



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Eduard Hanslick on Musical Beauty

The debate over the capacity of music to express non-musical ideas—which raged in the later nineteenth century between the partisans of Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner—was addressed persuasively by Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904) in his book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*The Beautiful in Music*, 1854). Hanslick was known both for his writings on musical aesthetics and as an influential music critic for several Viennese newspapers. In both capacities, he wrote in support of the “absolutist” viewpoint associated with Brahms—that music fundamentally could express only musical ideas. He was also a personal acquaintance of Brahms, whose music seemed to him to project the essentials of beauty without distractions from programmatic meanings.

The first two chapters of *The Beautiful in Music* attack the notion that music’s goal is to express or embody emotions. For Hanslick the beautiful in music was not a matter of emotions at all, but instead a contemplative, rational faculty. The third chapter of the book, which is excerpted here, addresses directly the nature of musical beauty.

. . . So far we have considered only the negative aspect of the question, and have sought to expose the fallacy that the beautiful in music depends upon the accurate expression of feelings.

We must now, by way of completing the exposition, bring to light also its positive aspect, and endeavor to determine the nature of the beautiful in music.

Its nature is specifically musical. By this we mean that the beautiful is not contingent upon nor in need of any subject introduced from without, but that it consists wholly of sounds artistically combined. The ingenious co-ordination of intrinsically pleasing sounds, their consonance and contrast, their flight and reapproach, their increasing and diminishing strength—this it is which, in free and unimpeded forms, presents itself to our mental vision.

The primordial element of music is euphony, and rhythm is its soul: rhythm in general, or the harmony of a symmetrical structure, and rhythm in particular, or the systematically reciprocal motion of its several parts within a given measure. The crude material which the composer has to fashion, the vast profusion of which it is impossible to estimate fully, is the entire scale of musical notes and their inherent adaptability to an endless variety of melodies, harmonies, and rhythms. Melody, unexhausted, nay, inexhaustible, is preeminently the source of musical beauty. Harmony, with its countless modes of transforming, inverting, and intensifying, offers the material for constantly new developments; while rhythm, the main artery of the musical organism, is the regulator of both, and enhances the charms of the timbre in its rich variety.

To the question: What is to be expressed with all this material? The answer will be: Musical ideas. Now, a musical idea reproduced in its entirety is not only an object of intrinsic beauty but also an end in itself, and not a means for representing feelings and thoughts.

The essence of music is sound and motion. . . .

When young, we have probably all been delighted with the ever-changing tints and forms of a kaleidoscope. Now, music is a kind of kaleidoscope, though its forms can be appreciated only by an infinitely higher ideation. It brings forth a profusion of beautiful tints and forms, now sharply contrasted and now almost imperceptibly graduated; all logically connected with each other, yet all novel in their effect; forming, as it were, a complete and self-subsistent whole, free from any alien admixture. The main difference consists in the fact that the musical kaleidoscope is the direct product of a

creative mind, whereas the optic one is but a cleverly constructed mechanical toy. If, however, we stepped beyond the bounds of analogy, and in real earnest attempted to raise mere color to the rank of music by foisting on one art the means of another, we should be landed in the region of such puerile contrivances as the “color piano” or the “ocular organ,” though these contrivances significantly prove both phenomena to have, morphologically, a common root. . . .

It is extremely difficult to define this self-subsistent and specifically musical beauty. As music has no prototype in nature, and expresses no definite conceptions, we are compelled to speak of it either in dry, technical terms, or in the language of poetic fiction. Its kingdom is, indeed, “not of this world.” All the fantastic descriptions, characterizations, and periphrases are either metaphorical or false. What in any other art is still descriptive is in music already figurative. Of music it is impossible to form any but a musical conception, and it can be comprehended and enjoyed only in and for itself.

The “specifically musical” must not, however, be understood only in the sense of acoustic beauty or symmetry of parts—both of which elements it embraces as of secondary importance—and still less can we speak of “a display of sounds to tickle the ear,” or use similar phraseology which is generally intended to emphasize the absence of an intellectual principle. But, by laying stress on musical beauty, we do not exclude the intellectual principle; on the contrary, we imply it as essential, for we would not apply the term “beautiful” to anything wanting in intellectual beauty; and in tracing the essential nature of beauty to a morphological source, we wish it to be understood that the intellectual element is most intimately connected with these sonoric forms. The term “form” in musical language is peculiarly significant. The forms created by sound are not empty; not the envelope enclosing a vacuum, but a well, replete with the living creation of inventive genius. Music, then, as compared with the arabesque, is a picture, yet a picture the subject of which we cannot define in words, or include in any one category of thought. In music there is both meaning and logical sequence, but in a musical sense; it is a language we speak and understand, but which we are unable to translate. It is a highly suggestive fact that, in speaking of musical compositions, we likewise employ the term “thought,” and a critical mind easily distinguishes real thoughts from hollow phrases, precisely as in speech. The Germans significantly use the term *Satz* (“sentence”) for the logical consummation of a part of a composition, for we know exactly when it is finished, just as in the case of a written or spoken sentence, though each has a logic of its own.

The logic in music, which produces in us a feeling of satisfaction, rests on certain elementary laws of nature which govern both the human organism and the phenomena of sound. It is, above all, the primordial law of “harmonic progression” which, like the curve lines in painting and sculpture, contains the germ of development in its main forms, and the (unfortunately almost unexplained) cause of the link which connects the various musical phenomena.

All musical elements are in some occult manner connected with each other by certain natural affinities, and since rhythm, melody, and harmony are under their invisible sway, the music created by man must conform to them—any combinations conflicting with them bearing the impress of caprice and ugliness. Though not demonstrable with scientific precision, these affinities are instinctively felt by every experienced ear, and the organic completeness and logic, or the absurdity and unnaturalness of a group of sounds, are intuitively known without the intervention of a definite conception as the standard of measure. . . .

The object of every art is to clothe in some material form an idea which has originated in the artist’s imagination. In music this idea is an acoustic one; it cannot be expressed in words and subsequently translated into sounds. The initial force of a composition is the invention of some definite theme, and not the desire to describe a given emotion by musical means. Thanks to that primitive and mysterious power whose mode of action will forever be hidden from us, a theme, a melody, flashes on

the composer's mind. The origin of this first germ cannot be explained, but must simply be accepted as a fact. When once it has taken root in the composer's imagination, it forthwith begins to grow and develop, the principal theme being the center round which the branches group themselves in all conceivable ways, though always unmistakably related to it. The beauty of an independent and simple theme appeals to our aesthetic feeling with that directness which tolerates no explanation except, perhaps, that of its inherent fitness and the harmony of parts, to the exclusion of any alien factor. It pleases for its own sake, like an arabesque, a column, or some spontaneous product of nature—a leaf or a flower.

There is no greater and more frequent error than to distinguish between "beautiful music" with and without a definite subject. The error is due to the extremely narrow conception of the beautiful in music, leading people to regard the artistically constructed form and the soul infused into it as two independent and unrelated existences. All compositions are accordingly divided into full and empty "champagne bottles"; musical "champagne," however, has the peculiarity of developing with the bottle. . . .

A theme harmonized with the common chord sounds different if harmonized with the chord of the sixth; a melody progressing by an interval of the seventh produces an effect quite distinct from one progressing by an interval of the sixth. The rhythm, the volume of sound, or, the timbre—each alters the specific character of a theme entirely; in fine, every single musical factor necessarily contributes to a certain passage assuming just this particular aspect, and affecting the listener in this particular way. What it is that makes Halévy's music appear fantastic, that of Auber graceful—what enables us immediately to recognize Mendelssohn or Spohr—all this may be traced to purely musical causes, without having recourse to the mysterious element of the feelings.

On the other hand, why the frequent chords of 6/4 and the concise, diatonic themes of Mendelssohn, the chromatic and enharmonic music of Spohr, the short two-bar rhythm of Auber, etc., invariably produce this specific impression and none other—this enigma, it is true, neither psychology nor physiology can solve.

If, however, we inquire into the proximate cause—and that is, after all, what concerns us most in any art—we shall find that the thrilling effect of a theme is owing, not to the supposed extreme grief of the composer, but to the extreme intervals; not to the beating of his heart, but to the beating of the drums; not to the craving of his soul, but to the chromatic progression of the music. . . .

The manner in which the creative act takes place in the mind of a composer of instrumental music gives us a very clear insight into the peculiar nature of musical beauty. A musical idea originates in the composer's imagination; he develops it—more and more crystals coalesce with it, until by imperceptible degrees the whole structure in its main features appears before him. Nothing then remains to be done but to examine the composition, to regulate its rhythm and modify it according to the canons of the art. The composer of instrumental music never thinks of representing a definite subject; otherwise he would be placed in a false position, rather outside than within the domain of music. His composition in such a case would be program music, unintelligible without the program. If this brings the name of Berlioz to mind, we do not thereby call into question or underrate his brilliant talent. In his steps followed Liszt, with his much weaker "Symphonic Poems."

As the same block of marble may be converted by one sculptor into the most exquisite forms, by another into a clumsy botch, so the musical scale, by different manipulation, becomes now an overture of Beethoven, and now one of Verdi. In what respect do they differ? Is it that one of them expresses more exalted feelings, or the same feelings more accurately? No, but simply because its musical structure is more beautiful. One piece of music is good, another bad, because one composer invents a theme full of life, another a commonplace one; because the former elaborates his music with ingenious originality, whereas with the latter it becomes, if anything, worse and worse; because the harmony in one case is varied and novel, whereas in the other it drags on

miserably in its poverty; because in one the rhythm is like a pulse, full of strength and vitality, whereas in the other it is not unlike a tattoo.

There is no art which, like music, uses up so quickly such a variety of forms. Modulations, cadences, intervals, and harmonious progressions become so hackneyed within fifty, nay, thirty years, that a truly original composer cannot well employ them any longer, and is thus compelled to think of a new musical phraseology. Of a great number of compositions which rose far above the trivialities of their day, it would be quite correct to say that there was a time when they were beautiful. Among the occult and primitive affinities of the musical elements and the myriads of possible combinations, a great composer will discover the most subtle and unapparent ones. He will call into being forms of music which seemingly are conceived at the composer's pure caprice and yet, for some mysterious and unaccountable reason, stand to each other in the relation of cause and effect. Such compositions in their entirety, or fragments of them, may without hesitation be said to contain the "spark of genius." . . .

If, instead of looking for the expression of definite states of mind or certain events in musical works, we seek music only, we shall then, free from other associations, enjoy the perfections it so abundantly affords. Wherever musical beauty is wanting, no meaning, however profound, which sophisticated subtlety may read into the work can ever compensate for it; and where it exists, the meaning is a matter of indifference. It directs our musical judgment, at all events, into a wrong channel. The same people who regard music as a mode in which the human intellect finds expression—which it neither is nor ever can be, on account of its inability to impart *convictions*—these very people have also brought the word "intention" into vogue. But in music there is no "intention" that can make up for "invention." Whatever is not clearly contained in the music is to all intents and purposes nonexistent, and what it does contain has passed the stage of mere intention. The saying, "He intends something," is generally used in a eulogistic sense. To us it seems rather to imply an unfavorable criticism which, translated into plain language, would run thus: The composer would like to produce something, but he cannot. Now, an *art* is *to do* something, and he who cannot do anything takes refuge in "intentions."

As the musical elements of a composition are the source of its beauty, so are they likewise the source of the laws of its construction. A great number of false and confused notions are entertained on this subject, but we will single out only one. We mean the commonly accepted theory of the sonata and the symphony, grounded on the assumption that feelings are expressible by musical means. In accordance with this theory, the task of the composer is to represent in the several parts of the sonata four states of mind, all differing among themselves, and yet related to one another. (How?) In order to account for the connection which undoubtedly exists between the various parts, and to explain the differences in their effect, it is naively taken for granted that a definite feeling underlies each of them. The construction put upon them sometimes fits, but more frequently it does not, and it never follows as, a necessary consequence. It will always, however, be a matter of course that the four different parts are bound up in a harmonious whole, and that each should set off and heighten the effect of the others according to the aesthetic laws of music. We are indebted to the inventive genius of Moritz von Schwind for a very interesting illustration of Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* (Op. 80), the several parts of which the artist interprets as representing connected incidents in the lives of the principal actors, and then gives a pictorial description of them. Now, just as the painter transforms the sounds into scenes and shapes, so does the listener transform them into feelings and occurrences. Both stand in a certain relation to the music, but neither of them in a necessary one, and it is only with necessary relations that science is concerned.

It is often alleged that Beethoven, when making the rough sketch of a composition, had before him certain incidents or states of mind. Whenever Beethoven (or any other composer) adopted this method, he did so to smooth his task, to render the

achievement of musical unity easier by keeping in view the connecting links of certain objective phenomena. If Berlioz, Liszt, and others fancied that a poem, a title, or an event yielded them something more than that, they were laboring under a delusion. It is the frame of mind bent on musical unity which gives to the four parts of a sonata the character of an organically related whole, and not their connection with an object which the composer may have in view. Where the latter denied himself the luxury of these poetic leading strings and followed purely musical inspiration, we shall find no other than a musical unity of parts. Aesthetically speaking, it is utterly indifferent whether Beethoven really did associate all his works with certain ideas. We do not know them, and as far as the composition is concerned, they do not exist. It is the composition itself, apart from all comment, which has to be judged; and as the lawyer completely ignores whatever is not in his brief, so aesthetic criticism must disregard whatever lies outside the work of art. If the several parts of a composition bear the stamp of unity, their correlation must have its root in musical principles. . . .

Not long since, the fashion began to regard works of art in connection with the ideas and events of the time which gave them birth. This connection is undeniable and probably exists also in music. Being a product of the human mind, it must naturally bear some relation to the other products of mind: to contemporaneous works of poetry and the fine arts; to the state of society, literature, and the sciences of the period; and, finally, to the individual experiences and convictions of the author. To observe and demonstrate the existence of this connection in the case of certain composers and works is not only a justifiable proceeding but also a true gain to knowledge. We should, nevertheless, always remember that parallelisms between specific works of art and the events of certain epochs belong to the history of art rather than to the science of aesthetics. Though methodological considerations may render it necessary to connect the history of art with the science of aesthetics, it is yet of the utmost importance that the proper domain of each of these sciences be rigorously guarded from encroachment by the other. The historian viewing a work of art in all its bearings may discover in Spontini “the expression of French imperialism,” in Rossini “the political restoration”; but the student of aesthetics must restrict himself to the examination of the works themselves, in order to determine what is beautiful in them and why it is so. The aesthetic inquirer knows nothing (nor can he be expected to know anything) about the personal circumstances or the political surroundings of the composer—he hears and believes nothing but what the music itself contains. He will, therefore, without knowing the name or the biography of the author, detect in Beethoven’s symphonies impetuosity and struggle, unsatisfied longing and defiance, all supported by a consciousness of strength. But he could never glean from his works that the composer favored republicanism, that he was a bachelor and deaf, or any of the numerous circumstances on which the art historian is wont to dilate; nor could such facts enhance the merit of the music. It may be very interesting and praiseworthy to compare the various schools of philosophy to which Bach, Mozart, and Haydn belonged, and to draw a parallel between them and the works of these composers. It is, however, a most arduous undertaking, and one which can but open the door to fallacies in proportion as it attempts to establish causal relations. The danger of exaggeration is exceedingly great once this principle is accepted. The slender influence of contemporariness may easily be construed as an inherent necessity, and the ever-untranslatable language of music be interpreted in the way which best fits the particular theory: all depends on the reasoning abilities; the same paradox which in the mouth of an accomplished dialectician appears a truism seems the greatest nonsense in the mouth of an unskilled speaker. . . .