

Experiential Aesthetics: Humility, Ineffability, and Music

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Abstract: In *Music and the Ineffable* (1961), Vladimir Jankélévitch argued that music can elicit endless talk, but such talk gives nothing back to the music. The experience of music remains *sui generis* and ineffable; while analysis and interpretation can be beneficial, they do not change this stubborn fact. Thus, writings about music should be anchored in humility. Just as the scientist and theologian stand in awe before their subjects, hoping to learn something but accepting that mysteries lie beyond their reach, so too should music scholars recognize the limits of their craft. This paper suggests that experiential aesthetics, which centers real-time experience over after-the-fact analysis, provides a humbling corrective to intellectual approaches to aesthetics, which give priority to rational artistic assessments.

Keywords: Experientialism, theology, mysticism, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Rudolf Otto, Hasidism

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” This aphorism, attributed variously to Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Frank Zappa, Elvis Costello, and George Carlin (Hartse 2022, 4), assumes a certain futility or incoherence in trying to describe one medium with another. An early articulation of this assumption appeared in the *New Republic* in 1918: “writing about music is as illogical as singing about economics” (cited in Hartse 2022, 4). In truth, one can write *about* music (or dance *about* architecture), sometimes to great effect, adding an interpretation, describing qualities, offering technical insights, or drawing out some latent meaning. Indeed, it seems the more intense the experience, the more one seeks to understand it, turning to analogy or metaphor or pulling from an analytical toolbox. Yet, such musings should not be mistaken for the *thing itself*. As art historian Bernard Berenson (1954) opined, during the “aesthetic moment” a spectator or auditor can feel as though they “had been initiated into illuminating, exalting, formative mysteries” and achieved a “moment of mystic vision” (93). Interpreting this experience or attempting to retrieve some of the “magic” can be helpful and rewarding; but, as the aphorism suggests, music can only truly be experienced as music.

A central paradox of aesthetics is the desire to join sensation, rooted in experience, and judgment, grounded in reason and logic. Aesthetics, after all, derives from the ancient Greek term *aisthesis*, meaning perception or awareness through the senses, as opposed to intellectual concepts or rational knowledge (*noesis*) (Poteat 1993, 24). No matter how detailed, compelling, or well-researched the aesthetic judgment might be, it does not always or necessarily line up with an individual’s response—otherwise there could be “second-hand opinions about beauty” or “experts on beauty who had never experienced the things they described” (Scruton 2011, 7). Again, this does not negate analytical efforts, whether prescriptive or descriptive. A bibliography of nearly 200 English-language books on aesthetics is proof of the robustness of, and interest in, such studies (Friedmann 2018, 155–164). Rather, the point is that while the study of aesthetics relies on experience, experience does not require aesthetic examination. Real-time engagement (“heart”) occurs independent of interpretation (“mind”) (Van Ess 2007, 3).

This “perhaps naïve and obvious fact” (Trela 1974, 1) is at the root of *experiential aesthetics*, a term defined here as the “resort to concrete experience, whether perceptual, intuitive, activist, axiological, or mystical, as the source of truth” (Runes 1942, 103). With reference to science, theology, and musicology, this paper argues that an experientialist approach can add a healthy dose of humility to evaluating musical aesthetics.

Humility

At the beginning of this century, the John Templeton Foundation, a philanthropy that promotes efforts to “affirm life’s spiritual dimensions,” investigate “big questions,” and explore “the intersection of science and religion,” brought together ten scientists to discuss *humility theology*—a worldview that, in the words of founder Sir John Marks Templeton (2000), recognizes that scientists “will never reach an end of learning, and some are even talking about other sources of truth—philosophy and especially theology—as crucial components in the search for reality” and that “Every person’s concept of God is too small” (vii). Both science and theology, the argument goes, exist in an atmosphere of awe and wonder, and thus share a baseline of humility. More an ideal than always a reality (there are plenty of unwavering and absolutist scientists and theologians), this paradigm is, at the very least, a helpful reminder of the limits of human knowledge.

Various religious traditions hold tensions between knowing and unknowing, certainty and doubt. An example from the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic sayings, arguments, and counter-arguments on theology and law, describes an encounter between third-century Rabbi Hanina bar Hama and a man who “extended his prayer and said: God, the great, mighty, awesome, powerful, mighty, awe-inspiring, strong, fearless, steadfast and honored.” After the man finished his prayer, Rabbi Hanina scolded him: “All of the praises we could possibly lavish upon the Lord are nothing but a few silver dinars relative to many thousands of gold dinars. Reciting a litany of praise does not enhance God’s honor” (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 33b). This sort of reasoning has led mystics and theologians to favor “silence in the face of mystery” (Saliers 2007, 72), opt for *negative theology*—statements about what God *is not*, rather than what God *is* (Brown and Simmons 2019)—or embrace an *evolving theology*, which views all theological assertions as “tiny beginnings of humankind’s comprehension” (Templeton 2000, viii).

The latter position resonates in the science fields, where humility is (ideally) a companion of curiosity. *Intellectual humility*, or transparency about the limitations of one’s work and an openness to being corrected, is essential to scientific discovery—so much so that guidelines have been drafted to aid scientists and science publications bypass the human impulse to be absolutely certain, and to foreground flaws in submitted papers to alert reviewers and readers (Hoekstra and Vazire 2021). Charles Darwin modeled intellectual humility over a century-and-a-half ago in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Not only was Darwin reluctant to publish the groundbreaking opus (his *HMS Beagle* voyage ended over twenty years earlier), but he also included several passages admitting imperfections, highlighting gaps in his evidence, and respectfully dialoguing with established theories, which his work would ultimately supersede (Oakes 2007).

As Darwin demonstrated, humility and discovery can and should be intertwined. Instead of causing paralyzing feelings of smallness, the vastness of nature and the cosmos are invitations to learn and wonder more. Celebrated science educator and humanist Carl Sagan (2006) put it this way: “I believe it is true that humility is the only just response in a confrontation with the universe, but not a humility that prevents us from seeking the nature of the universe we are admiring” (31). If God exists, Sagan speculated, “He or She or It or whatever the appropriate pronoun is” would surely smile on those who “admire the real universe in all its intricacies” and shun “the sodden blockhead who worships while understanding nothing” (31). Science, then, is a type of “informed worship,” translating reverence and admiration into a search for knowledge, however limited. In this sense, humility is more than the virtue upon which all others depend, as many ethicists contend (Wright 2019). It is also the foundation of all human understanding: religious, scientific, and everything else.

Ineffability

Philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch applied this view to music in his treatise, *Music and the Ineffable* (2003; originally published as *La Musique et l'Ineffable* in 1961). Arguing that “Music was not invented to be talked about” (79), Jankélévitch saw music literature as a one-way pursuit: music elicits words, but words add nothing to music. Yet, instead of invalidating such discourse as a fruitless waste of time or energy, music’s indescribability “unleashes a state of verve” that stirs endless and “infinitely equivocal” talk (72). Jankélévitch stressed that although interpretation and analysis are always subjective and variable, and should never be confused with the music itself—just as a printed score or material object (record, CD, file, etc.) are not themselves music—these tools can help deepen our understanding of a phenomenon that transcends the bounds of even the most sophisticated language. Commenting on Jankélévitch’s own richly descriptive musicological analysis, Steven Rings (2012) observes that the “combination of pointing and highly evocative figural language” does not simply draw out features of the music, but also “constitutes a linguistic performance” that “directs the reader’s ears toward the music in question and urges that it be experienced in certain ways” (220). Jankélévitch was well aware of this manipulative property of language, including his own use of it, thus furthering the point that *experiencing* music and *interpreting* music, either before or after listening, are two different things.

Instructively, Jankélévitch connected music, the ineffable subject of musicology, and God, the ineffable subject of theology: “no one truly speaks of God, above all, not theologians. . . . Alas, music in itself is an unknowable something, as unable to be grasped as the mystery of artistic creation—a mystery that can only ever be grasped ‘before and after’” (102). Modernist composer and conductor Pierre Boulez remarked similarly that music can become clear through study, but in its performance remains a mystery (Cobussen 2008, 128). Philosopher and literary critic George Steiner (1989) chimed in: “No musicology, no music criticism can tell us as much as the action of meaning which is performance” (8). Affirming that music only exists when it is performed, composer Paul Hindemith (1953) wrote: “An individual piece of music, being many times reborn and going through ever renewed circles of resonant life, through repeated performance, dies as many deaths at the end of each of its phoenixlike resurrections” (1). Philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1964) questioned if anything felt during an orchestral performance continues after the music stops: “Its somatic effects are transient, and its moral hangovers or uplifts seem to be negligible” (181). And yet, the experience of music stimulates much writing and discussion, which can get us close to understanding, but should be tempered by the fact that full apprehension is outside our reach. Jankélévitch explained it thus: “[S]imple listening, or performing per se, is far more effective than the most striking intellectual insights. Listening to music creates a state of grace in the blink of an eye, where long pages of poetic metaphors would not suffice. As irrationalist as this conclusion may seem, we need to accede to it” (119).

To be sure, such musings have Romantic undertones—favoring emotion over reason and subjectivity over objectivity (Lockhead 2012, 234)—and the type of music alluded to, while left unidentified, is implicitly Western concert music. Jankélévitch wrote books on Fauré (1938), Ravel (1939), and Debussy (1949), and discussed these composers in *Music and the Ineffable*. Clearly, he did not have a pop or children’s tune in mind when he wrote that “Listening gives us a glimpse of ineffable Kitezeh [mythical city of Russian legend]” (2003, 119). Still, might there be some inscrutable sublimity in even the simplest music or most modest performance? Can the experience of music in all its forms point to something inexplicable, even if it does not inspire “endless talk”? Is there an empirical way to label which music deserves this lofty status and which music does not? Or does humility compel us to avoid such categorizing? Can we apply Jankélévitch’s ideas to *all* music? Is music, in the generic, a “signal of transcendence” (Conti and Stetson 2008)?

Just as Jankélévitch used a theological analogy to stress that music is outside our conceptual grasp, so did Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto include musical analogies in his influential tome, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923; originally published as *Das Heilige* in 1917). Otto divided religious phenomena into

two categories. The first is the *numinous* or “wholly other”: an encounter with a “truly ‘mysterious’ object” that is “beyond our comprehension,” “whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own,” and “whose special character we can feel, without being able to give it clear conceptual expression” (28, 30). The second is *rationalization*, or attempts to put the numinous into words and replicate it in ritual. Rationalization yields mythologies, texts, practices, and dogmas, but these should not be confused with the “*sui generis* and irreducible” encounter on which they are based; “like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while [the holy] admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined” (7).

As with an all-consuming, in-the-moment encounter with music or the cosmos, spiritual *knowing*—a non-rational, intuitive, unarticulatable state—and *understanding*—a rational, approximate, intellectualized interpretation—are not the same, and can be “mutually exclusive and contrasted” (Otto 1923, 135). Put differently, although Otto cautioned against equating numinous experiences with mere emotions—especially since emotion terms are themselves approximations—the holy is in some sense perceived through “embodied thoughts” (Rosaldo 1984, 143) or the “mindful body” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), which process stimuli in a way that cannot be adequately put into words. The body has its own non-rational means of perception that can, and often does, escape cognitive appraisal (Thagard 2010, 98).

Significantly, Otto compared this ever-present theological impediment to what music scholars face when waxing on their subject: “[T]he object of religious awe or reverence . . . cannot be fully determined conceptually: it is non-rational, as is the beauty of a musical composition, which no less eludes complete conceptual analysis” (59). In this way, music is also “wholly other,” as Christopher I. Lehrich (2014) explains in an analysis of Otto: “Music is not mimetic, representational, expressive, or communicative in any plausible sense of these terms” (28). Again, Otto had a certain type of elevated Western music in mind; but the notion of music being experienced first and rationalized later—and music not being equivalent to labels ascribed to it—is arguably universal.

Using Bach’s celebrated Mass in B Minor as an illustrative case in point, Otto maintained that while some music can “express the *mysterium* by way of imitation,” it has no “positive way to express ‘the holy’” (70). Thus, while both music and the holy are profoundly experiential and ultimately mysterious—and, as such, can be useful homologies for one another—they are *not* each other, nor are they anything else. Otto captured this in a quote he attributed to eighteenth-century hymnist Gerhard Tersteegen: “A God comprehended is no God” (25). Is it likewise true that music comprehended (i.e., satisfactorily described in words) is not music? The very possibility should keep us humble before the sound.

Experientialism

The foregoing discussion has relevance for musical aesthetics: the philosophical reflection on the nature, meaning, purpose, and quality of music, its performance, and its reception. If music is meant to be experienced and is only secondarily subjected to aesthetic assessment, then *experiential aesthetics*, which values real-time perceptual and intuitive musical responses as a source of truth, should be regarded as the aesthetics from which all others derive. In contrast to intellectual approaches to aesthetics, which favor conscious associations and meticulous artistic appraisals, experiential aesthetics looks primarily at subconscious, organic, intuitive appreciations (Friedmann 2018, 5). Of course, the nature of such responses depends on cultural exposure and conditioning, internalized norms and expectations, and personal tastes and associations regarding musical styles and qualities; but the experience of the music is, in the moment of listening, non-rational and separate from analytical understanding. Following Jankélévitch and Otto, an experientialist position contends that reactions to musical stimuli are more immediate and more important than the terms used to describe them.

At its core, experiential aesthetics deals with the relationship between music and perception. Rather than judging whether or not a musical piece is “beautiful” (or some other quality), or why one

piece is better or more aesthetically successful than another, attention shifts to the interplay between music and the spontaneous realm of sensations—a focus that reconnects to the root term *aisthesis* (“sensation” or “perception”) (Potreat 1993, 24). To be sure, all avenues of aesthetics must begin with experience: a person engages with an artwork (or natural phenomenon or something else), which produces sensations that are typically felt as distinct from those achieved by other means. An especially intense or transformative experience might be described as “awe” or “wonder” (Palmer 2008, 394–395). An objectivist will examine aspects of the object that triggered the response, while a subjectivist will assess the response itself. Some combination of the two is probably necessary for making informed aesthetic claims; however, they are both removed from the experience itself and, as such, incomplete. Experiential aesthetics, as applied in this paper, reminds us that all talk about music issues from basic experiences that occur before and stand apart from linguistic rationalization, however enlightened.

Composer Aaron Copland (1953) touched on this in his essay on the “gifted listener,” or one who combines the acumen of a trained musician with the instincts of a layperson:

I like this idea that we respond to music from a primal and almost brutish level—dumbly, as it were, for on that level we are firmly grounded. On that level, whatever the music may be, we experience basic reactions such as tension and release, density and transparency, a smooth or angry surface, the music’s swelling and subsidings, its pushing forward and bringing back, its length, its speed, its thunders and whisperings—and a thousand other psychologically based reflections of our physical life of movement and gesture, and our inner, subconscious mental life. That is fundamentally the way we all hear music—gifted and ungifted alike—and all the analytical, historical, textual material on or about the music heard, interesting though it may be, cannot—and I venture to say should not—alter that fundamental relationship (13–14).

Copland’s emphasis on the primacy of experience was specifically aimed at the professional musician, who devotes countless hours to studying, practicing, and analyzing music and, because of this absorption, tends to lose sight of the “primal and almost brutish” way we all hear music. This can also be read as a reflective self-examination. Copland’s own extraordinary ability to compose, conduct, and write about music of the highest artistic and technical complexity undoubtedly caused him to overlook, from time to time, music’s experiential essence. In a 1964 article published in *Billboard*, Copland admitted that the hard work, training, and creativity that goes into an orchestral piece is often rejected the moment it reaches the listener’s ears. “Composers tend to assume that everyone loves music,” he wrote. “Surprisingly enough, everyone doesn’t” (10).

This sort of spontaneous, usually unarticulated, aesthetic response affirms the experientialist position that, whatever a piece’s compositionally or culturally intended meaning or value, the listener’s instant, non-rational, gut-level response is not beholden to it. Philosopher of aesthetics Roger Scruton (2011) elaborated on this: “There is no way that you can argue me into a judgement that I have not made for myself, nor can I become an expert in beauty, simply by studying what others have said about beautiful objects, and without experiencing and judging for myself” (5). No matter how reasonable, articulate, or compelling the opinion of a critic, philosopher, colleague, or friend might be, judgment occurs in experience. Nonetheless, as with science and theology, the singular, ineffable moment does not preclude or exclude analysis or rich descriptions—either before or after listening—and can, in fact, encourage us to explore and seek understanding (*à la* Jankélévitch). Rather, the takeaway is this: such pursuits should be done with humility.

Case Study: *Hasidic Niggunim*

The dictum to be humble before the sound is not limited to listening. It is true for performers as well—those who are at the same time makers and auditors. The centrality of experience is a defining aspect of Hasidic Jewish songs, which unite music and theology—putting the analogies of Jankélévitch and Otto into practice—and shift our attention from concert works to folk melodies. Hasidism

emerged in Eastern Europe around 1750 as a populist mystical movement opposed to the rigid academicism of rabbinic Judaism. Among its innovations was heightening the *mitzvah* (commandment) to be joyful in daily life, especially through song and dance. Musicologist Hanoach Avenary (1979) linked this prioritization, which inspired wordless ecstatic singing, to the conviction that language could not adequately achieve or communicate a spiritual state: “Words were regarded as a medium which was insufficient for grasping the secrets of cabbalistic theosophy, and for the exalted feelings of union with the endless and absolute.” (158).

Avenary offered several Hasidic sayings alluding to this belief, including “Silence is better than words, but singing is better than silence” and “There are castles in the upper spheres which open only to song” (158). Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1750), the founder of Hasidism, taught that melody enables greater spiritual expression than liturgical prayer, and that *niggunim*—melodies usually sung with nonsense vocables (e.g., “ai di di dai”) and sometimes with repeated Yiddish or Hebrew “mantras” (Vinaver 1985, 191–242)—circumvent the inherent poverty of language (Barzilai 2009, 57). Such singing, according to Avenary, is meant to “express the unexpressible, to give voice to that which is too intimate to be uttered in word” (159).

These sayings and observations capture the experiential nature of *niggunim*. Devotion takes precedence over aesthetic values; melodic features and vocal quality are of little importance. In fact, the spontaneous style of singing means that no two performances of a tune are the same, even when sung by the same person (Schleifer 1985, 20). The sole measure of “aesthetic success” (Scruton 2011, 13) is the ecstasy of the moment, called *deveikut* (“clinging to God”). *Niggunim* are thus not sung to affect others, nor do they aspire for external beauty: “Only by means of participation can their ravishing, moving, exalting power be realized” (Avenary 1979, 180). This does not mean that tools of analysis cannot or should not be applied. However, as vehicles for numinous encounters, *niggunim* aim toward the “wholly other,” not the scrutiny of the critic or musicologist.

Experientialism is also reflected in the makeup of the tunes themselves. Hasidism maintains that God is in all things and, as such, is the source of all melodies. This theological claim is actionized in *tikkun* (“repairing”), whereby secular or non-Jewish melodies are purified and restored to a spiritual state through singing them as *niggunim*, either without words or with new religious lyrics (a process known as contrafaction). A number of *niggunim* are ascribed to rabbis or musicians, but many others were borrowed from pre-existing tunes: Polish military marches, Central European waltzes, Cosack dances, Eastern European folk tunes, etc. “Redeeming the soul” of these tunes was itself considered a *mitzvah*, and was engaged in with utmost religious conviction (Jacobson 2010, 227).

The Habad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism, founded by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), developed a four-step process of *tikkun*. First, the person must identify the “holy spark” dormant in a melody. Second, the person must spend time with the song, creating a sense of ownership. Third, the original lyrics must be abandoned. Fourth, the repurposed song must be sung with proper religious intention (Koskoff 2001, 77–78). Central to this process is a belief that once a song is redeemed, it is no longer connected to its former state. There are numerous stories illustrating this thorough transformation. In one, Rabbi Shneur Zalman comes upon an organ grinder singing a beautiful song. The rabbi tosses some coins at the street musician and asks him to repeat the song over and over. Eventually, the rabbi sings the song himself, imbuing it with religious fervor and erasing its original lyrics. Witnessing this, the organ grinder loses his ability to sing the original song (Koskoff 2001, 75). Another legend involves Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik Taub of Kaliv (1744–1821), who is walking through a Ukrainian forest. He hears a shepherd singing a song of longing for his lost love. The rabbi meditates on the melody and internalizes it, replacing its secular love lyrics with words of longing for the mystical divine presence. When the rabbi asks the shepherd to sing the song again, he cannot (Rubin 1963, 247).

As fantastical as these and similar stories might be—and as culturally and theologically specific as Hasidic mystical-musical conceptions are—they nonetheless center the experiential nature of music

in universally applicable ways. Through the inclusive, “anything goes” use of melodies, and the insistence that aesthetic judgments are essentially superfluous, Hasidic *niggunim* illustrate a general principle: music exists in the experience of it. Music remains ineffable, and so is used to commune with an ineffable God; and yet, neither the music nor the deity is made more comprehensible in the process.

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