Musical Aesthetics

Musical Aesthetics:

An Introduction to Concepts, Theories, and Functions

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PREFACE

Thomas Henry Huxley, the Victorian biologist best remembered as "Darwin's bulldog," set the definition of aesthetics as a list: beauty in appearance, visual appeal, an experience, an attitude, a property of something, a judgment, or a process.[1] This expanded meaning touches on the original Greek *aisthesis*, which deals with feelings and sensations. Aesthetics is not limited to the thing itself, but is rather a holistic term encompassing the focal point—the object, performance, atmosphere, etc.—as well as experiences of, and responses to, that focal point.

Still, Huxley's elucidation, like many others, suffers from an over-emphasis on beauty. Although aesthetic engagement is classically concerned with perceptions of the beautiful, this is not the only criterion of artistic merit. Art (and other phenomena) can be aesthetically satisfying without necessarily being "beautiful" in the conventional sense of eliciting pleasure.

Applied to music, aesthetics might be conceived as the relationship between music and perception. Rather than judging whether or not a composition is beautiful, or why one piece is more beautiful than another, attention shifts to the interplay between musical stimuli and the interior realm of sensations. The onus of appraisal moves from the cold tools of theoretical analysis to the living auditor.

For some thinkers, this is the only appropriate location for aesthetic assessment. Nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer argued that music taps into channels of pure emotions:

> Music does not express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their motives.[2]

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[1] See Charles S. Blinderman, "T. H. Huxley's Theory of Aesthetics: Unity in Diversity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21:1 (1962): 49-55.

[2] Harlow Gale, "Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Music," *New Englander and Yale Review* 48 (1888): 363.

T. H. Yorke Trotter, founder and principal of the Incorporated London Academy of Music, echoed Schopenhauer in a 1907 lecture, stating that, while other art forms awaken ideas and images that act on the feelings, music directly stirs "dispositions which we translate by the vague terms, joy, sadness, serenity, etc."[3]

In this revised view, aesthetic value does not rest on the micro or macro features of a piece, *per se*, but on how one responds to those features. Emotional arousals are instant aesthetic judgments. It is no accident that the perceived qualities of a piece or passage mirror the responses induced: joyful, mournful, serene, ominous, and so forth. The intensity of the emotion might separate one piece from another, but the immediacy of the music—as Schopenhauer and Trotter described it—seems to defy antiseptic classification. Among other things, integrating (or equating) aesthetics with emotions underscores the subjectivity of the topic, and highlights the interconnectedness and simultaneity of stimulus, experience, and evaluation.

This experiential approach underlies the themes and subject matter in this book. While the ideas included mostly stem from my own research and reflection, several people helped to give them shape. I am grateful to my students at the Academy for Jewish Religion California, whose insights and challenges encouraged me to refine numerous points. Similar thanks are owed to the readers of my blog, *Thinking On Music*. Finally, I am forever thankful to my wife, Elvia, whose love of music fuels my writing on the topic.

[3] T. H. Yorke Trotter, "The Emotional Appeal in Instrumental Music," Lecture for the Musical Association, London, March 19, 1907.

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy concerned with beauty, taste, and standards of judgment, especially in the arts.[1] The term derives from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning "sensation" or "perception," which in turn derives from the verb *aisthanomai*, meaning "to perceive, apprehend by the senses, to see, hear, feel."[2] Plato employed the straightforward and nontechnical meaning of such terms: to notice, to be aware, to detect.[3] In the *Republic* and elsewhere, Plato devised a critique of sense perception, wherein *knowledge* deals with "what is" (certain, stable) and *sensation* deals with "what is and is not" (ambiguous, unstable).[4] To *know* is to grasp an understanding based on reasoned explanations; to *perceive* is to be affected by changeable physical conditions.[5] In this view, *aesthesis*—perception by the senses—always has a degree of uncertainty.

Eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten shifted aesthetics from its base definition of "sensation" to "beauty," thereby initiating the modern usage. The first paragraph of his *Aesthetica* (1750) lays the groundwork: "Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thinking analogous to reason) is the science of sensual cognition."[6] The treatise elaborates on the various elements of this complex opening

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[1] Thomas Munro, "Aesthetics," in *The Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1942), 6.

[2] William H. Poteat, *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays*, ed. James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 24.

[3] For example, Plato, *Symposium* 220c, "By midday the soldiers began to notice," and *Politics* 1276a, "much of the city was unaware of it." Translations supplied by Timothy Chappell, "Perception and Sensation," in *The Continuum Companion to Plato*, ed. Gerald A. Press (New York: Continuum, 2012), 225.

[4] Plato, *Republic*, 475e-80a.

[5] Chappell, "Perception and Sensation," 225.

[6] Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik: Die grundlegenden Ausschnitte aus der "Aesthetica"* (1750/1758), trans. and ed. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), 3. Translation supplied by Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

statement. Most important is Baumgarten's attempt to unify science and art, such that the former supports the latter.[7]

The desire to join rational judgment, grounded in logic, and sensation, rooted in experience, establishes the central paradox of aesthetics. Roger Scruton, a prolific English philosopher who specializes in aesthetics and politics, explains:

> The judgement of taste is a genuine judgement, one that is supported by reasons, but these reasons can never amount to a deductive argument. If they could do so, then there could be second-hand opinions about beauty. There could be experts on beauty who had never experienced the things they describe, and rules for producing beauty which could be applied by someone who had no aesthetic tastes….The paradox, then, is this. The judgement of beauty makes a claim about its object, and can be supported by reasons for its claim. But the reasons do not compel the judgement, and can be rejected without contradiction. So are they reasons or aren't they?[8]

If, as many philosophers maintain, the evaluation of beauty concerns the object itself (the painting, building, ballet, film, etc.) and not the subject's predispositions or state of mind, then why do the opinions of others—experts and laypeople alike—so often conflict with our own impressions? Again, quoting Scruton: "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."[9] No matter how reasonable or articulate the opinion of the critic, philosopher, colleague, or friend, judgment invariably involves experience.

This observation is especially apt when discussing music, perhaps the most experiential art form. Like music itself, which operates on a primal level best described as "pre-rational," musical judgment seems more visceral than cognitive, more automatic than reasoned. An old opera joke addresses the problem of relying on the expert's opinion: Wagner's music is better than it sounds, while Puccini's music sounds better than it is.[10]

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[7] Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, 7.

[8] Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

[9] Scruton, *Beauty*, 5.

[10] The first half of this joke, "Wagner's music is better than it sounds," is commonly attributed to two American humorists, Mark Twain and Bill Nye (Edgar Wilson Nye). According to a well-documented article on the website *Quote Investigator*, Nye made closely related quips about classical music and Wagner's music, and Mark Twain helped popularize the Wagner remark, giving Nye credit.

The humor lies in the absurdity of judging music—the audible art—apart from how it sounds. It is the difference between experiential appraisal ("I know what I like when I hear it") and analytical discernment ("I discern its value when I measure it"). These divergent modes of apprehension help explain the often-wide chasm between popular musical tastes and the rarified tastes of music critics, theorists, historians, and other professionals.[11]

Philosophers who ponder the aesthetic experience recognize the necessity of personal exposure to artistic stimuli. In the standard scenario, a person experiences certain aspects of an artwork (or natural phenomenon), which produce moods and sensations that are rarely achieved by other means. This is described variously as "a kind of distance, or as seeing in a certain way, or as wonder, or awe, or as a unique kind of joy, or reverie, or disinterest, in the sense of an escape from worldliness."[12] Some theorists, known as objectivists, focus on features of the artwork that produce the response, while subjectivists look mostly at the response itself. As we have seen, a full appreciation of aesthetics requires a combination of the two.

The issue becomes thorny when attention turns to ostensible ties between the emotional content perceived in music, and music's purported ability to objectively convey such content. The capacity of music to express emotion, as opposed to our experience of emotion in music, is a major subject in contemporary musical aesthetics. Whereas pre-modern thinkers viewed music as a branch of mathematics, following the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition, late medieval and Renaissance thinkers introduced a humanist understanding of music as the "sonorous art," which gave mathematics a secondary place of "calculating means to audible ends."[13] This prioritization, later championed by Baumgarten, Kant, and Hegel,

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In Twain's posthumously published autobiography, he compares the oratorical skills of his acquaintance, General Daniel Sickles, to Wagner's compositional style: "The late Bill Nye once said, 'I have been told that Wagner's music is better than it sounds.' That felicitous description of a something which so many people have tried to describe, and couldn't, does seem to fit the general's manner of speech exactly. His talk is much better than it is." Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, vol. 1 (New York: Collier and Son, 1924), 338.

[11] This analysis is extracted from my essay, "Less is More," in *Music in Our Lives: Why We Listen: How It Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 13-14.

[12] Donald Palmer, *Does the Center Hold? An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 394-95. See Norman Kreitman, "The Varieties of Aesthetic Disinterestedness," *Contemporary Aesthetics* (2006), http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=390

[13] Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 32.

gave greater weight to the listener and to effects such as attraction, enjoyment, and stimulation.

The new emphasis contributed to an important debate in the second half of the nineteenth century between supporters of Eduard Hanslick, a Viennese music critic and musicologist, and partisans of composer Richard Wagner. In contrast to Wagner, who believed music could make direct and unambiguous emotional appeals, Hanslick argued that music could only express musical ideas. Hanslick's influential book, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*The Beautiful in Music*), published in 1854, articulates an "absolutist" viewpoint, where music projects the essentials of beauty without need of programmatic references or associations. The third chapter of the book, excerpted below, challenges the assumption that music operates primarily in the realm of emotions and extra-musical meanings.

> 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 sophistical 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."[14]

Contemporary philosophers have continued the debate. For example, Peter Kivy posits that while conventions and associations, typically stemming from auditory resemblances to human expressive behaviors, can cause us to perceive emotions in certain musical qualities and techniques, we do not actually feel these emotions ourselves. Rather, we are aroused by our own involvement, and mistake that excitement for emotions expressed in the

[14] Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, trans. Gustav Cohen (London: Novello, 1891), 82-83.

music. We may ascribe sadness to a musical passage. However, our response—sometimes with tears—is not one of sadness, but of pleasure in the appreciation of aesthetic features.[15] Philosopher Susanne K. Langer made a similar point when noting the transient nature of music's "somatic effects."[16] If the music truly made us sad, then we would continue to be in that state after the music ends.

Setting aside the merits of such positions and their counter-positions, interest in the auditor's experience suggests a move beyond beauty and the beautiful. In a way, we have returned to *aisthesis*—sensation—as the basis of musical aesthetics. Broadly conceived, aesthetics includes not only classical concerns about musical form and content, but also, increasingly, the sensori-emotional experience. As such, the very concept of beauty is more properly understood as "aesthetic success."[17] Success in this sense, judging whether or not the music "works," acknowledges not only the crucial interaction of sound and listener, but also the functionality of even the most "absolute" types of music. Scruton gives a clear example:

> There is no contradiction in saying that Bartók's score for *The Miraculous Mandarin* is harsh, rebarbative, even ugly, and at the same time praising the work as one of the triumphs of early modern music. Its aesthetic values are of a different order from those of Fauré's *Pavane*, which aims only at exquisitely beautiful, and succeeds.[18]

Approach

This book adopts an experiential understanding of aesthetics, in which perceptual and intuitive musical responses—real-time experiences—are valued as a source of truth. Such experiences occur when musical qualities—pulse, meter, phrasing, timbre, dynamics, harmony, interpretation, etc.—inspire feelings of pleasure, revulsion, or shades in between. Unlike intellectual aesthetics, which values conscious associations and meticulous artistic appraisals, experiential aesthetics looks primarily at everyday subconscious appreciations. The type and intensity of these experiences are not always agreed upon, given the innumerable momentary and long-term factors guiding individuals to hear certain music in certain ways.

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[15] Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 13.
[16] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 181.
[17] Scruton, *Beauty*, 13.
[18] Scruton, *Beauty*, 13.

The experientialist position holds that reactions to musical stimuli are more immediate and more important than the terms used to describe them. As secondary descriptions removed from the aesthetic moment, the terms themselves are essentially anchorless or, at best, impressionistic. This observation is especially apropos when assessing the functionality of music. We intuitively appraise music based on its appropriateness for a specific situation. This process is observed in infants as young as six months, who prefer low pitches and low arousal music for lullabies and high pitches and high arousal music for play songs.[19] The wrong sounds at the wrong time, no matter how beautiful by calculated aesthetic standards, will not succeed experientially. While an object-oriented aesthetician might urge an appreciation of music by itself and on its own terms, music is never heard in isolation. This fact, added to the fleeting nature of sound, has led some to question the very idea of music as an object.[20]

This book also takes an eclectic approach to thinking on music. Inspired in part by Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Posidonius and Seneca, eclecticism involves selecting the most reasonable ideas among existing beliefs. In its active form, eclecticism attempts to construct unity among elements adapted from seemingly discordant philosophies. This was true for the Alexandrian school of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, which sought to blend elements of Eastern and Western thought. Passive eclecticism, which this book employs, is less systematic and less weary of contradicting itself if the case demands it. Recognizing that musical tastes and experiences are variable from context and context, person to person, population to population, and subculture to subculture, no one theory or school of thought can adequately address all situations. What emerges is a type of "contextual aesthetics," an attitude that, admittedly, can come across as too fluid or impure to be of value. Ralph B. Winn put it bluntly in his definition of eclecticism, published in 1942: "In its passive form, [eclecticism] is found in many thinkers of no great originality."[21] G. W. F. Hegel found eclecticism, even in its active form, to yield "nothing but a

[19] C. D. Tsang and N. J. Conrad, "Does the Message Matter? The Effect of Song Type on Infants' Pitch Preferences for Lullabies and Playsongs," *Infant Behavior and Development* 33 (2010): 96-100. Cited in David Hargreaves and Alexandra Lamont, *The Psychology of Musical Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 231.

[20] See "Object and Non-Object: Two Poles," in Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise,* trans. James A. Steintrager (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 169-211.

[21] Ralph B. Winn, "Eclecticism," in *The Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1942), 86.

superficial aggregate."[22] The chapters ahead implicitly challenge these assertions.

Organization

The wildly varied nature of music and musical experiences warrants an unsystematic journey into musical aesthetics. Instead of applying a central thesis or comprehensive framework, this book engages a variety of ideas and interdisciplinary insights. In this way, it echoes my previous book, *Music in Our Lives: Why We Listen, How it Works* (2015), which collects short essays that, at times, offer opposing viewpoints and switch sides in musical debates. The present volume similarly brings together an assortment of brief essays written over a three-year period. The analyses should be read as time-specific convictions rather than permanent views, reflecting the ephemeral nature of music itself. Read individually, each essay is a self-contained excursion, complete with background, propositions, conclusions, and implications. Taken together, they suggest the possibility that conflicting viewpoints can possess a bit of truth, and that, for a subject as momentary and multifaceted as music, truth can be contextually variable.

To be sure, my approach will not satisfy all readers. This book joins *Music in Our Lives* and two others with similarly fluid formats.[23] Critical reviews of those books have fallen on opposite sides. Those who see the necessity of short-form academic writing in our fast-paced world of information overload have praised the books.[24] Those looking for a sustained and exhaustive treatise have been disappointed, and will likely respond negatively to this volume, which introduces numerous ideas and

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[22] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6, vol. 2: Greek Philosophy*, trans. Robert F. Brown (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 330.

[23] Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Synagogue Song: An Introduction to Customs, Theories and Customs* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012) and *Music in the Hebrew Bible: Understanding References in the Torah, Ketuvim and Nevi'im* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).

[24] See, for instance, Sheldon Levin's review of *Synagogue Song* in the *Journal of Synagogue Music* 39:1 (2014): 64-66, which notes, "Each entry, which takes but a few minutes to read, is filled with clearly explained and documented information. From clarifying the psychology of music while describing its beauty and emotion, from cataloguing modes to delineating ethnicity, from exploring holiday texts and specific prayers to discussing congregational participation and choral music, this book covers a very wide span of topics."

perspectives without pretending to exhaust them.[25] Many treatises and single-topic studies of aesthetics, musical and otherwise, are available for the interested reader (see: Appendix). This book offers something different: roughly one hundred "lessons in miniature," which introduce major concepts, theories, and functions without venturing too deeply into complexities or controversies.

Despite the occasional personal position and idiosyncratic opinion, this book is conceived as an introduction. The categorization owes to three main elements. First is the subject matter. The chapters cover different areas of musical aesthetics: Aesthetics of Emotions; Aesthetics of Listening; Aesthetics of Performance; Aesthetics of Composition; Aesthetics of Nature; and Aesthetics of Commerce. Each chapter offers a selection of brief studies grouped together according to "family resemblance." Second, each essay is written to be both readily intelligible and (hopefully) engaging enough to stimulate further investigation. While lay readers comprise the target audience, scholars and musical sophisticates should also find the discussions profitable. Third, the essays are not intended as the final word. The questions posed, theories proposed, and phenomena explored could fill entire volumes.

In the strictest sense, this is not a philosophy book, although it presents and grapples with various philosophical points. The content and structure are interdisciplinary, bringing together practical and theoretical musings drawn from the social sciences, hard sciences, philosophy, literature, theology, musicology, humanities, and other fields that directly or indirectly contribute to an understanding of our attraction to music.

[25] See, for instance, Rob Haskins's review of *Music in Our Lives* in the *ARSC Journal* 47:1 (2016): 92-93, which dismisses the book as aiming "squarely at a general and mostly unlettered music-loving audience."

CHAPTER ONE

AESTHETICS OF EMOTIONS

Music of all genres and sub-genres can be reduced to formulae and equations. The constituent sound patterns are intimately tied to mathematics: rhythm, counting, time signature, tone, overtone, pitch, interval, mode, scale, harmony. At the same time, music's effect on the listener evades the reductionist tools of mathematics and music theory (the "science of music"). Aaron Copland, a defining composer of the twentieth century, admitted that despite his mastery of mathematical/theoretical tools, he primarily received musical information on the "primal and almost brutish level" of emotions:

> 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 swellings and subsidings, its pushing forward or hanging 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.[1]

Notwithstanding these intuitive reactions, emotionality in musical creation, performance, and reception has long been debated. Divergent viewpoints persist regarding whether or not musical sounds directly convey emotional content, employ an objective emotional or symbolic language, retain an intended quality or character against subjective interpretations, or provide clarity and resolution lacking in our everyday lives. What is certain is that the *perception* of emotion in music—real or imagined—accounts largely for music's historical and cross-cultural

[1] Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 14.

appeal, as well as its ubiquitous associations with matters of the spirit and ideas of the supernatural.

Between Reason and Monsters

Francisco Goya published A Collection of Prints of Capricious Subjects in 1799. The eighty etchings and aquatints, known as *Los Caprichos* (caprices, folios), criticized the "multitude of follies and blunders common in every civil society" and particularly in Goya's native Spain: superstitions, arranged marriages, corrupt rulers, powerful clergy, and so on. The forty-third print is among the artist's most enduring images. Entitled "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" ("El sueño de la razón produce monstruos"), it shows an artist (possibly Goya himself) asleep at his drawing table. He is surrounded by bats, owls, and a wide-eyed lynx—ominous creatures in Spanish folklore. A mysterious figure lurks in the center, staring directly at the viewer.

On first impression, the illustration seems to be an endorsement of rational thought: when logic lies dormant, the world becomes demon-haunted (to paraphrase Carl Sagan). But this is only part of the meaning. A caption accompanying the print warns, "Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her, she is the mother of the arts and source of their wonders." Pure rationality and pure irrationality are both dangerous. Reason without emotion is too dull and heartless to adequately address basic human and societal needs. Emotion without reason gives rise to all sorts of prejudices and harmful fantasies. When held in harmonious balance, passion and intellect create life-affirming art.

Goya's rejection of absolute rationalism marked a transition from the Enlightenment to early Romanticism. While not denying the value of science and social reforms, he reclaimed emotions as an authentic and positive force.

Romantics would further the cause, placing knowledge and wonder, history and mythology, order and spontaneity side by side. Their idealization of expression stirred them to especially grand appraisals of music, which E. T. A. Hoffmann called "the most romantic of all the arts—one might say the only purely romantic one."[2] This belief owes largely to the balance Goya advocated. In most of its incarnations, music is both quantifiable and unquantifiable. Its raw materials and construction are

[2] David Charlton, ed., *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96.

open to theoretical and scientific analysis, but its evocations are almost by definition non-rational. Most important, music's expressiveness is born from its structure.

As a visual artist, Goya might have objected to the musical bias of many later Romantics. After all, the counter-requirements of heart and mind are found in every art form. At its best, art is a reminder of what makes us human: form and feelings, function and purpose, reason and emotion.

The Limits of Transmission

Since at least the Romantic period, musicians and theorists have argued that musically expressed emotions cannot be fully or adequately conveyed in words or rational concepts. Instead, music is understood as a mode of communication that bypasses ordinary language and speaks directly to the ineffable realm of the "inner life." This emotional conveyance is typically regarded as both cultural and highly personal: conventions within a music-culture determine the generalized impressions of musical qualities, such as mode, pitch range, and tempo, but specific interactions between those qualities and the listener are not predetermined. A wide and highly variable range of factors, as unique as the listener herself, fundamentally shapes the experience.

Deryck Cooke's influential treatise, *The Language of Music* (1959), proposes a more systematic approach.[3] Through an examination of hundreds of examples of Common Practice tonality (Western tonal music since 1400), Cooke developed a lexicon of musical phrases, patterns, and rhythms linked to specific emotional meanings. In his analysis, recurrent devices are used to effect more or less identical emotional arousals, thus yielding a predictable, idiomatic language.

This theory, while helpful in identifying and organizing norms of Western music, has been criticized for omitting the role of syntax. There might be a standard musical vocabulary, but without rules for arranging constituent elements into "sentences," there can be no consistent or independent meanings. For even the most over-used idiom, the performance and listening contexts ultimately determine the actual interpretation.

This observation casts doubt on another of Cooke's central claims. If, as Cooke argued, musical elements comprise a precise emotional vocabulary,

[3] Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

then a composer can use those elements to excite his or her own emotions in the listener. This is achievable in emotive writing, such as a heartfelt poem or autobiographical account, which uses the syntactic and semantic structures of language to reference ideas, images, and experiences. However, because music lacks these linguistic features, direct emotional transmission is hardly a sure thing.

Philosopher Malcolm Budd adds an aesthetic argument to this criticism. By locating the value of a musical experience in the reception of the composer's emotions, the piece loses its own aesthetic interest; it becomes a tool for transmitting information, rather than an opening for individually shaped emotional-aesthetic involvement. According to Budd, Cooke's thesis, which he dubs "expression-transmission theory," misrepresents the motivation for listening:

> It implies that there is an experience which a musical work produces in the listener but which in principle he could undergo even if he were unfamiliar with the work, just as the composer is supposed to have undergone the experience he wishes to communicate before he constructs the musical vehicle which is intended to transmit it to others; and the value of the music, if it is an effective instrument, is determined by the value of this experience. But there is no such experience.[4]

The multivalence of musical language is part of its appeal. Idiomatic figures may be commonplace in tonal music, but their appearance and reappearance in different pieces does not carry definite or monolithic information, whether from the composer or the vocabulary employed.

Objective and Subjective Emotions in Music

"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. *Expression* has never been an inherent property of music."[5] This oft-quoted statement from Igor Stravinsky's 1936 autobiography, *Chronicles of My Life*, remains hotly debated. It seems to fly in the face of intuition, which automatically senses in music a definite emotional quality. Postmodern deconstructionists have taken Stravinsky's statement to its extreme, discounting an essential relationship between music and emotions, and arguing that music can only

[4] Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions: The Philosophical Theories* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 123.
[5] Igor Stravinsky, *Chronicles of My Life* (London: Gollancz, 1936), 83-84.

express musicality itself. Nonmusical associations—emotional, symbolic, and visual impressions—have nothing to do with music *per se*, but instead prove the human tendency to endow everything in our environment with animate qualities. Advocates of this view, such as Peter Kivy and Malcolm Budd, agree especially with the second part of Stravinsky's statement:

> If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality. It is simply an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, a convention—in short, an aspect we have come to confuse, consciously or by force of habit, with its essential being.[6]

Stravinsky's words might confound listeners of his music, which elicits a range of deeply emotional responses. However, his comment speaks more to process than to impact. It articulates a formalist position, wherein music's meaning is determined by form. Music invariably *produces* emotions, but it does not *embody* them. This viewpoint marked a shift away from nineteenth-century Romanticism, which valued irrationality, spontaneity, and transcendence over Enlightenment ideals of reason, order, and materiality.

Importantly, 1936 was the middle of Stravinsky's neoclassicist period, bookended between a Russian "neo-primitive" period (1907-1919) and a period of serialism (1954-1968). Neoclassicism was a return to compositional attributes favored in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including light textures, conciseness, conventional forms (dance suites, sonatas, etc.), and tonality (more a reaction to Modernism than to Romanticism). It was not simply an imitative movement: "neo" denotes both return and innovation. Even Stravinsky's dry and Bach-like *Octet* for wind instruments (1923)—an early effort dismissed in the press as a bad joke—bears the composer's Neoclassical signature.

Stravinsky clarified his rejection of Romanticism and its "supernatural muse" in *Poetics of Music* (1947): "Invention presupposes imagination but should not be confused with it. For the act of invention implies the necessity of a lucky find and of achieving full realization of this find."[7] Fellow twentieth-century composer Aaron Copland saw in Stravinsky's

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[6] Stravinsky, *Chronicles of My Life*, 83-84. See Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions: The Philosophical Semblance: Reflections on Musical Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Peter Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[7] Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music: In the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 53.

approach the beginnings of objectivism, which came to dominate concert music as the twentieth century marched toward the twenty-first.[8]

Unlike the overly expressive music of the Romantics, which expands harmony, dynamics, and form to transmit intensely personal sentiments, Classical and modern works, while sonically light years apart, share an air of impersonality. Construction precedes and produces expression, rather than the other way around. Thus, as Copland wrote in *The New Music, 1900-1960*, there is "no need, therefore, to concentrate on anything but the manipulation of the musical materials, these to be handled with consummate taste and craftsmanlike ability."[9]

Viewed in this light, Stravinsky's provocative stance on music and emotion really answers a question of style: Should emotions drive composition (Romantic-subjective) or derive from it (Classical-objective)? The broader issue of whether feelings originate within musical sounds or are grafted onto them seems almost moot. Not to sidestep the debate entirely, but the *experience* remains emotional all the same.

To Jargon or Not to Jargon

Art historian Bernard Berenson described the transformative potential of gazing at visual art: "He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or building, statue, landscape, or aesthetic actuality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness."[10] Berenson compared this moment to a flash of "mystic vision," when the workaday mind is muted and perceptive faculties transcend their ordinary functions.

This articulation of experientialism, which values experience as a source of truth, contrasts with intellectualism, where knowledge is derived from reason. The latter is characteristic of Marxist theorist Theodor W. Adorno, whose studies of the arts comprise over half of his *oeuvre*. Adorno used his considerable intellect to criticize popular music, which encourages pre-rational engagement. In fairness, he was less concerned with the substance of "pop" than with its capitalist producers and passive consumers. He viewed popular music as evidence of a devious hegemony

[8] Aaron Copland, *The New Music, 1900-1960* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 48-49.
[9] Copland, *The New Music*, 20.
[10] Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History* (Glasgow: Pantheon, 1948), 80.

rooted in an "industrialization of culture" that conditions passive listeners to hardly listen at all.[11]

This argument has some validity. Listening habits are standardized through exposure to "hits" and popular styles, such that listeners basically know what will happen in a song before they hear it. As R. C. Smith, a philosopher of science and defender of Adorno, notes:

> In the world of mass produced music, in the very experience itself, standardisation acts as a sort of regularisation of sensational patterns. As a result of the conformity of these patterns there is a sort of lulling effect which, in a manner of speaking, is almost (inter)subjectively stunting.[12]

These social critiques overlook music's experiential impact. The transcendence Berenson described can occur with any art form, regardless of its origins, intentions, or predictability. In the subjective, spontaneous, and totalizing moment, all that exists is the experience itself. Analysis is as impossible as it is superfluous.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the immediacy of experientialism finds its opposite in Adorno's writings, which have been called "excessively negative," "excessively ornamented," and "excessively difficult." The complexity of his German prose made early English translations unreliable, and his esoteric vocabulary can obscure his insights. Adorno was critical of this tendency in others, as evidenced in his attack on the language of Martin Heidegger in *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (*The Jargon of Authenticity*).[13] Yet, as he admitted in a footnote to that work, "Even he who despises jargon is by no means secure from infection by it—consequently all the more reason to be afraid of it."[14]

The Useful and the Useless

Among the many definitions of beauty is the one most operative in our everyday lives: the pleasing or attractive features of something or someone. This is beauty in the intuitive or experiential sense; we know it when we sense it. Aesthetic snap-judgments of this sort and the disagreements they ignite

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[11] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
[12] R. C. Smith, "On Adorno's Critique of Popular Culture and Music," *Heathwood Institute and Press*, June 2013, http://www.heathwoodpress.com/on-adornos-critique-of-popular-culture-and-music/
[13] Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964).
[14] Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, 68.

recall the cliché, "There's no accounting for taste," and its Latin predecessor, *de gustibus non est disputandum* ("In matters of taste, there can be no disputes"). This does not mean that taste is thoroughly or hopelessly subjective. Anthropologists and evolutionary biologists have uncovered basic universal principles of art. For example, philosopher Denis Dutton observed that we find beauty in things done especially well, while anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake contends that "decorating" was a crucial way our ancestors marked off practices essential to physical and cultural survival, such as hunting, peacemaking, and rites of passage.[15] Yet, once we move beyond the baseline acceptance of the existence of beauty and its importance in human life, opinions take over.

Historically, aesthetics has been a difficult subject to intellectualize. George Santayana observed in *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) that, as a philosophical subject, beauty has "suffered much from the prejudice against the subjective."[16] This is mitigated in part by the inclusion of art history and critical theory under the philosophical umbrella. Yet, such efforts highlight rather than bypass the fundamental obstacle of personal taste: in order for beauty to be taken seriously, it must be removed from the proverbial beholder's eye and placed within some externalized rubric. Santayana summed it up:

> [S]o strong is the popular sense of the unworthiness and insignificance of things purely emotional, that those who have taken moral problems to heart and felt their dignity have often been led into attempts to discover some external right and beauty of which our moral and aesthetic feelings should be perceptions or discoveries, just as our intellectual activity is, in men's opinion, a perception or discovery of external fact.[17]

In other words, if beauty (and morality) cannot find footing in objective truth, they are forever doomed to triviality.

The dismissal of emotions runs counter to the biological-anthropological theories alluded to above. Whereas philosophers tend to view beauty as an end and art "for its own sake," evolutionary theorists investigate the basis for art's emergence and persistence as a cross-cultural phenomenon. For them, what constitutes the beautiful from one person or group to the next

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[15] Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010); and Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Came From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

[16] George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Scribner's, 1896), 4.

[17] Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, 3-4.

is less important than its functionality. Rather than being at odds, beauty and utility are inextricably linked.

In a way, our aesthetic judgments harmonize the philosophical and biological-anthropological sides of this debate. On the one hand, we over-rely on the moral-philosophical categories of "good" and "bad" when describing art, giving the impression of absolute or empirical standards, whether or not they actually exist. On the other hand, these designations stem from a functionalist response: "good" means useful; "bad" means "useless" (or "less useful"). A painting or musical composition might be beautiful according to academic standards, but fail to move us personally. We can intellectually appreciate its creativity and execution without being emotionally attracted to it. Likewise, something of lesser technical quality can be strikingly beautiful if it serves a purpose.

Art is Not Life

Although woven into life's intricate tapestry, artistic expression stands apart from the messy details and fluid meanderings of worldly experience. Even the most elaborate artwork—be it a novel, film, symphony, or painting—is simplistic compared to the overwhelming complexities of an average day. Poetry, both calculated and free-flowing, bypasses the vagaries of flatly spoken words and all the "uhs" and "ums" that come with them. Poets supplant natural speech with measured syllables, crafted imagery, thoughtful word choices, and detours from standard syntax and grammar. Singers follow suit: their words are shaped into clean and fluid phrases; their "speech" is regimented into meter and tonal intervals. The focus is narrowed, the extraneous is trimmed, the message is tightly conveyed.

This essential quality of art is illustrated by its opposite. In 1951, University of Kansas psychologist Roger Barker and co-author Herbert F. Wright published *One Boy's Day: A Specimen Record of Behavior*, chronicling a fourteen-hour span in the life of a Mid-Western American boy.[18] Eight researchers took turns following the boy, recording his minute-by-minute activities at home, school, and play. 7:08 AM: "He came out of the bathroom carrying a bottle of hair oil." 8:24 AM: "He tossed a stone in the air and swung, but accidentally clipped a flag pole." No theoretical approach was offered or suggested, just 435 pages of unadorned verbatim notes. Barker expected scientists to enthusiastically

[18] Roger Barker and Herbert F. Wright, *One Boy's Day: A Specimen Record of Behavior* (New York: Harper, 1951).

examine the raw data, breaking it down and interpreting it in various directions. But the book flopped. Readers—both scientists and laypeople—had little interest in trees without a view of the forest.

Artistic representations avoid life's tedious details. According to musicologist Curt Sachs, "Art denaturalizes nature in order to raise it to a higher, or at least a different, plane."[19] This applies well to music. Unlike the ever-ticking clock, musical pieces are set within limited durations. The self-enclosed architecture of musical form contrasts with the convoluted tangles of the natural world. Musical lines, whether monophonic or hyper-polyphonic, are cherry-picked from infinite sonic possibilities. In both vocal and instrumental music, there is an unnatural clarity of intentions and ideas. Stereotyped modes, phrases, devices, and figurations replace the murkiness and gray areas of real life.

The foregoing discussion is summarized in Picasso's famous (unsourced) saying: "Art is the elimination of the unnecessary." Our attraction to art stems from its distinction from natural processes and mundane human affairs. Without this separation, there can be no art.

The Worm-Eaten Clavier

Musical experiences are sometimes described as mind-altering, soul-stirring, body-consuming, and humdrum-transcending. More than hyperbole, these terms attempt to elucidate the ineffable moment when music fills the whole of an individual. Such occurrences are not regular in the sense of happening all the time or resulting from all exposures to musical sounds. Reaching this higher plane depends on the type of music and the type and level of one's involvement with it. Still, it is achieved often enough for the above descriptions to resonate. Though perhaps not automatic for the majority of us, we can recall experiences of intense musical captivation.

Moments of this sort can be profoundly life-enhancing (and, in some sense, life-saving). Musical absorption offers temporary relief from fears, anxieties, stresses, ailments, and other burdens. Surrendering to the sounds, the person is transported from an existence fraught with turmoil to one in which all is well.

As might be imagined, those involved in the making of music are especially susceptible to its optimal impact. Joseph Haydn was an espouser of musical relief. In his youth, Haydn possessed an exquisite

[19] Curt Sachs, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World: East and West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1943), 31.

soprano voice. He was sent off to study music, first at the household of a relative, schoolmaster and chorister Johann Matthias Frankh, and later with composer Georg von Reutter, who was music director at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. Neither master took proper care of young Haydn, who was frequently hungry and often wore filthy clothes. Part of his motivation to sing well was to gain the attention of aristocrats, who treated him to refreshments.

By age sixteen, Haydn's voice had lost its boyish luster and he was dismissed from the choir. He found himself in destitute conditions, living in a cold and leaky attic. He earned a meager income giving music lessons to children and performing in orchestras. But he was not inclined to complain, for it was then that he embarked on a campaign of composition, which eventually yielded over 750 works. Looking back on those lean years, Haydn recalled: "When I sat at my old, worm-eaten clavier, I envied no king his great fortune."[20]

So it is with anyone who receives music's holistic embrace. In that moment, however brief, it is as though reality is held in suspension. Hardships resolve in musical waves, and emotional surges quiet the worried mind. The individual enters another realm where nothing is lacking.

Unreal, Real, and Ideal

A chord played in isolation is ambiguous. It might be the tonic of one key or a degree of several others. Without additional chords on either side, the chord cannot establish a definite mood or meaning. Likewise, a string of chords splayed randomly into the air does not have a perceptible purpose. Without pointing in a specific direction or outlining a reasoned path, it is basically functionless. Only when chords occur in a progression do they have a discernible goal, whether establishing a key, modulating, transitioning, or reaffirming.

Not surprisingly, the chord progression is the most universally satisfying, and thus the most ubiquitous, Western harmonic tool. This owes to its fulfillment of two psychological needs: structure (beginning, middle, and end) and the resolution of tension. Logical progressions convey the order and predictability we strive for in life, but often do not achieve. It is no accident that the most common progressions are also the

[20] Joseph Haydn, quoted in Stacy Horn, *Imperfect Harmony: Finding Happiness Singing with Others* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2013), 126.

most comforting, such as I-V-vi-IV and "Pachelbel's Progression" (I-V-vi-iii-IV-I-IV-V).

In contrast, a single chord, no matter the type, has no analogue in actual life. Unlike the chain of cause and effect that drives every natural process, the isolated chord has no antecedents or consequences. It is irrelevant to our interconnected world.

An unsystematic succession of chords falls between progression and isolation. Although there is movement from one chord to the next, it lacks the gratifying impact of anticipation, pattern recognition, and closure. This sort of harmonic series hits perhaps too close to home: it resembles the aimless meandering of existence. Instead of affirming a desire for order, it holds a mirror to life's frequent chaos and seeming randomness. It is relatable in a negative way.

To put it simply, an isolated chord is unreal: it is alien to any physical or psychological process. A chord succession is real: it reflects the unpredictable nature of existence. A chord progression is ideal: it embodies the direction and design we seek.

The Exclusion of Smell

One of the foundations of art is direct pleasure. We are stirred by the elegant brushstroke, the well-crafted verse, the graceful dance, the sloping rooftop, the modulation from one key to another. Whatever utility the art object may serve, it is valued as a source of experiential gratification. Yet, for all of its immediacy, art is not sensation alone. Pleasure without substance is too amorphous to stimulate deeper contemplation. Sensory stimuli must form a pathway to the mind.

Direct pleasure plus intellectual engagement equals art. Versions of this formula appear in philosophical discourses since the days of Plato and Aristotle. A sense of beauty is joined with a sense of order: balance, pattern, development, climax. These ground rules have taken some aestheticians into areas not ordinarily recognized as art *per se*, such as sports and cooking. What baseball, recipes, oil paintings, ballet, symphonies, and statues share is a convergence of pleasure and form.

Because the creative impulse has so many outlets, the philosophy of art tends to err on the side of inclusion. Art generally refers to artifacts (e.g., paintings, decorated objects, tattoos) and performances (e.g., dance, music, drama)—categories broad enough to accept marginal cases. But there are limits, most notably the exclusion of smell.

Human beings are capable of distinguishing thousands of different odor molecules. The location of the olfactory bulb in the brain's limbic

system—the seat of emotions and memories—enables smells to call up instant and powerful associations. The proliferation of perfumes and air fresheners suggests a level of discernment on par with visual and auditory judgment. Yet, despite its personal importance and nuance, there is a longstanding philosophical prejudice against the "lower sense." The reason for this is that smell resists systematic organization.

In contrast to the relationship between higher and lower musical pitches, lighter and darker paint tones, and rising and falling action, smells do not lend themselves to rational arrangement. They do not have names like the colors of the rainbow or the notes on a scale. They are always identified with the things from which they emanate (cheese, gasoline, tar, shampoo, wet socks, etc.). They are received in their entirety at the moment of perception. Thus, while smells may prompt direct pleasure and strong connotations, they lack order. We will never sniff a "smell-sonata," for, as Monroe Beardsley explains: "How would you begin to look for systematic, repeatable, regular combinations that would be harmonious and enjoyable as complexes?"[21]

This is not to belittle our capacity for smell. The forty thousand olfactory receptors are crucial to our lives and can be a source of great satisfaction. But they trigger an experience too pure to be art.

Musical Suspension of Disbelief

Creators and performers of worship music come in two basic types: those who are true believers and those who are not. While it might be assumed that the first group represents an overwhelming majority, candid admissions from composers, accompanists, choristers, music directors, and even some clergy would suggest that nonbelievers (and people on the fence) have a sizable presence among the makers of prayer-song. On the surface, their involvement reveals a scandalous contradiction: they lead congregations in devotional music, yet they are not themselves devout. However, a poll of people in the pews would show a similar assortment of true believers, nonbelievers, and occupiers of spaces in between.

This indicates that level of conviction does not necessarily determine level of sincerity. One can be fully committed to the enterprise of worship music without pledging allegiance to the words. The simple reason for this is that music allows for easy suspension of disbelief—or, more precisely, makes belief secondary to experience. Music-making is an inherently

[21] Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 99.

spiritual activity in that it facilitates deep sensations, heightened awareness, and a departure from one's ordinary state of being. As such, worship music accomplishes the religious goal of tending to the spirit—and it does so regardless of textual content.

This is especially true for religiously disinclined composers who nevertheless write music for expressly religious purposes. A famous example is Ralph Vaughan Williams, who, according to his poet wife Ursula, was "never a professing Christian."[22] In her biography of her composer husband, Ursula wrote: "Although a declared agnostic, he was able, all through his life, to set to music words in the accepted terms of Christian revelation as if they meant to him what they must have meant to [religious poet] George Herbert or to [John] Bunyan."[23]

As a conscientious composer, Vaughan Williams was careful to match lyrical themes with appropriate musical accompaniment. He undoubtedly took equal care when setting secular words to music. In the process of composition, he absorbed himself in the text, not in order to believe its literalness, but in order to turn words into an elevated—and elevating—musical experience. Like so many musicians and congregants, he approached the words of prayer essentially as an excuse for music, and the spiritual gratification he received validated his efforts.

Before we rush to judge Vaughan Williams' position as false or impoverished, let us reflect on these eloquent words from his wife: "He was far too deeply absorbed by music to feel any need of religious observance."[24] So it is for innumerable others who devote their talents to worship music.

Numinous Noises

Theologians often treat music as a potent tool for fostering sacred awareness. Music's ethereal abstractness suggests a reality beyond the ability of words to describe. Of the resources available to humanity, musical sounds are the closest representation of the divine. To quote Joseph Addison, they are "all of heav'n we have below."[25] Yet, theologians are quick to remind us that music and theology are not the

[22] Ursala Vaughan Williams, *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 29.
[23] Vaughan Williams, *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 138.
[24] Vaughan Williams, *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 29.
[25] Joseph Addison, "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day," in Joseph Addison, *The Works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison*, ed. Thomas Tickell (New York: William Durell, 1811), 204.