

## EXPRESSIVENESS IN MUSIC

HAROLD OSBORNE

While all music lovers are convinced of the power of music to move them emotionally, our understanding of the expressive and emotional nature of music has been bogged down by a century of controversy which has had no other outcome than to forge more and more rigidly opposing standpoints on questions that have usually been too vaguely formulated for clarification to be possible. Controversy has turned on two main points: (1) Is the expression of emotion by means of music possible? Is it essential? Is it a major function of music or a main reason why music is so highly valued? (2) If music does express emotions, are these the emotions familiar to us in everyday life or are they a special set of emotions experienced only in listening to music?

The controversy about the expressiveness of music was set on foot in 1854 by Eduard Hanslick's little book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, which electrified the musical world of his day by describing music as *tönend bewegte Form* (sonorous form in movement) and asserting that it is intrinsically incapable of expression. This was followed in 1880 by Edmund Gurney's monumental work *The Power of Sound*, which took a similar line. In our own century, in exaggerated opposition to the mushy sentimentality which only too easily infects much writing about music in the Romantic tradition, Igor Stravinsky said in *Chronicles of my Life* (1936): 'I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc. Music is given to us with the sole purpose of establishing an order in things .. Its indispensable requirement is construction. Construction once completed, this order has been attained, and there is nothing more to be

said.' In direct contrast with this line of thought is the much more prevalent conception of music today which is symbolised in the description of it as a 'language of the emotions.' It is the purpose of this paper to suggest a few considerations which may help to prepare the ground for a reconciliation of these views or at least take us a step beyond the bare confrontation of the irreconcilable.

In his influential book *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956) Leonard B. Meyer distinguishes between what he calls the 'formalist' and the 'expressionist' theories as follows: 'The formalist would contend that the meaning of music lies in the perception and understanding of the musical relationships set forth in the work of art and that the meaning of music is primarily intellectual, while the expressionist would argue that these same relationships are in some sense capable of exciting feelings and emotion in the listener.' This formulation perpetuates the common mistake of assuming that appreciation of any work of art must be either intellectual understanding or emotional response. On the contrary, artistic appreciation consists in *perceptual* apprehension. Appreciation of music is the auditory apprehension of a sonorous construct as an ordered, emergent unity. Preliminary intellectual analysis may help as a preparation towards non-analytical, synoptic apprehension. But appreciation itself is not the piecemeal awareness of constituent parts which are then related together by understanding, but the subsequent synoptic apprehension of the unitary whole. It is the resultant expansion and enlargement of perceptual consciousness which justifies our calling the experience aesthetic and its object a work of art. True, this perceptual experience may itself be profoundly emotional. But the antithesis between emotional response and intellectual understanding remains a false one: appreciation must be regarded as emotionally coloured perception. The necessity for realising this is apparent in such a book as *The Sense of Music* (1959) by Victor Zuckerkandl, when he asks: 'And where in all this is there a place for *emotion*, which so many believe constitutes the very essence of music—so much so, in fact, that music is quite commonly referred to as the language of the emotions? There is just no place for emotion in the context of the essential question.' He then adds: 'There is no musical experience without emotion, that is to say, there is no way of grasping a musical context, the motion of tones, otherwise than by partaking in it, by inwardly moving with it — and such inward motion we experience as emotion.' Thus he returns to Hanslick's *tönend bewegte Form* but seems to claim that the apprehension of these forms in auditory perception is an emotional experience.

Let us for a moment forget the formidable elaboration of theory and consider what it is actually like to listen to music. When I am listening to a piece of fine music I am not more than peripherally aware of myself as swept by successive

emotions or wallowing in a warm bath of emotional indulgence. Attention is concentrated on *perceiving* the structure of sound that is being presented. Afterwards, when it is over, I may say that the experience was profoundly emotional or that profound emotion was 'in' the music. During performance the experience was one of concentrated hearing. It is when we listen to melodies, however, or rhythms, or slighter pieces of music that we chiefly tend to hear the emotion 'in' the music.

When we experience music, or indeed any work of art, we attend not only to the physical properties it manifests, but also to its aesthetic or expressive features. These fall into three classes: (1) Aesthetic qualities proper, such as are indicated by the descriptions 'elegant,' 'graceful,' 'majestic,' 'dainty.' (2) emotional or 'mood' qualities such as are indicated by describing a work as 'sad,' 'lugubrious,' 'gay,' 'serene,' etc; and (3) affective or evocative qualities such as 'moving,' 'charming,' 'exciting,' 'tedious,' etc. It is the second class which have created unsolved problems for aestheticians.

Phenomenologically, we hear the emotion of sadness, gaiety or whatever in the music as a feature of the sonorous construct which is the music presented to us. We do not necessarily experience it as an emotion in ourselves. For example, Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* is inappropriate at a wedding because it *sounds* joyful — we hear joyfulness in it — at a time when we are *feeling* sad. Nor do we mean that the emotion we hear 'in' the music is a sign of a similar emotion experienced by the composer or the performer, as we assume that a bodily gesture is a sign of sadness, surprise or delight. We assume that the 'sublime' emotions we hear in the last part of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* were experienced *at some time* by the composers, but this is an assumption difficult to verify. The emotion we hear is 'in' the music, a feature of the music itself in a way in which sadness, surprise or delight are not features of the gesture which indicates them. Emotions, however, are mental states or events in living creatures. Works of art are not living creatures and the problem posed for aesthetic theory is how emotional qualities can be perceived 'in' them. At least it is clear that the analogy we need is not that of the expressive gesture (Ouch!), but rather the expressive character which cloaks many natural objects — the dolefulness of a weeping willow, the calm tranquillity of an Essex countryside, the violent agitation of a storm at sea or the harsh melancholy of the foghorn.

We speak of 'emotion.' But emotion is a complex mental state consisting of an object or situation apprehended and a tendency to take action in relation to it as

well as a linked feeling tone. It is the affective state alone which is expressible in pure music or non-representational art. What we hear in music are the shades of feeling, the minutiae of mood and affective tone, which we experience in life sometimes embodied in full-blown emotions but sometimes alone. When they occur alone we call them 'moods'. Music may express sadness or dejection but not sorrow or grief, which are states of feeling related to apprehended situations, unless there is an indication of referential context as in opera or song. Anger, sexual jealousy, irritation, despair cannot be expressed in 'pure' music or non-representational art. Noone has ever detected, or could ever detect, an emotion of despair in a piece of pure, non-relational music or non-representational visual art, for despair involves a feeling of very intense dejection specifically directed towards a situation apprehended together with a belief that no action is possible to better the situation. Unless there is non-musical reference accompanying the music, only the feeling tone or mood can be expressed. Busoni understood this when he wrote in *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music* (1911): 'To music, indeed, it is given to set in vibration our human moods: Dread (*Leporello*), oppression of the soul, invigoration, lassitude (Beethoven's last Quartets), decision (*Wotan*), hesitation, despondency, encouragement, harshness, tenderness, excitement, tranquillisation, the feeling of surprise or expectancy, and still others; likewise the inner echo of external occurrences which is bound up in these moods of the soul. But not the moving cause itself of these spiritual affections; — not the joy over an avoided danger, not the danger itself, or the kind of danger which caused the dread; an emotional state, yes, but not the psychic species of this emotion, such as envy, or jealousy; and it is equally futile to attempt the expression, through music, of moral characteristics (vanity, cleverness), or abstract ideas like truth or justice. When this is borne in mind part of the difficulty is reduced. We understand how the music of opera and song, religious music and incidental music in general can be appropriate to the occasion, or not. We have the analogy of expressive sounds in nature which carry an aura of mood and affective tone. By the powers of synaesthesia, just as the painter Arthur Dove could represent the mournful sound of the foghorn by his painting *Fog Horns* and the Futurists Russolo and Boccioni expressed states of mind by their evocative abstractions, so music by its evocation of mood can express the affective aura of things and situations though not the things or situations themselves.

It is still necessary to circumscribe more precisely the logic of 'express' in this context. On the one hand the ancient Chinese and Indian aesthetic traditions have understood better than Western aesthetics of this century that self-revelation for its own sake is not an aesthetic aim. A composer may or may not treat his

music as a sort of emotional autobiography in which to expose the moods and emotions he feels : we are interested in such self-display only to the extent that what is revealed in the music has been endowed with universal, more than passing individual value. The logical difference between self-expression and self-revelation has been interestingly worked out by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Works and Worlds of Art* (1980), pp. 21-29. It must be added that self-expression so distinguished must nevertheless be subject to further conditions before there can emerge an object appropriate for aesthetic contemplation. On the other hand it is generally agreed in contemporary aesthetics, following Kant (e.g. *Critique of Judgement*, Bk 1, sect. 13), that the arousal of specific emotions is not a proper function in any of the arts. Indeed many would maintain that a work of art which stimulates emotion directly in a hearer is not functioning aesthetically, as art. The aesthetic function of art, including of course music, is not emotional arousal but the *presentation* of feeling and mood. A poem about a spider need not — should not— evoke in the reader the emotions of horror and disgust experienced by a woman who seeing a spider leaps upon the nearest chair. When reading Andrejev's *The Seven That Were Hanged* we do not set ourselves to planning ways of escape. The work of art presents emotional moods in such a way that in contact with the music the hearer non-verbally apprehends them, savours the way they feel and contemplates them as items in the human affective repertory. The extent to which in order to savour and apprehend the feeling tone of emotions in a work of art it is necessary to experience them vestigially in oneself seems to vary from person to person : in general, people experienced in aesthetic contact with the arts find this less necessary. But the central principle is clear : appreciation of music is not emotional response in the way in which the woman responds to the sight of a spider or the heroic lad in the audience leaps on to the stage to rescue the heroine from a fate worse than death. It is emotionally coloured perception demanding the utmost in perceptual concentration and the expansion of awareness to heights beyond the ordinary so that an extremely complex but unified object may be brought to consciousness as a unity in 'synoptic' perception and not put together analytically from discretely heard constituent elements.

While the foregoing exposition falls within the general ambit of contemporary Western aesthetics, it must nevertheless be recognised that even a cursory survey reveals that music is a pretty well universal phenomenon among the peoples of mankind and that throughout the world it has in fact been practised primarily for the evocation of emotion and mood. In primitive times the obsessive and hypnotic effects of musical sound in conjunction with incantatory

chanting have been exploited by shamans and medicine-men from the peoples of northern Europe to Tibet, by tribal priests everywhere, to induce abnormal states of consciousness which were believed to involve direct contact with magical or supernatural powers. One thinks also of the Vedic chanting of ancient India. The deep sonority of the *rag-dungs* (copper tubes up to 15 feet long) descended from the ancient Bon religion of Tibet still exerts a powerful emotional response, as does the resonance of the 6 feet Chilean *trutruca* and other long wooden tube-like instrument played by the natives of South America. The profound emotional powers ascribed to music are reflected in the miraculous legends which attach to famous musicians of antiquity whose names have survived. The Greek poet-musician Orpheus, it was told, could move trees and rocks, hold wild beasts in check, by his music. Similar tales were told of Tan-Sen, the court musician of the emperor Akbar : that he could light a candle or cause the sun to rise an hour early by his music. Throughout history music has everywhere been used in conjunction with ritual and ceremonial to evoke religious or patriotic warlike emotions and for milder emotional titillation in times of leisure.

The philosophers of ancient Greece were deeply convinced of the direct effects of music on human character and emotional disposition. Contrary to current Western belief, the emotional character and influence of the music was attributed not to the individual composition but to the mode in which it was played. This linking of emotional power of music with mode has been taken for granted in most developed musical traditions. It was strong in Europe up to the time of the Baroque. In the sophisticated tradition of Iran it is the mode or *dast-gah* which determines the emotional atmosphere and creates the right state of mind in the listener, giving new reality to the magic of the word, inducing revelation into the mystery of meaning behind the words of the great poetic epics. The Indian musical tradition stands, of course, at the summit of this line of evolution. Emotional atmosphere is embodied in the *rāga* and the *rasa* works directly upon the mind of the hearer. In his book *The Rāgas of Northern Indian Music* (1968) Alain Danielou writes : 'Indian music, like Arabian and Persian, always centres around one particular emotion which it develops, explains and cultivates, upon which it insists, and which it exalts until an impression is created on the listener which is almost impossible to resist. The musician can then, if his skill be sufficient, lead his audience through the magic of sound to a depth and intensity of feeling undreamt of in other systems.'

From the time of Jazz with its debts to African folk songs and African rhythms, much popular music in North America and Europe has made the direct

arousal of emotion a deliberate aim, culminating in hysterical swooning and emotional ejaculation among audiences of fans. It became the music of the young. But the more serious exponents of Pop music have made careful studies of the music of India and the Far East. What they were in search of was a music which could induce the sort of expansion of consciousness and extension of awareness which the younger generation sought in too superficial addiction to Yoga disciplines, Zen contemplation or psychedelic drugs. Since Indian classical music became more generally familiar in America and Europe during the 1950s through such figures as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and the brothers Imrat and Vilayat Khan it began to be believed that this was the goal of which they had been in search. It was even believed by the ignorant that this music could 'send one on a trip' without drugs. This is, of course, a distortion of fact. But the aim is far from sheer emotionalism. It is a form of 'magic consciousness' which the religious mystic of all ages seeks through the contemplation of God and describes as ineffable union with the divine. It has been described as a 'transparent' mode of perception free from the bounds of space and time, but one which is not always or necessarily religious in origin. The hallucinogenic drugs induce an analogous state without providing the perceptual material with which it can be satisfied. The aim of the arts, I have elsewhere maintained, is, centrally, to create such an intensification of perceptual awareness, opening the doors of consciousness, while offering perceptual material of complex organic unities adequate and more to maintain such a state active and alert.

This conception, which may be extended to the other arts besides music, does justice to the emotional power of music while recognising the 'aesthetic distance' which Western philosophy rightly, if sometimes exaggeratedly, maintains is an essential condition of the aesthetic attitude of attention.

Ex-editor, *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Present Address :

Kreuzstr, 12

8640 Rapper Swil SG, Switzerland