Introduction

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In the preface to his 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut declares that all music is sacred (5). On the surface, this statement is overly roseate and indiscriminate. How can every piece of music—or, more precisely, every combination of sounds that might conceivably be called "music" no matter the type, quality, or intention—be hallowed? There are, of course, conventional categories of sacred and secular music; but, aside from textual or contextual (or sometimes subtextual) features, trying to pinpoint what makes the categories *sonically* distinct can be a fruitless exercise. The same goes for binaries of "good" or "higher" versus "bad" of "lower" music—subjective labels that tend to isolate music from the experience of it, and usually tell us more about the creator or listener than about the music itself. The old adage of "one person's trash is another person's treasure" should caution against making definitive statements about a piece's superiority or inferiority, especially given the cultural and subcultural diversity of musical styles and norms, as well as the strong role of personal preference. Vonnegut's own listening habits, as revealed in the recent documentary *Kurt Vonnegut: Unstuck in Time* (Weide and Argott, 2021) included writing along to easy listening "elevator music"—the sort of recordings critics habitually ridicule and almost never revere.

Yet, the notion that all music is sacred is not really about taste or how music is perceived through our inescapably judgmental ears. Rather, it is an idealization echoed elsewhere in Vonnegut's fiction, where music (again, mostly in the abstract) is a beautifying, humanizing, and ennobling force in an otherwise harsh, random, and absurd existence. Vonnegut affirmed this view until his final days, writing, "let this be my epitaph: The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music" (2006).

In its inclusiveness, this attitude is similar to naturalist John Muir's "positive aesthetics," wherein every natural lanscape, no matter how attractive or unattractive by conventional human measures, is beautiful by virtue of its pristineness (Muir 1894, 48–73). Muir contrasted this perspective with that of his artist and photographer companions, who sought out picturesque vistas and angles resembling the composition of works of art. Human intrusions into these settings, including selective representations of them, can only diminish the natural beauty.

While the views of Vonnegut and Muir may be untenably romantic, underlying them is the original sense of "sacred," a term rooted in the Latin *sacrare*, meaning "to set apart." The natural world is, according to Muir, set apart from the human constructed world, and is therefore thoroughly special. Music, too, is set apart in important ways (acknowledging that defining "music" is a contentious prospect well beyond the scope of this introduction): musical sounds are perceived as distinct from other sounds; words set to music rise above everyday speech; musical sounds can penetrate deeply into otherwise untapped areas of consciousness; music has "extra-physical" power over our emotions; music suggests something greater than ourselves; our musical propensities separate us from other species (advances in zoomusicology notwithstanding) (Friedmann 2015, 169). To be sure, the extent to which any of these qualities are reflected in a piece is determined by a variety of personal, cultural, educational, situational, dispositional, and other factors; but music's close association with religious rites and spiritual practices suggests an intuitive appreciation of its "sanctity."

And yet, music is not, in fact, separate from the human experience. On the contrary, across cultures and throughout human history, singing and instrument playing have been integrated into a wide

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array of other activities—from work and worship, to love and war, to celebration and mourning—and even conceiving of music as an attraction or commodity in and of itself is a relatively recent and mostly Western concept. Much like Muir's observation, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe" (Muir 1911, 211), so, too, is music hitched to everything else in the human experience. Along these lines, it is instructive to note that when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow famously dubbed music "the universal language of mankind" (Longfellow 1851, 4), he was not suggesting that music transcends linguistic barriers or that it is perceived the same way from person to person or community to community. Instead, he stressed that music has universal *functions*—in the case of his examples, work songs. The phenomenon of music is ubiquitous but like language, it exists in many forms and dialects.

The foregoing discussion alludes directly and indirectly to several perennial quandaries in music criticism and aesthetics. Are musical categories, be they judgments or genres, sustainable in any objective sense? To what extent can music, especially without the potential (but not always) clarifying aid of lyrics, convey definite meanings or ideas? How much of music's meaning is determined by the music-makers and how much by the auditors? Can music ever be appreciated for its own sake, or is it always attached to extra-musical feelings, associations, judgments, and/or activities? Are there any standards that can be applied across musical examples or types? What constitutes the "good" or "beautiful" or "genuine" in music, and what might be their opposite? Why do certain sounds evoke generalized emotions, and how consistent are those responses inside or outside the music's cultural setting? More broadly, does music need philosophical discourse, and does philosophy have the proper tools to address music?

To these can be added a series of tensions presented by Paul Rinzler in his book, *The Contradictions of Jazz* (2008). Although his subject is jazz aesthetics, these contradictions—or "dynamic tensions" where "two opposites are present and are fully expressed, yet are in conflict" (8)—are felt in the full range of musical expressions: individuality and interconnectedness; assertion and openness; freedom and responsibility; creativity and tradition. At the same time, Rinzler is cognizant that music is fundamentally experiential; these tensions arise in the musical moment and work themselves out (or not) in that temporal present. "The most important thing about jazz—to me, at least," writes Rinzler, "is how it sounds. Jazz is music, and music, in general, is meant to be heard and enjoyed. But after the sounds die away, as they must, curiosity can lead us to start thinking about these sounds and how they were produced" (xiii). So it is with virtually all musical discourse: first comes the sound, then comes the reflection.

The difficulty of capturing or deciphering music in words is largely why the same questions continue to be asked and the same tensions continue to be explored. Contributors to this special issue add fresh perspectives and new insights to these enduring themes and inquiries, looking at music in both the general sense and examining specific musical pieces, movements, and moments. Each article has its own focus, makes its own arguments, and occupies its own branch(es) of philosophy: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, politics, and, of course, aesthetics. Beyond the centralizing subject of music, what ties them together and into the best of philosophical traditions is that they not only ask big questions but also, in seeking to answer them, add more questions to the ongoing discourse.

Before closing, it is helpful to explain, albeit cursorily, the key terms of this special issue: criticism and aesthetics. Music criticism entails the application of critical faculties to understanding music or some aspect thereof. This broad conception departs from more rigid definitions, such as making judgments on the value or "excellence" of individual performers, performances, or pieces of music. Adjudication is only part of the music criticism mosaic, and is not always paramount or even necessarily present. Aesthetics includes not only classical concerns about the nature and appreciation of musical "beauty," but also the sensori-emotional cognition of "aesthetic success" (Scruton 2011, 13): whether or not (and how) a piece of music "works" to charm, alarm, calm, aggravate, please, disconcert, and so on. In other words, musical aesthetics is the interaction of music and perception (Friedmann 2018, vii).

Despite the deceptive concision of these definitions, the key terms—like the term "music"—remain hotly debated. Rather than taking up more space here, it is best to leave the complexities (and perplexities) to the talented and accomplished authors of this collection.

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