

A Nonconceptual Ontology of Music

Patrick Hinds
University of Surrey

Abstract

Much has been written about music's intrinsic or inherent meaning- the idea that musical sound has its own value without referring to anything outside itself. I review the views of various writers that reconcile on this point (Scruton, Kant, Hanslick, Samson, Cage, Zbikowski) and indicate a tendency to cite the conceptual elusiveness of music as a premise for the argument that music has *transcendent* meaning. This argument may entail a conflation of a lack of observable evidence (of meaning) with evidence for an unobservable meaning. To refute this transcendentalist position I invoke a range of studies in the psychology of music that ascribe *nonconceptual* content to music (Bigand and Poulin-Charronnat, Jones, Stevens and Byron, Clarke, Zbikowski, Moore, Larson and Van Handel) and a number of studies that evidence music's status in culture as a universally accessible, often trivial practice (Agawa, Nettle, McDermott and Hauser.) In addition I critique two approaches that assume a high-order communicated meaning. Subsequently, I draw on a wealth of supporting evidence in Cook that demonstrates the 'disparity between the experience of music and the way in which we imagine or think about it,' but argue that the transcendentalist assumption is nonetheless manifest in Cook's work too.

The conclusion I draw is that music is a *nonconceptual cognitive* phenomenon and affords a rich description as such via music psychology. It pertains to those aspects of the mind that *facilitate* rather than *constitute* understanding, and it is due to this ontological condition that music appears meaningless to the experiencer but nonetheless provokes a powerful phenomenological response. It may be music's lack of meaning that affords it such powerful effect: the lack of mediation by understanding implies a direct engagement with the faculties for feeling; meaning can be regarded a constraint that is lifted to allow freedom of cognitive structuring.

That music consists in the exercise of nonconceptual cognitive mechanisms could have implications for the wider debate on phenomenal consciousness or *qualia*. As Gray states, science '*can't find anything for consciousness to do.*' Music may be a good indicator of how the mind can experience while not having anything 'to do.' Citing a number of studies that suggest music is an exclusively and universally human prerogative (Agawa, Nettle, McDermott and Hauser, Cook,) I suggest that music is an ability contingent on a sophisticated concept of self. Taking music to be an exploration of nonconceptual cognitive mechanisms implies that it is a practice of subverting perceived *meaning* and engaging with aspects of *self* for the experience that entails. This ability to conceive of the conceiver is perhaps how sound can be something in itself: when environmental

information- the world- is separated from the aspect of self that is affording the means of perception- sound- and the *act* rather than the *object* of cognition is thus taken as a subject of experience. This experience lies behind meaning; ontologically removed from any form of explanation; hence the explanatory gap. Music could be an instructive form of qualia since, although it is conceptually inaccessible, it is well studied and affords various means of analytical evaluation.

Key-words

nonconceptual, cognition, self-perception, music-psychology, aesthetics, qualia, experiential autonomy.

Music's Intrinsic Value

It seems that music philosophy is somewhat closed to science. Rodger Scruton exemplifies this closure in saying:

It is obviously the case that advances in the neurosciences have begun to impinge upon what for me was a sacred and protected territory (music) and one has to, as it were, herd the call to rush to the boundary to defend it.¹

This position ties in closely with ideals concerning music's *autonomy*- the notion that music's meaning is somehow inherent or intrinsic to it. As Eduard Hanslick- the progenitor of such a view- put it, music's meaning 'inheres in the combinations of musical sounds and is independent of all alien, extra-musical notions.'²

The postulate that musical sound has its own intrinsic value, obtaining in lieu of any external mediation, is a pervasive one, seemingly persisting in various quite disparate approaches. Jim Samson, for example, while opposing himself to the likes of Hanslick (and Scruton), nonetheless seems to concede to the inaccessible, exclusively musical meaning:

Music, it might be argued, is so utterly and irreducibly specific, its meaning so embedded in its essence, that we are forced to borrow from other systems of thought in order to attempt any kind of description at all.³

And John Cage, perhaps significantly, strongly opposes the tradition of Western art music and musicology generally while still apparently sharing the same intuition with the above: 'Music means nothing as a thing'⁴ he argues; for Cage, 'sounds should be just sounds.'⁵ Note the uncanny resemblance of the latter comment to something that his ideological oppo-

1. Scruton 2011

2. Hanslick 1854/1891; 12

3. Samson 1999; 47

4. Cage 1961; 66

5. Cage 1961; 61

nent Hanslick wrote: ‘music speaks not only by means of sounds, it speaks nothing but sounds’⁶

This circumscription and consequent isolation of music from the world of meaning is by no means exclusive to philosophy either. Lawrence Zbikowski, writing in music-cognition, makes an exemplary case, suggesting that “Musical concepts are of another world, another order, because they extend into a domain that is beyond words.”⁷

I argue that this widespread tendency to hold music apart from science and, indeed, the world, can be construed as a response to and thus indicator of a particular ontological condition of music, and perhaps aesthetic experience generally, namely, that music consists of *nonconceptual cognitive* content⁸. It seems that the commonality to be gleaned from the views mentioned above- highly diverse in their wider intentions and ideas- is that music is indeed inherent to sound. However, I suggest that this does not simply open doors for transcendentalist discourse (discussed below) but rather distinguishes psychology as the appropriate means of explanation, sound being understood as a form of psychological content. And indeed there is a rich and ever growing discourse on nonconceptual musical content in the psychology of music, which I will review in the following. That music is nonconceptual implies that it appears as a *meaningless* phenomenological event, thus aiding and abetting those who claim music is *beyond* the world. However, I see nothing wrong with Cage’s approach- that of rejecting meaning outright but nonetheless pointing out that “the grand thing about the human mind is that it can turn its own tables and see meaninglessness as ultimate meaning” (p.195.) Nonconceptual cognitive content from music psychology may be useful in explaining how this can be the case.

After reviewing the psychological literature, I consider writings from philosophy, psychology and musicology, with the aim of critiquing *conceptual* assumptions- i.e. the assumption that music can be treated as a fixed abstract object. Subsequently I return to the transcendentalist argument and refute it. Finally I make some suggestions of how a nonconceptual cognitive music might bear on the wider debate on phenomenal consciousness (qualia,) if music is held to be a *self-directed* behaviour. While my view is indebted to Cage in how it paints music as something pertaining to an individual listener, that is meaningless to the individual listener, it owes something to Kant in attributing aesthetic experience to the engagement

6. Hanslick 1854/1891; 119

7. Zbikowski 2002; 326

8. I use ‘nonconceptual’ here in the loosest possible way, so loose as to be effectively interchangeable with ‘nonrepresentational.’ My definition for these terms perhaps owes more to psychology than philosophy, but I devote much of this essay to clarifying what I mean by saying music is nonconceptual, so I think that any immediate ambiguity should be resolved in the following.

of general cognitive faculties rather than abstract/mental objects:

Aesthetic judgement is not based on ‘an empirical concept, but a feeling of pleasure (and so not a concept at all.)... [this] pleasure can express nothing but the conformity of the object to the cognitive faculties (p.14)

It is nonconceptual content that can explicate this ‘conformity,’ brought about without mediation from concepts, thus reconciling the views of various philosophers *along with* work in music psychology. Music psychology provides such content from various areas.

Examples of Nonconceptual content

General indications as to music’s nonconceptual ontology

Generic musical materials have been explicated without referencing external processing units or representations, e.g.: tonal hierarchy modelled in connectionist architecture.⁹ This research demonstrates that human responses to an aspect of musical sound can be modelled by a system that has no mediating external processor, and thus affords the conclusion that the pertinent experience of such materials can be associated with non-conceptual cognitive mechanisms. Also, rhythm has been theorised as neurological entrainment,¹⁰ which suggests a neural (rather than epistemic) mechanism for the development of rhythm-expectancies.

These are means of explicating general properties of music that do not appeal to conceptual knowledge, then. For another general indication of a nonconceptual cognitive music, consider that Stevens and Byron have indicated universal musical constraints,¹¹ i.e. those that obtain across all epistemic/conceptual frameworks and so are not conceptually specific.

Description at the level of structural components.

Other studies, taken together, afford a rich description of music at the level of *specific structural components*.

Lawrence Zbikowski¹²

9. Bigand and Poulin-Charronnat 2009

10. Jones 2009

11. Stevens and Byron 2009

12. Zbikowski 2002

Zbikowski used models from cognitive science to explicate music in terms of inherent properties of the mind. One such model pertained to *cognitive categorisation*:

[Our] recognition of... things reflects the categories through which we structure our thought: to recognise a book is to identify it as a member of the category *book*; to recognise a tree is to identify it as a member of the category *tree*. Categorization occurs in all sensory modalities and throughout the range of mental activities: we categorize smells and sounds, thoughts and emotions, skin sensations and physical movement. Categories are...basic to thought. (p.13)

It was Zbikowski's insight to demonstrate how this fundamental cognitive process is essential to music listening. He did this in the form of a motivic analysis- i.e. explicating the musical motif as a cognitive category- although, as he puts it, while this 'is a good example of a musical category, categories can be much more various and structured around whatever set of musical relationships seems best to account for what is salient about a particular repertoire' (p.59.)

In which case categorisation, as a cognitive *facility* rather than a meaningful object or *concept*, could be a significant source of musical effect; it's a big part of music and a big part of the mind.

Image Schemata

Another form of nonconceptual content I'm going to mention is *image schemata*.¹³ These structures are *embodied*, so derive their content from the body as opposed to abstract mental objects; they are *metaphorical* in that they can apply to lots of different experiences. As Zbikowski puts it:

[a]n image schema is a dynamic cognitive construct that functions somewhat like the abstract structure of an image, and thereby connects up a vast range of different experiences that manifest this same recurring structure.¹⁴

This structuring thus helps us 'carve up our world'¹⁵ into manageable bits. Hence they *facilitate* rather than *constitute* understanding. Image schemata have been applied in music analysis by Moore (2010) and Larson and Van Handel (2005.)

13. see Johnson's *The Body in the Mind* (1987)

14. Zbikowski 1998

15. Johnson 1987

Eric Clarke¹⁶

Lastly, Clarke developed an approach to music based on James Gibson's¹⁷ work on *ecological theory*.

This is the theory that there is much inherent structure in the environment and in the perceiver that thus affords the perceiver *direct* perception- without mediation from abstract knowledge or representations. The ear and sound is a good example of this relationship- we don't need to know anything about sound or the ear in order for us to respond in a structured way to sound and thus perceive with efficacy.

Ecological theory refers to- and is supported by- work in the field of robotics and connectionism; for a review of embodied and ecological cognitive content see Leonard Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition* (2011.)

Summary of Nonconceptual Argument

The views of various philosophers reconcile on the notion of musical sound's inherent value.

General indications as to music's nonconceptual ontology can be gleaned from music psychology

- Connectionist modeling of tonality
- Rhythm as neurological entrainment
- Universal properties of music

Nonconceptual content can be explicated at level of music structure:

- *Cognitive categorisation*
- *Image Schemata*
- *Ecological theory*

It's important to remember that nonconceptual content explicates *cognitive facilities*: means by which we come to understand rather than objects of understanding; these are the processes *behind* conceptualisation.

This ties into Kant's description of aesthetic experience as: '[T]he harmony of [the] form with the cognitive faculties' (p.16)

16. Clarke 2005

17. Gibson 1966, 1979

Objective Views

I'm now going to talk about the opposition to a nonconceptual argument: objective/conceptual views.

Zbikowski¹⁸

To begin I will just briefly mention Zbikowski, since his view is explicitly conceptual; he believes music has concepts, and yet I have claimed that his research can be interpreted to support a nonconceptual view- viz. the cognitive categorisation methodology.

His argument is that the efficacy of cognitive theory models in music analysis indicates the existence of musical concepts, since these models are typically applied where concepts are indeed assumed. Ultimately, he fills the explanatory gap that the musical concept creates by appealing to mysticism; hence the quote considered above: 'Musical concepts are of another world, another order, because they extend into a domain that is beyond words.' (p.326)

However, there's quite a lot of literature in philosophy that suggests nonconceptual content *alone* can constitute experience, so it is not clear that conceptual content is necessarily implied by Zbikowski's evidence for nonconceptual content.

For example, this quote from Bermúdez and Cahen:

Arguably, I can perceptually discriminate many more colors and shapes than I currently have concepts for. Although I may be capable of discriminating between two color chips of very similar shades of red, red_{27} and red_{29} , not being an expert on colors I will not have the concepts red_{27} and red_{29} . With my limited conceptual repertoire, I will correctly judge both color chips to be red. However, I will so judge on the basis of experiences whose contents are much more specific and fine grained in a way that cannot be captured by my conceptual capacities.¹⁹

So, I can discriminate between things I do not have distinct concepts for- like two different shades of red, or, perhaps more pertinently, two different musical tones. This suggests that there are such things as nonconceptual experiences, so evidence for nonconceptual content is not necessarily evidence for conceptual content. Categorisation then, could be employed nonconceptually, just on the basis of sensory discrimination, I don't think Zbikowski gives any reason to doubt this.

18. Zbikowski 2002

19. Bermúdez and Cahen 2008

Debellis²⁰

Mark Debellis is important since he attempts to explicate music as an abstract object with semantic meaning, using established philosophical methodologies. This, then, is a strongly *objective, conceptual* approach.²¹

Debellis believes ‘musical hearing is representational... being a representation entails having a content, something the representation is about, means or expresses’ (p.19.) Music’s effect is here attributed to its associated representation- something extrinsic to sound; some ‘aboutness,’ ‘meaning’ or ‘expression’ that the sound carries or refers to.

That Debellis locates ‘music’ in some external, objective realm, apart from the subjective listener, is further revealed here: ‘[A]re musical organisation and other music-theoretic properties to be understood... as features of mental states or as features *of music* (which said mental states represent the music as having)? Here I opt for the latter conception...’ (p.22) Debellis views music as an *abstract object* then, and as having content equivalent in kind to theoretical/analytical representation. This is a central assumption which allows Debellis to employ Fregean semantic theory. In positing a representational ontology, Debellis is able to render music in terms of individuated, meaningful subjective objects that can then relate to real objects in the world.

After giving Frege’s example of the Morning and Evening Stars (modes of presentation, or ‘m.p.’s’ hereafter) relating to Venus (a referent or intension), Debellis discusses the musical case:

two kinds of hearing ascription may be distinguished: one whereby the kind of hearing ascribed is type-distinct- involves a different mode of presentation- from the belief expressed by the content sentence [‘untrained listener’]- and one where hearing and belief are type-identical [‘trained listener’]. Let us call the former theory-inequivalent hearing and the latter theory-equivalent (indicating epistemic equivalence, or lack thereof, to theoretical belief.) (p.40)

This suggestion of ‘epistemic equivalence’ between the expert listener’s experience and music theory is problematic since analysis is *informative*, even for the analyst, as Debellis recognises:

First we recognise... that the analysis is true to the way we have heard the passage, prior to encountering the analysis. Second, we feel we have learned something, either about the piece or about how we have been hearing it,

20. Debellis 1995

21. In fact Debellis postulates a nonconceptual level of content for music, but his work is firmly grounded in representational theory of mind; he tries reduce all musical content to Fregean semantic theory and he rejects the notion that nonconceptual content is distinct from conceptual content (pp.70-3) against Peacocke (1986, 1992a) and Crane (1992b). So his notion of ‘nonconceptual’ is in stark contrast to the one I offer here.

from the analysis.

'The assumption of epistemic equivalence of analysis and hearing that I have made... leaves quite unintelligible the element of discovery. (p.78)

The notion of shared m.p.'s between theoretical description and the listening experience of the expert is unconvincing, then, and it seems that the notion of different m.p.'s holding in relation (in virtue of an abstract object to which they relate) is no less so, as Debellis implies here:

it is an open question whether the psychological state the trained listener is in when she hears a pitch as a 5 is the same state as the untrained listener's [psychological] representation of 5- differing only in its *relations* to linguistic capacities- or a different state entirely... I do not pretend to know the answer to [such] questions, but certainly there is no a priori reason to think that the answer to any of them is yes; the burden of proof is to show that it is. (p.42)

Although the absence of evidence of such a relation could equally suggest that it needs to be evidenced if it is to be assumed (Cook (1990) argues that the relation between theoretical representation and listener experience is tenuous at best). This illustrates how Debellis's approach fails to delineate some fundamental property 'music' that would give different experiences of a musical particular a single referent, and so make semantic theory workable.

This point is reified, I think, when Debellis discusses the specification of musical meaning in terms of semantic theory:

[The note] G is scale degree 5 in [the key of] C as well as 1 in G. Since any pitch that is 5 in C is 1 in G and vice versa, '5 in C' is cointensional with '1 in G.' But... one may hear a pitch as 5 in C without hearing it as 1 in G. So the difference is... not to be found in that common intension. (pp.51-2)

The note G is a single distinct musical material, but it can be heard to function as two different theoretical constructs, depending on its context. A 'G,' then, does not sufficiently individuate musical content, since it affords a range of musical contents. Thus it cannot be the objective content. Debellis's solution is to posit a novel level of content- 'structure:'

[Structure] is a level of content shared by hearing and theoretical belief (p.52.)

This accounts for the content of the 'ordinary listener', links it to that of the expert listener, and also links the 'intension' (i.e. the particular instance of music) and the m.p. That this 'structure' has such an integral role in Debellis's theory- holding together the subjective attitudes, forms of music-representation and elements of semantic theory, as well giving 'ordinary' music content- implies that it should be an important point for him to argue. However, he disagrees:

Exactly how this is done does not seem a crucial issue; my purpose here is not to suggest a particular candidate for this kind of content but to point out the need for such a level (p.53.)

The need for such a level is a symptom of his approach. This seems more to acknowledge an explanatory gap than to give a solution: it is the objective content that he is here forced to invent. So, an objective approach like Debellis's seems to be critically flawed even on its own terms. However, there may be reason to believe that music not only doesn't afford reconciliation of subjective viewpoints, or modes of presentation, on some abstract object analogous to the Planet Venus, but doesn't actually afford reification as a subjective viewpoint or mode of presentation, analogous to 'Morning/Evening Stars' in Frege's example. In other words, I would argue that music doesn't afford representation by a first-person experiencer *as well* as a third-person analyst. Neither intensions nor modes of presentation are evident.

My reasons for arguing this relate to the work of Nicholas Cook. Cook cites a wealth of empirical, theoretical and phenomenological evidence to argue that forms of music representation and forms of music experience are 'two essentially different things,' that there is a 'disparity between the experience of music and the way in which we imagine or think about it' (p.135.)

Having reviewed empirical research by himself (1987*d*) and Alan Smith (1973), Cook argues that analytical representation does not seem to play a role in normative listening attitudes, even of expert listeners

Unless they have both the training and the inclination to track the form of a piece of music in theoretical terms as they listen, people experience recurrence without actually observing what recurs; they experience coherence but not the unitary organization in terms of which a theorist or analyst would explain that coherence²²

So, normative music listening- pertaining to whatever kind of listener- is a practice that little resembles the individuation of distinct representational objects- e.g. the Morning/Evening Star or the Planet Venus. In which case, Debellis's *first* assumption- that the subjective experience of music listening is representational- is itself questionable. Hence why I am arguing that music is an exclusively subjective experience consisting in direct, unmediated feeling; of a different kind to that which a subject can conceive of and thus objectify. These illuminating phenomenological reports, cited in Cook, give some credence to this view:

[according to Artur Rubinstein] "understand" is a word one shouldn't apply

22. Cook 1990; 68

to music; there's nothing to be *understood* for me, music must be felt."²³ Igor Stravinsky used almost the same words when he remarked, "I haven't understood a bar of music in my life; but I have felt it." (p.186)

It seems Debellis does not respect this basic ontological principle, and that the failure of his approach can be attributed to this incongruence between his approach and his subject

Nicholas Cook (1990)

While Cook's work seems to strongly oppose Debellis's, he does not endorse a nonconceptual view as I am presenting it. He does seem to drive a wedge between experience and conception, so his research is very useful when arguing for a nonconceptual music, but his discourse does not seem to conform to such a notion of music, I would argue. His view can actually be linked to Debellis's in that it implies music is equivalent in kind to representations.

Evidence for this can be found in various places. For one, he rejects potential explanation from several plausible candidates for nonconceptual psychological content

- the 'Gestalt principle of closure' and 'grouping' (p.22-3)
- the 'Phi phenomenon' (pp.24-5)
- "perceptual construction" (p.25)

All are collectively subordinated to listening for 'form' and dismissed as being 'prior to the stimulation of the [listener's] disposition' (pp.25-6.) I think he considers such perceptual mechanisms to be at too low a level of cognition to account for music.

Indeed, this I think reflects an assumption that Cook proceeds under—that the ineptitude of analysis is not due to objective models being inappropriate but is due to music's *complexity*. These next passages allude to this conception quite clearly:

Music is, as John Blacking says (1973: x), "too deeply concerned with human feelings and experiences in society... for it to be subject to arbitrary rules, like the rules of games": that is why symbols and images of music can never fully embody the coherence and quiddity of a piece of music' (p.185) In the final chapter he explains the inefficacy of theoretical constructs for being 'no more than representations of a reality that is itself more complex' (p. 236.) And again, here invoking 'context' as a possible problem with analytical representation: 'formal classifications of pitch-class content do not suffice to specify the context within which musical sounds are heard as similar

23. Quoted in Mitchell 1966: 19

or dissimilar, coherent or incoherent (p.234.)

Music, then, seems to be too ‘complex’ in its ‘coherence’ or ‘quiddity,’ too dynamic in its changing ‘context’, to be adequately explicated.’ In other words, ‘it is *too meaningful* to be conceptualised; it is *beyond* means of representation. Hence this is actually a particular form of a *transcendentalist* view- Cook assumes that the problem of explaining music stems from music’s superlative or profusion of meaning. Even in a study which seems highly congenial to a nonconceptual view- that repeatedly separates experience and conception (e.g. p.135); that argues music is not constituted by objects (p.223); that emphasises ‘the essential role that the listener... plays in the constitution of any event as a musical one’ (p.11); that suggests analytical representations are ‘explanatory metaphors or fictions’ (p.241)- the conclusion that music is simply meaningless and so inconceivable is circumvented.

Revisiting music’s transcendent meaning

The question begged, then is why do musicologists and philosophers so frequently conflate a lack of observable meaning with evidence for an unobservable meaning? Well, I think that the first answer would be that this view *glorifies* the musicologist’s subject, and therefore (vicariously) the musicologist. Jim Samson describes this glorification when it was at its height, in the 19th Century:

[The artwork] could stand for the indivisible Absolute, beloved of idealist thought. There are numerous variants of such idealist aesthetics in the nineteenth century. And there are closet supporters of it among more recent thinkers too... What they all share is a commitment to the closure which separates the work of art from the world, and the consequent capacity of the significant work to draw us into its healing “real presence.”²⁴

While this extreme perhaps is only rarely advocated nowadays, as Samson states, I would suggest that the assumption underlying it is still prevalent- that music is beyond meaning; Samson himself concedes to it in a quote mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and Zbikowski’s comment (above) is indeed exemplary (‘Musical concepts are of another world...’) And yet, it seems that the notion of there being something unique, or even peculiar about music’s content seems to be at odds with certain cultural realities:

- The most typical listening attitude has been shown to be one of indif-

24. Samson 1999; 40.

ference, where music is not the focus of attention.²⁵

- Musical experience has been observed, in the form of a favourable response to consonance, in children in the early stages of infancy.²⁶
- Music is practiced by all known peoples of the world.²⁷
- Music is highly heterogeneous both in its production and its interpretation.

These properties seem to far better reconcile with a practice of engaging fundamental cognitive mechanisms that are unconstrained by concepts than the communication of an exclusively musical, piece-specific, high-order meaning. Furthermore, what I think is a primary motivation for the transcendent view- phenomenological/experiential intensity- is accounted for in a nonconceptual view: the lack of mediation by understanding implies a direct engagement with the faculties for feeling; meaning can be regarded a constraint that is lifted to allow freedom of cognitive structuring. Consider the profusion of distinct categories that play out simultaneously in a piece of music (rhythm, harmony, melody, phrasing...), it's hard to see how such structural complexity would be possible in a conceptual narrative. So it may be by having no meaning that music has its powerful effect.

The most salient virtue a nonconceptual view has over either a transcendent view, or a straight conceptual view like Debellis's, however, may just be its potential for empirical observation couched in terms of the listener's psychology. Nonconceptual content can be revealed in formal-representations and music discourse and as such allows the attribution of psychological content to an experience of music. The transcendent conceptual view, on the other hand, relies on the possibility that a meaning could be expressed without evidencing itself if its evidence were unobservable.

That music is nonconceptual could have clear implications for how we think about music, then, since this view attributes music's effect to aspects of the embodied cognitive machinery rather than anything epistemic or transcendent. But I think that there could be scope to use this conception to move beyond 'thinking about music' and inform the wider debate on consciousness, if music is taken to be an example of phenomenal consciousness- what philosophers call *qualia*.

25. Juslin 2009; 133

26. Trehub: 2009; 231

27. Agawu 1999

Beyond ‘thinking about music’: Qualia

Qualia are *qualitative feels*: It feels a certain way to be perceptive of, say, the colour red, which is different to the way it feels to be perceptive of yellow. While science has detailed explanations of how we perceive colour, there appears to be a disparity between the notion of electrical signals passing along neuron fibres and the quality of experience that is my perception of a colour. This experience is often called qualia, and the problem of this disparity between understanding and experience has been called the *explanatory gap*:

By appeal to the physical properties of the brain we seem able to explain how we process information, how our bodies react to the environment, and even- on analogy with computers- how we reason. But why any of these processes should give rise to consciousness, that there should be something it’s like for creatures who have these processes going on inside them, this seems mysterious to us.²⁸

And it is this ‘what it is likeness’ of experience that is the source of the mystery. The last quote is from a philosopher- Joseph Levine- but I think it is instructive to also consider the problem as expressed by the neuroscientist Jeffrey Gray:

given that there is a scientific story that goes seamlessly from sensory input to behavioural output *without* reference to consciousness then, when we try to add conscious experience back into the story, *we can’t find anything for consciousness to do*.²⁹

Gray highlights the efficacy of science in describing the mind as a means of *behavioural output* here. Now, there might be mileage in the idea that music is a good indicator of how the mind can experience while not having anything ‘to do,’ in Gray’s sense. If music is nonconceptual it is isolated from observable behaviour because it is not integrated with a person’s representation of the world- it is not conceived as meaningful for the person so the person cannot produce a response that reflects its meaning and thus makes it scientifically accessible.

In order to flesh out this idea, I’d like to state that music is a *self-directed practice*. Consider that music is a ‘species-specific trait’³⁰; it is one that, “All cultures regard... as at least minimally valuable”³¹ and one that

28. Levine 2009; 286

29. Gray 2004; 40, his emphasis

30. Agawa 1999; 102-138

31. Nettl 2005; 23

non-human primates dislike- they prefer silence;³² it is trivially accessible.³³ These points suggest music rests on a distinctively human characteristic that is basic to humans generally, one such characteristic being that of a sophisticated concept of self. Taking music to be an exploration of non-conceptual cognitive mechanisms implies that it is a practice of subverting perceived *meaning*- concepts- and engaging with aspects of *self* for the experience that entails. This ability to conceive of the conceiver is perhaps how sound can be something in itself: when environmental information- the world- is separated from the aspect of self that is affording the means of perception- sound- and the *act* rather than the *object* of cognition is thus taken as a subject of experience.

So an experience of sound in itself may be an exclusively human prerogative constituted by self-directed behaviour that does not refer outwardly, and so is empirically inaccessible. In precisely the same way, an experience of an image in itself- like a colour- could be contingent on the ability to conceive of the means of perception- vision- and engage them purely for the sake of engaging them. Hence why any attempt to attribute a purpose or meaning to the phenomenal experience of perception- as science tries to do- is inherently flawed; such experience underlies any concept we might use to describe it by consisting in the intentional exercise of those aspects of self that facilitate conceptualisation. It lies behind meaning; ontologically removed from any form of explanation, hence the explanatory gap.

Music could be an instructive form of qualia since, although it is conceptually inaccessible, it is well studied and affords various means of analytical evaluation; I've highlighted some of the more sophisticated ways in which a perceiver might engage itself with sound in the section on non-conceptual content, but other highly pertinent examples include value-constraints like the tonal system and sound production in recorded music (of course, there are many other examples.) Music as an artefact has developed in culture to reflect certain invariant characteristics of cognition in order to provoke an experiential response, so provides a detailed and precise correlate to phenomenal consciousness or qualia.

Summary

I have argued a nonconceptual view of music by invoking philosophical, musicological and music-psychological data to give both a positive argument, and a critique of conceptual approaches from psychology, philosophy and musicology. In addition I have tried to demonstrate the tendency

32. McDermott and Hauser 2006

33. Cook 1990; 218

to conflate a lack of observable meaning with evidence for unobservable meaning and I have suggested that a nonconceptual view of music can inform the wider debate on phenomenal consciousness or qualia.

Conclusion

My view is that a plethora of nonconceptual content can be ascribed to music via work in the psychology of music, which can account for its experiential salience and conceptual elusiveness.

The notion of being able to generate intense experience purely subjectively, through an intentional but meaningless free play or ‘harmony’ of the cognitive faculties, might just as well be as interesting philosophically as the well-trodden ground of music’s extra-lingual expressivity. However, I think that the notion of a meaningless music seems to be contentious, and that many prefer to make the conclusion that music means too much than nothing at all. Again, I reiterate my contention in proceeding under Kant’s description of aesthetic experience:

[T]he [aesthetic] pleasure can express nothing but the conformity of the object to the cognitive faculties (p.14)

Bibliography

- Agawa, Kofi, *The Challenge of Semiotics in Rethinking Music* (1999) pp.102-138
- Bigand, Emmanuel and Poulin-Charronnat, Benedict, ‘Tonal cognition,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, (2009), pp.59-71
- Bermúdez, José, and Cahen, Arnon. ‘Non-Conceptual Content,’ section 4.1. (2008)
- Cage, John (1961), *Silence*.
- Clarke, Eric (2005), *Ways of Listening*.
- Cook, Nicholas, (1990), *Music, Imagination and Culture*.
- Debellis, Mark (1995), *Music and Conceptualisation*
- Gray, Jeffrey, (2004), *Consciousness: Creeping up on the Hard Problem*.
- Hanslick, Eduard, (1854/1891), *The Beautiful in Music*.
- Johnson, Mark (1987), *the Body in the Mind*.
- Jones, Mari Riess, ‘Musical time,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, (2009),

pp.81-92

Kant, Immanuel (1790/1952), *Critique of Judgement*.

Levine, Joseph, 'The Explanatory Gap,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Mind*, (2009), pp.281-291

McDermott and Hauser, 'Nonhuman primates prefer slow tempos but dislike music overall,' 2006

Moore, Allan, F., 'Where is here? An issue of deictic projection in recorded song'; *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135/1, (2010), pp.145-82.

Samson, Jim, 'Analysis in Context,' in *Rethinking Music* (1999) pp.45-55

Scruton, Rodger, 'Can there be a Science of Musical Understanding?' (2011) url: <http://www.themusicalbrain.org/events> accessed 02/2012

Shapiro, Leonard (2011), *Embodied Cognition*.

Stevens, Catherine and Byron, Tim, 'Universals in music processing,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, (2009), pp.14-23.

Zbikowski, Lawrence (2002), *Conceptualising Music*.