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ABSOLUTE MUSIC

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It: *Musica assoluta*; Fr: *Musique Absolue*; Germ. *Absolute Musik*; Span: *Música Absoluta*.

ABSOLUTE MUSIC AS A REGULATIVE CONCEPT

A term coined officially by Richard Wagner in 1846 (Wagner 1913, 2: 61), and then employed notoriously by Eduard Hanslick in 1854 (Hanslick 2018: 24), in both cases mainly to designate purely instrumental music, “absolute music” has had a complicate history. As Anna Pederson (Pederson 2009) has shown, the usage of this term in the musicological and aesthetic discourse of the 19th and 20th centuries made out of the correlative notion a *complex of ideas* (Sponheuer 2005: 151), a “collection of different sets of ideas” (Collins 2021: 634), or, even worse, a “clamour of contradictory discourses” (Chua 1999: 6), and thus something apparently *unreducible to a unity*.

In order to deal with this problem, I will follow Mark Evan Bonds’s suggestion of *postulating a regulative concept* beyond such semantic variety (Bonds 2014: 6). This strategy enables us to tackle crucial issues about music in the contemporary debate, such as the *specificity* of musical value and musical understanding, whereas the notion of absolute music has tended to be supplanted by terms carrying less theoretical commitment, such as “music alone” (Kivy 1998), or “music itself” (Zangwill 2015).

In this regulative modus, the concept of absolute music conveys a pre-theoretically diffuse, and not really controversial, “idea of music’s essence as autonomous, self-contained, and wholly self-referential”, where paradigmatic cases are constituted by pure instrumental music. This concept seems to be “straightforward enough” (Bonds 2014: 1).

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Even at a general level, the notion of absolute music presents ambiguities and difficulties: 1) The pre-theoretical definition provided by Bonds conflates two different notions, namely absolute music in its Hanslickian sense of *pure (instrumental) music* and the more recent mainly sociological notion of *autonomous (non-functional) music*. These two concepts should be and have been kept distinct. While both are based on the opposition between an intra- and an extra-musical domain (Eggebrecht 1997: 64), in *pure* music the opposition concerns the *content* (program music has an extra-musical content) and in *autonomous* music the *function* (religious music has an extra-musical function); 2) However, since (to take an example) *Background (non-autonomous music) music* is, at least in some cases, “pure music”, but it can not *prima facie* count as absolute music, it seems that the two above mentioned notions are implicitly entangled in the regulative concept of absolute music; 3) As a consequence, besides the predicates *pure* and *autonomous*, the pre-theoretical regulative concept of absolute music includes, at least, also the predicate *valuable* (see Zangwill 2015: 2). “Absolute music” denotes thereby music implicitly assumed to *deserve and require our attention*, and whose listening has been characterized in terms of “aesthetic contemplation as devotion” (Dahlhaus 1989: 78-87).

Such ambiguities and difficulties become even more evident, when we enter into more specific theoretical issues, mainly (even if not exclusively) relating to the musicological and philosophical domains.

A *first issue* concerns the problem of *identification*. At a theoretical level, the recent *querelle* between Taruskin and Zangwill (Stanevičiūtė *et. al* 2018: 3-41) shows how the ambition of identifying the essence of music (counting thereby as a necessary condition of “music itself”) can become controversial; at a practical level, even by assuming that such an essence can be identified, the problem remains of how in practice to pick out the musical works counting as absolute music. Peter Kivy (Kivy 1990: 15-24) showed how neither composer’s intentions nor listener’s attitudes constitute reliable criteria: the first is too restrictive, as we *de facto* treat as absolute music works originally composed i.e. with didactic (Bach’s *The Well-tempered Clavier*), social (Telemann’s *Tafelmusik* or Mozart’s *Divertimenti*) or liturgical (Bach’s Organ Music) purposes; the second is too permissive, as we can hear (and sometimes we *do hear*) any kind of musical work, paying “devotional attention” only to music.

A *second issue* concerns the *legitimacy* of the predicates *autonomous* and *pure* when ascribed to absolute music: 1) Particularly in the context of the “new musicology”, it has been suggested that musical works paradigmatic of absolute music, such as Schumann’s and Brahms’ Symphonies, can in fact be described in terms of a “composed novel” (Newcomb 1984: 234), as well as relying “no less than operas or tone poems – on codes of social signification such as affective vocabularies and narrative schemata” (McClary 2007: 67). All this yields a radical questioning of both the musical purity and autonomy of those musical works, as such narrative schemata are both extra-musical and play an ideological role within a defined social context; 2) An even more radical point of view is formulated in Adorno’s *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, according to which “intramusical tensions are the unconscious phenomena of social tensions”, and therefore “the end of music as an ideology will have to await the end of antagonistic society” (Adorno 1976: 68, 70). In this case, questions of legitimacy are not posed *a posteriori*, as relating to the very center

of the Canon of absolute music, but *a priori*: they concern the very possibility of autonomous music (and of autonomous art in general), since “the concept of autonomous art has probably always been ‘ideological’” (Hamilton 2007: 168).

A *third issue* concerns *value* (i.e. the third predicate previously identified as constituting the notion of absolute music): as Zangwill (2015: 2) correctly states, the *value* that we assign to instrumental music, in spite of its lacking semantic content, needs explanation. We can identify three main positions: (a) purely *aesthetic*, (b) *performative* and (c) *cognitive-hermeneutical*. (a) The purely aesthetic view consists, following Hanslick (2018: 40) in identifying the value of absolute music in its specific *musical beauty*: this can mean that the function of pure music is providing *pure aesthetic pleasure* (Kivy 1990: 95), and it can also entail *aesthetic realism*, that is, the view according to which the aesthetic properties exemplified by the musical work constitute the ontological ground of its value (Zangwill 2015: 14-16); (b) According to a second view, the value of pure music lies in its performative dimension, namely in the *response it elicits*. This position has been formulated by Roger Scruton in terms of “sympathetic response [...] to human life, imagined in the sounds we hear” (Scruton 1999: 355), and most recently by Hartmut Rosa in terms of “resonance”, according to which “[t]he experience of music suspends the division between self and world, transforming it in a way into a pure relationship” (Rosa 2019: 278); (c) According to the cognitive-hermeneutical view, the value of music does not depend on the *response elicited*, but rather on the *insight provided*. This view was notably proposed by Langer’s philosophy of art, according to which “[n]ot communication but insight is the gift of music; in very naïve phrase, a knowledge of ‘how feelings go.’ [...] [I]ts entire record is emotional satisfaction, intellectual confidence, and *musical understanding*” (Langer 1957: 244). This view has been re-proposed in similar terms by James O. Young, according to whom music *represents* (albeit in an illustrative, not semantic way) emotions, thereby providing “psychological insight into emotion and character” (Young 2014: 174).

A *fourth theoretical issue* is the question of musical understanding (see also Langer’s quoted excerpt). If “[a]bsolute music must be understood as pure form, according to canons that are internal to itself, the ‘philosophical problem [is] what is meant by ‘understanding music’” (Scruton 2001). Three points can be stressed in this respect:

- A diffused Wittgensteinian paradigm can be identified in many different approaches to musical understanding. This is possibly due to the fact that musical understanding concerns the grasping of “how music works” rather than of “what it says”. More specifically, musical understanding “resembles the idea of understanding a game” (Budd 2008: 123) at least for the following reasons: it is susceptible of refinement (Budd 2008: 123), such refinement can be achieved through practice, and requires the know-how involved in rule-following (Arbo 2013: 188).
- Within this general framework, it has been noticed how musical understanding is *multifaceted*. On the one hand (Budd 2008: 122-126), musical understanding has different dimensions – related to our capacities of following a performance, of performing a musical work, of dealing with different genres or with complex structures –, and can be very different accordingly to the musical works at issue: consequently, the comprehension of formal relations is not always the main criterion; on the

other hand (Kivy 1990, Davies 2011), there are different types of musical understanding depending on the different agents involved (listeners, performers, composers, musicologists).

- In this multifaceted panorama, three problems are particularly important. The *first* problem is whether mastery of technical musical vocabulary and notions are necessary for a better, or more detailed understanding of musical works (DeBellis 1995), or whether also non-technically-equipped listeners can reach such details through listening practice (Kivy 1990, Davies 2011); an intermediate position is taken by Budd, according to whom “the musically literate listener is in a more desirable position than the illiterate listener, not with respect to experiencing music with understanding, but in his capacity to make clear both to himself and to others the reasons for his musical preferences” (Budd 2008: 141). The *second* problem concerns the kind of vocabulary we employ when providing an account of our understanding of a musical work in non-technical terms, such as metaphorical (Scruton 1997 – for criticism see Budd 2008) or rather secondary literal meanings (Davies 1994 – for criticism see Zangwill 2007: 393-394). The *third* problem concerns the relevance of deep musical structures, such as the ones identified within the Schenkerian analysis, for musical understanding: Kivy (1990) maintains that musical understanding concerns only *audible aspects* of music and, consequently, deep structures are not the target of musical understanding; conversely, Stephen Davies appeals to the notion of “unconscious perception” and does not exclude that in the future human beings will be able to empirically prove the impact of such structures on our listening and understanding (Davies 2011: 126).

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