necessarily, it cannot do this without the mediation of some part or parts of a world (real or imaginary) realized through description or depiction. In order to discover and express feelings literary and visual works must present parts of a world which are not themselves feelings but which are apt to arouse them.

Secondly, it is, I believe, the fact that musical expression is achieved without the mediation of representation or belief that accounts for the common belief that music is non-moral and no political, for if music is unmediated in the way I have outlined it is incapable of expressing moral or political *judgments*. And it is surely this feature of musical expression which explains why Marxist aestheticians generally avoid music when they are expounding a Marxist view of art, for, to summarize ruthlessly, if, as Marxists suppose, art expresses ideology and ideology is constituted by a set of value-judgments, descriptive judgments, or depictions of political significance, then music *cannot* express an ideology. Rather than give up the thesis that art express ideology, Marxists choose to ignore music.³

Against this rather baldly stated view concerning music and ideology, it might be urged that it does not follow from the fact that music, unlike the other art forms, cannot make judgments on the world, either explicitly in the form of value judgments, or implicitly through selective depiction or description, that it has *no* moral or political significance. This, I believe, is true but the significance that music does in fact have is only tenuously related to anything that might be called moral or political, and is certainly not construable as a set of moral or political *messages*. For if I am right in my thesis, the significance that a piece of music actually has (when it has any) consists in its being the expression of an emotional quality (the quality of the feeling expressed). That emotional quality may be one or more of an indefinite number of qualities or characters ranging from the sentimental and declamatory to the authentic and sincere. It might be argued thus that the moral significance of a piece of music can be located in the emotional quality it expresses and hence invites in the responses of the listener. But here it is very important not to overestimate the weight of this putative moral significance: in particular, it would be wrong, I think, to suppose that the emotional quality of a piece of music can actually alter the emotional quality of the relevant extra musical emotional relationships of a listener who has responded to that quality in the way that it invited. It seems to me that what must happen when an emotion with a particular quality is expressively aroused in a listener by a piece of music is that the music discovers and gives a shaping voice to an emotional capacity or tendency *already possessed* the listener. Seemingly that is a conceptual truth, but it is a conceptual truth which should not be taken to imply that music is relatively powerless, for first, as I have already claimed, music may awaken and give unmediated life to feelings which might otherwise have lain dormant

or have existed only in mediated form, and second, pieces of music may become part of the active expressive repertoire of a listener.⁴

It is fairly clear, I think, that the emotional qualities to which I have drawn attention are *value* qualities just in so far as saying that an expression or feeling has one of them is to say something for or against that expression or feeling. This might seem to clinch the case for the moral significance of music, if it is right to assume that the value in question is a (kind of) moral value. But is it right to make such an assumption? I feel unable to answer this question categorically since I am not sure what (if anything) a moral value is. However, though I shall not pursue the matter further here, it seems to me probable that the following complex hypothetical is valid and its antecedents true. If the value-quality of the feeling expressed by a piece of music (*i.e.*, the value-quality of the feeling expressively aroused in some listener by the music) is capable of harming or benefitting a listener, and if, other things being equal, the harm or good that a person or group does to another person or group is always a moral issue, and if, in musical cases, other things always are equal, then music has moral significance. And here it is worth remarking that if music really does have moral significance of the kind adumbrated, it is not of the kind that lends itself to political or ideological analysis, since the value-qualities that embody the supposed moral significance are neutral in respect of political belief and ideology: as I have been concerned to stress, they are intrinsic properties of feelings and expressions, *i.e.*, they are independent of beliefs and objects.

I should like now to return to a consideration of the unmediated nature of musical expression. If, as I have suggested, the unmediated nature of musical expression makes it impossible for a piece of music to express a political or moral judgment, this may be seen as a limitation on its expressive power, but it may also be seen as constituting a potential expressive power which the other art-forms could not possess. That potential expressive power is a potential power to transcend, in expressively arousing feelings, any such inter-cultural or intra-cultural boundaries as are set by inter-cultural or intra-cultural differences in belief. Since music is free from objects and beliefs its appeal cannot be limited by such belief-boundaries. This not to say that the other art-forms cannot also transcend inter-cultural or intra-cultural boundaries; only that they cannot do so if the beliefs by reference to which their depictions or descriptions may be said to express feelings are peculiar to a particular historic-cultural period or to a particular individual or group within a given culture.

The point is that the production of visual and literary works is perpetually vulnerable to what might be called *object-opacity*. Visual and literary works can only express feelings through depicting or describing *objects* of feelings and in so far as individuals differ in what they regard as acceptable objects of feelings, visual or literary works which depict or describe objects of feelings acceptable to one individual or group may be opaque to other individuals or groups.

Of course, this is not to say that there are no historicocultural differences in musical production: the history of music is in part the history of changing musical styles and forms, but neither these differences of styles and forms between different cultures viewed synchronically (Western European, Chinese, Indian etc.) seem to present insuperable barriers to appreciation. Even religious music can, it seems, be fully appreciated by the atheist, and this strongly suggests that the core of the music has absolutely nothing to do with religious *belief*, which, of course, is just what my view of musical expression would lead one to expect. Music expresses (or fails to express) feelings, and there are *no* feelings which are the sole prerogative of the religious *believer*, or, indeed, of any other kind of *believer*. If there are religious, they are not religious in virtue of the kind of feelings that they are (ardent love, deep tenderness, passionate longing etc.) but in virtue of the *objects* of those feelings, objects which are identified in terms of *beliefs*.

My account so far may suggest that I believe that music alone amongst the art-forms speaks with a universal voice, but I do not. Such a view would be seriously wrong in at least two important ways. First, it would show no acknowledgment of the fact that, despite being perpetually vulnerable to what I have called object-opacity, both visual and literary works are capable of expressing and exploring universal themes, so that works of one time and culture may be appreciated by people from other times and cultures. This, together with the fact that the imagination is capable of breaking through certain culture and individual barriers, (we may not believe in ghosts, for example, but we may *imagine what it would be like* to believe in them and hence come to sympathise or even identify with characters such as Hamlet) means that some visual and literary works may achieve as wide an appeal as music: they are not necessarily doomed to be sunk in their own times and places. (My remarks here, of course, can only be true if there are indeed universal human themes: I assume, as against some vulgar Marxists, that there obviously are.) Second, it is clear that not every piece of music appeals to

or is appreciated in the same way by every listener : there are obviously wide divergences in musical taste which, if my thesis is right, must be explained without reference to inter- or intra-cultural differences in beliefs or conceptions of appropriate emotional objects. It seems to me that these divergences can best be explained by reference to differences in the emotional lives of listeners : specifically to differences either (a) in their emotional characters or (b) in what might be called the authenticity of their emotional lives.

I shall try to explicate what I mean by differences in emotional character by a consideration of certain emotional differences in extra-musical contexts. The differences I have in mind are those between the objects of person's loves, likes and dislikes. Take, for example, the differences in taste in countryside of different people : some prefer bare, wild mountain countryside, others lush generous countryside, and so on. Although people may and do argue in favour of their own preferences by comparing typical features of their own favoured countryside with those of other sorts, it would surely be a mistake to think that one set of preferential judgements was right and the others wrong, especially if purely aesthetic considerations are part of what form the preferences. It seems to me that such preferences are harmlessly and irreducibly relative.

I believe that the differences in the objects of countryside preferences be token differences in the feelings to which they give rise, and the closeness of the match between objects and feelings is revealed by the fact that both may properly be described in the same or similar general terms. And this suggests that it could reasonably be argued that differences in countryside preferences reveal quite general differences in emotional character, differences which might be expected to emerge in either areas where emotional proclivities are expressed. One of those areas is the experience of listening to music, an experience which, if my view of musical expression is right, essentially involves the expression of objectless emotions and hence provides what might be called neat evidence of differences in emotional character.

Clearly, the spread of the appeal of music will be limited by differences in its expressions of emotional character : some listeners will prefer expressions of one kind of emotional character, others the expressions of another, and so on, but this it might be said, does not constitute such a severe limitation on its appeal as does object-opacity in the case of literature and the visual arts, since the preferences which express a person's emotional

character need not be, and usually are not, exclusive : thus, for example, I may prefer countryside of kind X to countryside of kind Y and yet still like countryside of kind Y and other kinds of countryside. Thus one's emotional character exhibits a more or less varied hierarchy of different likes and different dislikes, and this helps to explain how it is possible for one listener to enjoy many different kinds of emotionally expressive music, even though he may have a *preference* for music which expresses one particular kind of emotional character.

I turn now to a consideration of (b), the authenticity of emotional lives.

I must confess here that I feel daunted by the prospect of raising this topic, not merely because it is obviously complex, but also because the terrain is very dim because relatively uncharted. In order to try to get some order into my discussion of the complexities and unclarities, I want to begin by considering ways in which a person's emotional life might be *in* authentic in extra-musical contexts and then relate this to the musical cases.

In extra-musical contexts, feelings can be said to be inauthentic for several different kinds of reason. In such contexts, a feeling may be said to be inauthentic because either (i) the belief or set of beliefs involved with it is irrational or unreasonable or (ii) its object is inappropriate or (iii) the desire or set of desires involved with it is in some way inappropriate or (iv) it is itself intrinsically inappropriate or (v) its manifestation (expression, evincing etc.) is in some way inappropriate.

A type (i) reason invokes what is now a commonplace in the philosophy of mind, namely, that just in so far as beliefs are involved with feelings those feelings may be assessed for their rationality and reasonableness: if a belief involved with a feeling is irrational or unreasonable so too is the feeling itself. I have no quibble with this partial bridging of the gap between reason and feeling. However, philosophers of mind who have written on the emotions seem generally to treat a belief that is involved with a feeling as part of the feeling itself, and this inclusion I believe to be wrong. Beliefs, it is true, are sometimes necessarily involved with feelings but they play a causal role in their generation and course, and nothing is a cause of itself (*pace* Spinoza). Nonetheless, once we have grasped that beliefs play a merely causal role in the arousal of feelings, we can allow that their rationality and reasonableness may legitimately be predicated of the feelings

to which they give rise. But this kind of inauthenticity of feeling clearly cannot afflict music since music comprises no beliefs at all.

Similarly, a reason of type (ii) would also be irrelevant in any consideration of the authenticity of feelings expressively aroused by music, since music does not present objects. Again a reason of type (iii) would also be irrelevant to the musical case, since music is never composed of specific, fully-fledged desires. I say 'specific' and 'fully-fledged' because it seems to me that music does sometimes expressively arouse what might be called objectless *feelings* of desire. Such feelings (as well as the purely feeling-elements of desires in extra-musical contexts) may indeed be inauthentic but I shall postpone discussion of them until I consider reasons of type (iv) and (v).

I have been brisk in my treatment of reasons type (i)- (iii) because, although they are interesting in their own right, they are not relevant to musical cases of inauthenticity, but before I leave them it might be worth stressing that they are fairly closely related, sometimes so closely related in fact that each reason may point to an identical inauthenticity, the difference residing merely in the point of view from which the inauthenticity is judged. Thus, it may be my *irrational beliefs* (reason (i)) which cause me to identify an *inappropriate object* (reason (ii)) which renders my *desire concerning the object inappropriate* (reason (iii)). I propose to examine reasons (iv) and (v) together since the ways in which each bears upon cases of musical inauthenticity are intimately related.

At first sight it might appear that a reason of type (iv) is also irrelevant to the musical case since, although music expresses feelings, it is not composed of them. However, despite this, the connection between the inauthenticity of feeling itself and the inauthenticity of the expression of feeling is more intimate than that between the latter and the other kinds of inauthenticity. The intimacy of the connection consists in this: that if a feeling is inauthentic its expression will also be inauthentic (otherwise it would not be an expression of *that* feeling) but not necessarily vice versa, for it is possible for a person to experience a perfectly authentic feeling and yet to be incapable of expressing it authentically⁵. (It seems to me that the musical case is of interest here because, if my thesis concerning the musical expression of feeling is right, then to say that a piece of music is inauthentic is to say that one has been made to *feel* inauthentically through the inauthentic *expression* constituted by the music. But more of that below.) But what is

it for a feeling *itself* (i. e., a feeling abstracted from any belief, desire, object or manifestation) to be inauthentic, or, to put it another way, is there such a thing as an intrinsically inauthentic feeling ?

It seems that in extra-musical contexts a feeling may be inauthentic without being intrinsically inauthentic, as, for example, when it is just too strong or too weak for the occasion which gives rise to it but not necessarily for other envisageable occasions. But I believe that there are also some feelings which are intrinsically inauthentic in that they do not constitute an appropriate response to *any* envisageable occasion. It would be a mistake to think that one could be certain of the existence of such feelings only from introspection, from reflection on the nature of one's own emotional experiences, for there are certain kinds of inauthentic *manifestations* of feelings which are criterial, in Wittgenstein's sense, for the presence of intrinsically inauthentic feelings, the manifestations being the more or less direct effluents of the feelings.

And this brings me to the musical case, for a piece of music will be judged inauthentic by a listener, if the feeling that it invites or expressively arouses is judged by him to be inauthentic : the music gives auditory body and shape to a feeling that he deems intrinsically inauthentic in the sense that he believes that the feeling thus aroused could not be an appropriate response to anything. Such inauthenticity is not solely of one kind : a piece of music that is *permeed* inauthentic in this way may be so because it is thought to be sentimental or turgid or declamatory or thin or mawkish or plangent and so on - the list would seem to be uncloseable.

If I am right in my view of the character of the value of musical expression then it would seem that what must separate those who disagree about the authenticity of a piece of music is the authenticity of their own emotional natures. I believe that to be the case, but my own account of how it comes to be so raises certain issues which I must now confront.

In extra-musical contexts, disagreements concerning the authenticity of a feeling can be adjudicated just in so far as the feeling is open to rational criticism. Such criticism will normally take the form of showing either (a) that the belief or set of beliefs involved with the feeling is or is not irrational or unreasonable or (b) that the desire or set of desires involved with the feeling is or is not irrational or unreasonable because of (a) or because it does or does not have otherwise undesirable consequences or (c) that the object of the feeling is or is not inappropriate because of (a) or because

having it as an object is or is not likely to have undesirable consequences. But adjudication by rational criticism is clearly not possible in the case of disagreements concerning the authenticity of pieces of music since musical expression of feeling is objectless and involves no beliefs. This, of course, raises the question of the objectivity of such judgments, but I do not wish to pursue that question here: for my purposes it is sufficient to point out that such disagreements exist and that they are likely to be a permanent feature of musical appreciation, since emotional inauthenticity is not likely to be eradicated. Furthermore, it seems clear that emotional authenticity is not the monopoly of any particular era or culture, and this is reflected in musical expression. Authentic musical works have been produced in all ages which means that one's appreciation of authentic music is not confined to any particular period.

Unlike beliefs and ideas, then, emotional authenticity and emotional character would appear to have no history. Thus, if I am right in the view that music is judged primarily for its emotional authenticity and character, we have here an explanation of the fact that the appeal of music may pass through historical and cultural boundaries more smoothly than that of the other artforms.

I am acutely aware that the topics I have raised in this article involve complexities and difficulties which I have not discussed, but I hope that my arguments can be seen as fruitful, if tentative, suggestions.

Notes and References

1. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* winter 1985.
2. *ibid*
3. One notable exception to this is Theodor Adorno, especially in his book, *The philosophy of Modern Music*. However, if I understand him correctly, his use of the concept of ideology is broader than most Marxists would allow, and this enables
4. I say 'repertoire' here because I believe there is a sense in which all expressive music is potential 'occasion' music, just in so far as there will always be occasions on which it is appropriate to play it.
5. I acknowledge that this might be more unusual than my formulation might suggest.