

The Beauty-Utility Dialectic as Conceived in Terms of the Abject and the Sublime

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Abstract: This article explores the perceived opposition of beauty and utility in music as traditionally regarded in Western thought. It first provides evidence of this binarism and discusses its nuanced interpretations. It then argues that the relationship between utility, the abject, and the sublime, along with the opposition between beauty and the sublime, supplies a catalyst for this perceived dichotomy. So doing, the article strives to challenge the perception of the beauty-utility dialectic and invite novel comprehensions.

Keywords: beauty, utility, abject, sublime, dialectic, psychoanalysis

Although the concepts of beauty and utility have long been debated in Western thought, there has nevertheless been a surprising consensus regarding the relationship between the pair in the arts, especially music. Despite possible evidence to the contrary, the two qualities have often been viewed in opposition by scholars and artists alike. Yet, in spite of this consistency, there has been little discussion as to why this dichotomy exists.

In a salutatory attempt to address this question, this article commences with an overview of traditional understandings of beauty and utility and their perceived interrelations as understood by diverse scholars and artists. Then, to underscore the beauty-utility polarity itself, the article discusses how scholarship has historically assigned value to music perceived as having no utilitarian purpose. Finally, prompted by the writings of Théophile Gautier, the article considers the relationship between utility and the abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva, and by consequence, the connection between utility and the sublime, as conceptualized by Immanuel Kant. In conclusion, the article argues that the association between utility, the abject, and the sublime, coupled with the opposition between beauty and the sublime as conceived by thinkers such as Kant, supplies a motivation for the perceived dichotomy of utility and beauty in music. By highlighting this explanation of the beauty-utility dialectic, this article seeks to pave the way for ultimately challenging the polarity itself, thus potentially undermining traditional comprehensions of utility and beauty in music and opening the door for new understanding.

The Perceived Polarity and the Preference for the Beautiful

According to British music sociologist Tia DeNora, practical *uses* of music are functions of music beyond expressive, aesthetic purposes.¹ This definition is indeed vague and leaves much up to interpretation, as such uses could hypothetically include the cultural, ideological, religious, political, commercial, pedagogical, motivational, regulatory, and evaluative understandings of *use* amongst countless other options. Nevertheless, DeNora's definition is beneficial as a starting point for us, given that its ambiguity allows us the flexibility to consider multiple possibilities. Likewise, whilst beauty in music and the other arts has often been defined as a *lack* of pragmatic use, and frequently regarded in terms of form as well, as we shall see, it may, in fact, be similarly understood in a myriad

of nuanced manners. On account of these varying definitions, the differentiation between the two concepts is itself rather imprecise. Yet, in spite of the fact that the definitions of these two terms and exactly *where* to draw the line between them has often been in dispute, what has often remained consistent is the perceived opposition between the pair when discussed in tandem.

In Antiquity, for example, we see the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) as one who thus situated musical beauty and utility in opposition. In this regard, he defined the concept of the beautiful in music according to the pleasure of the physical sensations aroused by such. Hence, for Aristotle, beauty was a result of music's structure. However, this beauty could only be appreciated and enjoyed absent utility. As with the passive enjoyment of other pleasures of the bodily organs, such as the amusement provided by views and scents, the enjoyment of sounds was amongst the three manners of life elected by those who are *not* subject to *necessity*, and hence, *utility*.² Our senses, he explains, "are loved for their own sake, quite apart from their *use*."³ (Emphasis added.) One can only devote oneself to the *kalon*, that is to say, to that which is beautiful, when one is freed from that which is necessary and useful. Therefore, the beautiful and the useful, in their full and complete forms, cannot coexist and were clearly in opposition for Aristotle. Moreover, it is evident that, in his interpretation, beauty was the superior of the two.

We see a similar conception of this dialectic and a resulting championing of the formal qualities of the musically beautiful over that of the useful by some ancient Greek music theorists, such as Pythagoras (570–495 BCE). However, their understanding concerning the beautiful differs somewhat from that of Aristotle. With these theorists, the formal qualities of music qualify as beautiful in their own right, and hence they remain indifferent to our reaction to them or our appreciation of them. Therefore, beautiful music is considered beautiful, regardless of how it makes us feel, *if* it makes us feel at all. This phenomenon regarding the objectivity of the beautiful in music is most especially apparent in the concept of the music of the spheres. Here, music is revered for its elegant mathematical proportions, such as in the ratios between its chosen frequencies; the harmonious proportions are viewed as beautiful on account of their perfect alignment. Whilst the concept applies to music on a cosmic scale, it can be found as well in that which is sounded and heard by us mere mortals. In late Imperial Rome, this notion of music as beautiful on account of its harmonious mathematical underpinnings was upheld by the Roman senator, consul, historian, music theorist, philosopher, and Christian martyr, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c.480–520).⁴

In the modern era, we witness the opposition of beauty and utility in a particularly nuanced manner with eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). For him, the beautiful concerns feelings of pleasure or pain, and, as such, it is one of three different types of satisfaction, the other two being the pleasant and the good.⁵ Of these, the beautiful elicits disinterested satisfaction in that it is not affected by individual subjectivity; rather, beauty is a feature of the object itself, regardless of the subject that contemplates that object.⁶ By contrast, the pleasant and the good are tied to interested satisfaction and individual subjectivity; thus, they are related to the subject's experience of the object instead of the object in and of itself.⁷ Moreover, for Kant, beauty is specifically linked to the *form* of an object, in terms of its purposiveness in itself and its lack of *external* purpose.⁸ The pleasant, by comparison, relates to Aristotle's conception of the beautiful, in that, it, too, is a result of the physical sensations induced by an object, such as the visual or the aural, and the consequent satisfaction of the subject's desires by said object.⁹ Similarly, the good is related to purpose, including, but not limited to, outside pragmatic use.¹⁰ Thus, exterior functional utility, which *could* be considered good, and hence which requires interest, is again opposed to beauty, which requires *disinterest*.

Drawing upon the writings of Kant, we have the eighteenth-century German poet, playwright, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805). Schiller *vehemently* opposed beauty and utility, and of the two qualities, he, like Aristotle, favored beauty. Demonstrating his espousal of this polarity and his preference for beauty, Schiller praised beauty as necessary for political freedom and lamented its

supposed demise at the expansion of science, and hence reason, in the Age of Enlightenment. Thus, he viewed art as a victim of science and its corresponding utility. As evidence, he sadly and indignantly proclaimed that, “[u]tility is the great idol of the age, to which all powers are in thrall and all talent must pay homage[.]” a sentiment that many might claim as true in our own era.¹¹ (Emphasis added.)

Perhaps the most notorious and polemical example of the perceived beauty–utility dialectic is found in an often-quoted statement offered by nineteenth century French Romantic poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist, and critic, Théophile Gautier (1811–1872). Gautier asserts that, “[t]he only truly beautiful is that which serves nothing; everything that is useful is ugly, because it expresses some need, and those of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor and infirm nature. – The most useful place in a house is the toilet.”¹² Clearly, Gautier, like Aristotle, explicitly defines beauty as the complete lack of utility. However, unlike Aristotle, Gautier seems unconcerned with the *effects* of the beautiful on us. Rather, in this regard, his position appears to more closely align with the ancient Greek music theorists and Kant, who believed in the beauty of music regardless of its effect. Nevertheless, Gautier still places in opposition the two qualities, and, for him, the pair cannot possibly coexist in their full essence in a single item. Moreover, for Gautier, as with Aristotle and Schiller, the quality of the beautiful is self-evidently far superior to that of the useful. Nineteenth century French symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), who dedicated his celebrated anthology of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), to Gautier, purported to maintain a similar view, in which the beautiful is equated with the useless, notwithstanding its effects. Likewise, nineteenth century French writer Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) expressed a parallel sentiment writing that, “[t]hat which seems beautiful to me, that which I wish to make, is a book about nothing, a book without outside attachment[.]”¹³ Thus, Flaubert, too, equates beauty with a lack of external function.

We observe a slightly different interpretation of this theme with nineteenth century Austrian music critic, aesthetician, and historian Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904). Hanslick again positioned beauty and utility in opposition to each other, and he favored the quality of beauty over that of utility, *but* he was against the inspiration of emotions (even those considered beautiful) by music as a determinant of music’s worth. The supposed ability of music to inspire feelings of joy, pain, sorrow, anger, and so forth was of no value to him. Such an interpretation was thus somewhat in opposition to, for example, DeNora’s later understanding of use in music, given that she defines pragmatic use as existing *outside* of expression, whilst Hanslick seems to consider expression itself to be a type of pragmatic use (although, admittedly, a rather dubious one at that, in his view).

Moreover, although, *like* Gautier and others, Hanslick evidently valued the beautiful over the useful in the dialectic, *unlike* Gautier, Baudelaire, and Flaubert, beauty was, for Hanslick, not *only* defined negatively, which is to say, by its *lack* of pragmatic use. The concept was also, for him, defined positively, qualitatively, by precise aspects of its formal structure. As evidence, he states that, “the beauty of a piece of music is specifically musical, i.e., is inherent in the tonal relationships without reference to an extraneous, extramusical context.”¹⁴ Thus, for Hanslick, it is not enough for music to be pragmatically useless in order for it to be beautiful; it must also have some positive formal traits as well. This mentality, in which music is valued according to its formal properties, is related to that of Aristotle, in its focus on structure. Yet, it also *differs* from that of Aristotle, in its lack of concern for the effect of the beautiful on us, instead considering the beautiful as indifferent to our impressions and reactions, an understanding more in alignment in *this* regard with the ancient Greek music theorists, Kant, and Gautier.

Hanslick’s comprehension resonated with those of other thinkers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well. Eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), for instance, likewise privileged musical form in determining the value of a piece of music. However, he also worked to move beyond mere formalism in such a determination, thus defining beauty as, “the sensual appearance of the idea.”¹⁵ Nineteenth and twentieth century Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) and twentieth century Ger-

man philosopher, musicologist, sociologist, and psychologist Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) likewise looked to musical form to ascertain aesthetic value. Yet, Adorno declared a focus on the physical experience of music, such as that advocated by Aristotle, to be naïve, perhaps demonstrating a bias favoring the mind over the body in this other duality. Moreover, unlike many thinkers *prior* to this point, he considered the role of culture in his determination of aesthetic value, advocating for an aesthetics that was not limited to simple objectivity on one hand, nor completely determined by the contextual particularity of an object's situation of creation on the other. Finally, Adorno believed that the beautiful possessed an otherworldly power and a redemptive capacity.

The Contrary and the Privileging of Use

One could go on discussing diverse interpretations of the beautiful and the useful in music and elsewhere seemingly indefinitely. Indeed, this cursory enumeration is not meant to be exhaustive. Such a task would be impossible, certainly within this limited amount of space. Nor is it expected to be absolute, likewise a futile undertaking.

At the same time, this account is not intended to demonstrate that the useful has *never* been valued. Assuredly, there are examples of the privileging of the useful, or, at minimum, the acknowledgement of its worth, across diverse eras. There were those Ancient Greek music theorists, for instance, that favored the utility of music for the purposes of indoctrination, discipline, socialization, and pacification. Aristotle himself attempted to justify the utility of music in these regards, as did Pythagoras and Plato (c.428/427–c.348/347 BCE).¹⁶ Similarly, French Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) heralded the useful in the arts, writing that, “[o]f all conditions, that which is most independent of luck and men is that of the artisan. The artisan only depends on his work; thus, he is free.”¹⁷ Hence, Rousseau took a view opposite that of Schiller, viewing utility, rather than beauty, as necessary for freedom. Then, in the early decades of the twentieth century, a widespread glorification of the utilitarian as an aesthetic was witnessed with the exaltation of the pragmatic in French composer Erik Satie’s (1866–1922) *musique d’ameublement* and French poet, playwright, novelist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau’s (1889–1963) championing of the utilitarian and the simple, amongst other things, in his treatise, *Le Coq et l’arlequin* (1918).¹⁸ Following this, musicologist Paul Nettl (1889–1972) explored *Gebrauchsmusik*, or utility music, such as for a dance, military ceremony, or political rally; scholar Heinrich Bessler (1900–1969) appropriated the term, believing that the aesthetic enjoyment of music could only be accessed by active involvement with the music, such as by dancing; and Béla Bartók (1881–1945), Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), Paul Hindemith (1895–1963), Carl Orff (1895–1982), and Aaron Copland (1900–1990) actively wrote music with such a utilitarian aesthetic as its goal. Finally, further into the 1930s, music was promoted for political and social utilitarian purposes, as with *fascist aesthetics* in Nazi Germany and the concept of *socialist realism* in the Soviet Union. However, whilst individuals such as these have championed the merits of utility in music, the same personages have often been relatively silent on beauty. This is certainly with regards to their *definition* of utility. Thus, we cannot be certain of their understanding of a possible dialectic between the two. As a result, their stance does not necessarily constitute a negation of the beauty–utility dialectic as traditionally understood, so, to that extent, its presence may in fact be moot.

Finally, I do not aim to say that beauty and utility have *always* been considered incompatible. Indeed, whilst beauty and utility were separate for Schiller, and beauty was the absence of utility for him, beauty could, nevertheless, fulfill a utilitarian purpose, in terms of social, political, and physical betterment, a concept that might have resonated with Aristotle as well. Similarly, despite Rousseau’s emphasis on utilitarian activity, he did still appreciate the potential non-functional appeal of a utilitarian creation. As proof, he stated that, “in the form of works determined by utility, elegance and taste are not excluded.”¹⁹ And likewise, in the early twenty-first century, American philosopher Denis Dutton (1944–2010) claimed that beauty, which he also linked to virtuosity, had a pragmatic use, specifically an evolutionary one. Thus, although utility did not (necessarily) serve beauty, beauty

could (and, according to him, did) serve utility, again similar to the mindsets of Aristotle and Schiller. Nevertheless, in spite of these more unusual viewpoints, the overarching beauty-utility dialectic and the preference for the beautiful remain. As a result, so, too, does the question *why*.

Use and the Academy

The question is of particular concern for us as scholars. This is especially on account of scholarship's ironic stance toward the two qualities. On the one hand, at least in terms of Western art music, going back to the beginnings of historical musicology and music theory in the nineteenth century, scholarship has traditionally shown a strong preference for studying music that has been considered pragmatically useless, which, as we have seen, has often been equated with the beautiful. One need only consider the work of Schenker, for example, and the ongoing centrality of his thinking in the discipline of music theory to find proof. Moreover, this fact is significant, because, as Joseph Kerman reminds us, "[a]esthetic judgment is concentrated tacitly on the initial choice of material to be analyzed[.]"²⁰

On the other hand, New Musicology in particular has, in recent decades, worked to demonstrate the cultural use of music, especially in terms of ideology, identity, and cultural context. Indeed, questions concerning music's supposed cultural work addressing matters of politics, social relations, race, class, religion, gender, gender identity, and sexuality, have been of primary importance for many in the field for dozens of years. Thus, it would appear that musicology is actually doing quite a bit of work with music deemed pragmatically useful. Yet, the field has dispensed considerably less effort in studying functionally useful music in terms of études, test pieces, audition repertoire, competition works, commercial music, ring tones, and so forth, especially within the realm of Western classical music. Thus, it would appear that New Musicology has, in fact, left vast swatches of the *most* pragmatically useful music virtually untouched. Unquestionably, some scholars, including DeNora and Timothy Taylor, have started to change their approach.²¹ Yet, such research still lags far behind comparable work in popular music studies and ethnomusicology. Furthermore, much of the change in approach is still in reaction to an established beauty-utility dialectic that favors the beautiful.

This is all ironic, given that, at the same time, New Musicology, along with other humanities disciplines functioning under the postmodern auspices of New Historicism, has paradoxically taken great pains to depict its *own* work as being pragmatically useful. This point has been driven home repeatedly and extensively by scholars as diverse as Abraham Flexner, Nuccio Ordine, and James Currie.²² Thus, it would appear as though the investigation of the beauty-utility dialectic is of particular import for music scholarship.

Of Commodities, Commodities, and the Abject

Gautier's stance, then, provides an appropriate starting point with which to consider this dialectical situation. Indeed, the extremity of his sentiment puts into greatest relief that which so many others, to a lesser, more subtle, and more nuanced extent, have argued. The writer, with his quote, mentioned earlier, self-evidently associates utility with need, particularly *human* need. For him, all need is repulsive because it indicates a lack, or an infirmity, in the subject. Thus, the toilet is the epitome of usefulness, because it is there to accommodate a human need, and a lack of the ability to transcend such animalistic and vital necessity. Consequently, music with strong utilitarian functions, such as method books, exercises, didactic études (as opposed to artistic études, including those by Franz Liszt (1811-1886) and Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)), test pieces (like the Paris Conservatoire *solos de concours*, or exam solos), orchestral audition excerpts, religious hymns, propagandistic music, fight songs, commercial jingles, and ring tones likewise point to human need and frailty. Method books, exercises, and didactic études, for example, exist to remedy a need, that is, the lack of technical or musical ability in a performer. Likewise, orchestral excerpts are performed as such, outside of the context of an orchestra, because the performer is in need of employment, and the orchestra has need of a performer. Hymns of praise imply the inferiority, and hence inadequacy, of the human suppli-

cant; propagandistic music signifies a social or political urgency that must be remedied; and commercial jingles endure because a company needs, or wants, to acquire a profit. Finally, ring tones alert their recipient of need by another. For Gautier, then, and perhaps for many of us, these musics could not possibly also be beautiful, or, at minimum, not *as* beautiful as they would have been, absent such pragmatic utility.

Gautier's thoughts on need, and by association, usefulness, very much echo twentieth and twenty-first century Bulgarian–French philosopher, literary critic, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's (b.1941) thoughts on the abject. For Kristeva, the abject is neither subject nor object. Rather, it is devoid of signification. Thus, in terms of value, it is worth nothing. Moreover, the abject, for Kristeva, is that which we reject and exclude, an act that we undertake in order to define *ourselves* as subjects. To this end, according to Kristeva, we create the abject as rejectamenta and separate ourselves from it, for the sake of inducing in our world some semblance of safety and security, whether real or imagined. Hence, with the abject, we wall ourselves off from everything else that there is, in the interest of ultimately allowing ourselves to live, either literally or figuratively.

For Kristeva, examples of the abject include a despised food item, filth, waste, dung, vomit, a pus-filled wound, and crime, especially premeditated crime.²³ All of these examples are items that disgust and horrify us, and thus, we distance ourselves from them and label them the abject. However, the preeminent example of the abject for Kristeva is the corpse, the most disgusting and horrifying of all. She explains that, “[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.”²⁴ The corpse is thus everything that we do not wish ourselves to be, and hence, we recoil from it in horror, walling it off from ourselves.

According to Kristeva, the abject terrifies us, as in these circumstances and others, because it indicates a lack, or an infirmity, in ourselves, and this lack we find threatening. We cannot handle the implied personal imperfection, and metaphorically, we run from it. Moreover, the abject illuminates a lack of a border confining and delineating us as unique, individual subjects. Indeed, Kristeva writes that, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, [and] order. What does not respect border, positions, [or] rules.”²⁵ Hence, the abject destroys our sense of security, however illusory. Thus, we fear it and thrust it out, just as we do the corpse, the once-living human turned non-living, because it reminds us that we, as living creatures, are not so distinct and safe from the non-living as we once had thought. Furthermore, the abject reminds us of our lack of autonomy, independence, agency, and security, all items that we typically assume that we possess. By emphasizing to us our own subjectivity to the same needs and fates as all other living creatures, when confronted with the abject, we lose our sense of boundaries and our sense of self. With the abject, we are no longer safely and securely separate from everything else. In sum, as Kristeva says, the abject “pulverizes the subject.”²⁶

Thus, whilst not nearly as extreme as Kristeva's corpse, for some of us, on some level, Gautier's toilet is a threat, as are even études and test pieces, in their subtle reminder to us of our lack, our infirmity, our imperfections, our paucity in terms of agency and autonomy, and our dearth of complete separateness and distinction from all else that there is. Hence, these items, as the pragmatically useful and the functionally utilitarian, are, on some level, the abject, or, at minimum, *symbolic* of the abject; indeed, it matters not which, as the effects are identical. Thus, we, like Aristotle, Kant, Schiller, Gautier, and others, thrust them, as the pragmatically useful, out from our definitions of the beloved beautiful, leading, in part, to the beauty–utility dialectic, and the preference for the beautiful.

The Useful Sublime

However, it does not end there. Kristeva views the abject as being on the edge of the sublime, and indeed, her definition of the abject correlates closely with eighteenth century Irish–British statesman, economist, and philosopher Edmund Burke's (1729–1797) take on the sublime, as well as Kant's own view of the sublime, facts that further underscore and explain this perceived dialectic.

Burke himself conceived of the beautiful and the sublime in opposition, and it is true that he is believed to be the first to separate the pair of traits into two distinct categories. Like Kant's views of the beautiful, the pleasant, and the good, Burke understands beauty and the sublime in terms of sensations of pleasure and pain. However, unlike Kant, he regards neither beauty nor the sublime in terms of form or lack thereof. Instead, he relates beauty to the passion of love, as well as to the five senses, the latter akin to Aristotle, and he connects the sublime to the passion of fear, especially terror. Use, which he considers in terms of form rather than function, is not involved in his conception of either the beautiful or the sublime. Nonetheless, his views are still applicable for us here. For, given that, according to Burke, whilst the *beautiful* is that which is well-built and aesthetically pleasing, the *sublime* is that which has the ability to impel and eradicate us. We see that Kristeva's abject can correspond to Burke's conception of the sublime, in that, for Kristeva, the abject destroys the subject, just as, for Burke, the sublime has the power to exterminate us, *as* subjects. In other words, the sublime, whether literally, by harming us physically, or figuratively, by making apparent our lack, annihilates us, as does the abject.

Kristeva's interpretation of the abject is still more in alignment with Kant's consideration of the sublime. For Kant, the sublime, like the beautiful, is indifferent to us as subjects.²⁷ Thus, it is objective rather than subjective. Moreover, for him, the sublime is akin to the beautiful in that both are represented as universally valid, devoid of interest, possessing of subjective purposiveness, and necessary.²⁸ However, whilst the beautiful for Kant is a function of form, the sublime, by contrast, is formless and without border.²⁹ Kristeva, as we have seen, regards the abject, too, as formless and without border. The sublime is also a totality and an absolute, and it is associated with chaos, wildness, irregularity, disorder, and desolation.³⁰ This is likewise the case with Kristeva's abject. It is all-encompassing, and it appears to break with all rules and order. Then, whilst, for Kant, the beautiful is purposive, sustains life, and engages the imagination, the sublime appears to violate purpose and likewise does violence to the imagination.³¹ The abject does this, too, as it horrifies us and upends our sense of self within the universe. At the same time, the mind is not only attracted to the sublime, as with the beautiful, but, akin to enchantment, it is also repelled by it.³² Thus, we are both drawn to the sublime, and we desire to turn away from it, as is so often the case with the abject. Finally, for Kant, beauty is defined in terms of *quality*, whereas the sublime is defined in terms of *quantity*.³³ The inherently better *quality* an object is, the more beautiful it becomes, whilst the greater the *quantity* of the object there is, the more sublime it becomes. Hence, with the beautiful, something is left out, some imperfection, resulting in a lack in the beautiful object itself. This is opposed to the sublime, in which the lack, or infirmity, or need, is in *us*, as beholding subjects, whether in our inability as musicians, in need of technical études, or our vulnerability as living creatures, subject to mortality. In all of these regards, the abject, too, follows the sublime, in that, with its totality, it makes us aware of our lack.

Ergo, because we can understand the useful as the abject, as well as the abject as the sublime, we can, by consequence, conceptualize the useful, too, as the sublime. Then, given this comprehension of the useful as sublime, along with both Burke's and Kant's opposition of the beautiful and the sublime, it becomes logical how and why so many amongst us have passionately opposed beauty and utility, in our various conceptions of the terms, as well as why we may have often upheld the beautiful as the superior of the two, as Kant himself did. Beauty, with its boundaries, and hence its certainties, is comforting and non-threatening. The useful, by contrast, as the abject and the sublime, with its unboundedness, its intimidating immensity, and its pointing to our own lack, can be uncertain and thus frightening. Hence, it can cause us to reject it.

Toward the Future

Given this possible explanation for the commonality of the beauty-utility dialectic, then, what do we do? We may initially choose to focus our studies on the form of utilitarian music, disregarding its pragmatic function, for instance. Some have already done precisely that.

Moreover, upon the foundation developed here, and with further consideration, we may be able to upend the dialectic altogether. One way to do this may be to consider how the pragmatically useful in music might actually be beautiful. Indeed, that is the next portion of the larger project of which the present article is but a small part.

At this point, though, we might also consider disturbing the dialectic by contemplating what it might *mean* to regard pragmatically useful music – and the functionally utilitarian more broadly – as sublime. For one, we may attempt to view the useful with admiration, reverence, and respect, or even with astonishment and awe. According to Burke, these are passions caused by the sublime in nature. Indeed, the sublime, and hence, utility, are not all negative, and thus, they may be worthy of such positive attention. For, unlike Kant, Burke, in *his* dialectic of the beautiful and the sublime, clearly favored the sublime. As evidence, he praised it, stating that, “it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”³⁴ Such an understanding on our behalf may open up new possibilities when we consider a method book, a test piece, a commercial jingle, or a ring tone as sublime, and, by consequence, as something all-powerful, all-consuming, and awe-inspiring.

We may also improvise on Kant’s tune and become, at least momentarily, indifferent to musical utility’s usefulness, as seemingly paradoxical as that may initially appear. Hence, instead of making use of music’s usefulness, we would rather stand back and reflect upon its use, its *ability* to be useful, and the *way* it which it is pragmatically useful, all in a contemplative manner. In the process, we may, to borrow from Hegel, actually sublimate pragmatic use ourselves. Thus, we may cancel our initial judgment of the useful, preserve its essence, and then elevate it.

These are but a few potentials. Nevertheless, it is clear that, by considering such an as-of-yet unconventional understanding of the pragmatically useful in music, we open the door to further novel comprehensions. Hence, in the words of nineteenth century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), may we “dwell in Possibility,” and consider the possibilities that might await us when we cast aside traditional notions of a beauty–utility dialectic, along with any innate preferences for the beautiful. Indeed, may we consider what we may find when we instead view the utilitarian in music and elsewhere as the sublime.

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Notes

¹ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1333a30 ff. For more on the three ways of life, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 5 and *Eudemian Ethics*, 1215a35 ff.

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a22 ff.

⁴ Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *De institutione musica*.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1914), 59–63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59–63, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61–65.

¹¹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man and Letters to Prince Frederick Christian von Augustenburg*, trans. Keith Tribe (Penguin Random House, 2016), 5.

- ¹² “Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien ; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c’est l’expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l’homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature. – L’endroit le plus utile d’une maison, ce sont les latrines.” Translation my own. Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Paris: C. Charpentier, 1880).
- ¹³ “Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure,…” Translation my own. Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet, December 16, 1852 in *Littérature Francophone* (Paris: Groupe de la Cité international Création-Diffusion, 1992), 85.
- ¹⁴ Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), xxiii.
- ¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoband (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 3.
- ¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- ¹⁷ “De toutes les conditions, la plus indépendante de la fortune et des hommes est celle de l’artisan. L’artisan ne dépend que de son travail.” Translation my own. Catherine Bouttier, *Les Plus Belles Pages des Lumières* (Omnibus, 2015), 147.
- ¹⁸ Jean Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin* (Nanu Press, 1918, 2009).
- ¹⁹ “dans la forme des ouvrages que l’utilité détermine, l’élégance et le goût ne sont pas exclus.” Translation my own. Bouttier, *Les Plus Belles Pages*, 20, 147.
- ²⁰ Joseph Kerman, “How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out” *Critical Inquiry* 7/2 (1980): 314.
- ²¹ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*; Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4.
- ²² Moreover, as they have argued against such an approach, Flexner, Ordine, and Currie have all, in various manners, demonstrated how, ironically, scholarship pursued for its own sake, with no intent for pragmatic use, can sometimes, perhaps even often, produce the most pragmatically useful results. Abraham Flexner, “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge,” *Harper’s Magazine* 179 (June/October 1939): 544–552; Nuccio Ordine, *The Usefulness of the Useless*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, Inc., 2017); James R. Currie, “After Relevance” (paper, Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Boston, Massachusetts, November 2019); James Currie, “Music After All” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no. 1 (spring 2009): 145–203.
- ²³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2–4.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁷ Kant, *Judgment*, 96.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*, 104.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ³⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Basil: J.J. Tourneisen, 1792), 47.

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