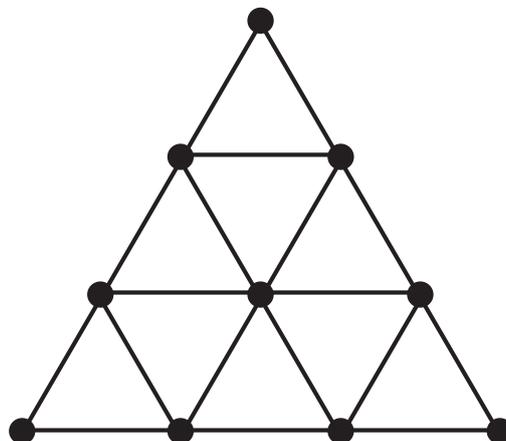


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## Music and Philosophy: Contemporary Challenges

The ties between music and philosophy are strong and venerable, as they date back to the very beginnings of the latter. According to the ancient tale, Pythagoras, when passing by a smithy one day, noticed that the hammers make sounds of different pitch and, more importantly, that some of the pitch combinations feel pleasant on the ear while the others sound rather harsh. Intrigued by this phenomenon, the ancient sage began to further investigate it with the so called monochord (being just a plank with a string attached to it which could be shortened at any chosen position to alter the pitch). Thus he discovered that the successions of two sounds that sound pleasant (or, to use a more technical term, *consonant*) could be achieved if the string is being shortened by 1:2, 2:3 or 3:4. Pythagoras could not be more satisfied with this finding, as it proved his claim that the universe is, on its hidden and true level, based upon an intelligible mathematical structure, and, moreover, that a key to understanding this structure is the Holy Tetractys, a figure representing the first four natural numbers in the form of a regular triangle:



Music, according to Pythagoras, was present not only in the purely intelligible aspect of the universe but also in the visible realm of the cosmos – as the (unhearable) sound generated by the cosmic spheres which rotate, carrying the stars in the sky. Pythagorean insights presented music as something connected very intimately to the rational harmony of reality, possibly being even closer to it than verbal language. This idea was familiar to Socrates who in the *Phaedo* identified philosophy with “the greatest music.” The concept of inaudible, soundless music that derives from and mimics the harmony of the cosmos – music of the spheres or *musica mundana* – had been vivid not only in neoplatonic or medieval philosophy but was still considered a live theoretical option by a thinker as different as Johannes Kepler, one of the founders of modern astronomy who used to interpret empirical data in a speculative and mystical framework of a Pythagorean kind.

This “cosmic” or metaphysical philosophy of music had been, however, accompanied from the very outset by a more down to earth approach – one that put forward the expressive or persuasive qualities of sound and music. Damon, a Pythagorean from the fifth century BC, claimed that different musical scales express different moods or feelings and are able to evoke them in the listeners. Music can shape people by changing not only their emotions and momentary frames of mind but also their long-lasting attitudes (*ethoses*). This capacity of music led Plato to include it into his fundamental project of *paideia* and also in a demarcation between harmful or morally evil music that should be forbidden in the proper state and the good kind that is helpful in upbringing people and making them more self-restrained. More recently, Theodor Adorno restated that Platonic distinction as he separated commercial music (being a product of “the culture industry” and a factor meant to subdue people to capitalist oppression) from contemporary avant-garde music, which for him had a subversive potential and was able to expose the contradictions of capitalism, making its listeners more conscious and freer.

Music, understood both as a representation (*mimesis*) and as an expression, has been often granted a central place in the metaphysical constructions of philosophers. Schopenhauer claimed that it was intimately related to the primordial will, being the hidden, irrational core of life and reality. Nietzsche, on the other hand, argued in his famous, juvenile essay that music contained the Dionysian energy which was essential to alleviate German culture’s suffering from the excesses of rationalism and bourgeois morality. But how do these historical accounts fare today? Is music still a crucial topic for philosophers? What philosophical problems does music pose in the twenty first century? Before addressing this question, however, one remark needs to be made. The Western culture of music has become something completely different from what it used to be. At the beginning of the twentieth century it underwent an unprecedented change which abolished the fairly strict canon that applied to it before. This process had two parallel aspects: first, the principles of functional harmony, being a theoretical foundation and a norm in classical music, were challenged and ultimately did away with by the Viennese avantgarde composers of the early twentieth century; and, secondly, the range of sounds to be considered as potential material for music has been broadened by the futurists and the pioneers of early electronic music, as well as by the invention of so called *concrete music*, which utilizes pre-recorded environmental sounds. Both the structure of a musical work and the sounds it is made of became free from any general, normative constraints. That has led to a situation where almost everything can count as music.

This radical freedom (supported by the constant development of new equipment for creating music) constituted the new space of the culture of music. This space is, first of all, a very pluralistic one. There are not only many different styles, genres and compositional techniques in contemporary music but the very question “What is music?” has become problematic. It led some theorists (Hans Eggebrecht and Carl Dahlhaus, for example) to claim that music today comes only in the plural: there is no “music” but different “musics” or musical practices that should no longer be unified by any kind of umbrella-term. This may be somewhat confusing for listeners who never know what to expect from a new composition and who have to become familiar with very different musical idioms that require different approaches and modes of listening. At the same time, however, it is an

extremely interesting situation for philosophy of culture. Contemporary music seems to need philosophy more than ever – philosophical considerations should fill the gap left absent by the traditional norms of music. Not only the very nature of music needs to be reexplored but also related questions of value appear more pressing than ever. What are the possible criteria for discerning and evaluating all the different kinds of musical output? Is music an autonomous *l'art pour art* or should it be considered in a broader (social, political, ethical, or spiritual) context? Are there any limits to constant progress and development of new avantgarde styles and techniques? How should we listen to music and how does it affect us? These and similar problems, of which many were previously resolved (or dispelled) by the tradition of European classical music, after the collapse of this tradition require philosophical attention.

But we may also point at the reverse relationship: philosophy of culture needs music as a fascinating subject matter to explore. The latter may be considered a laboratory for exploring the condition and transformations of contemporary culture. New music, for example, as it heavily depends on all kinds of equipment, presents a model of interaction between art and technology. Also, it reflects the complicated relations between culture and power, as music was utilized by the totalitarian regimes of the last century as well as taking an important part in various emancipatory or subversive movements. Yet another topic to explore is the complicated relationship of contemporary music to its past. Even if the traditional canon has lost its normative power, it obviously has not been totally wiped out from the cultural landscape, being still remembered by both artists and the audience. Contemporary music provides all kinds of evidence for research on the tensions between the past and current radical novelty in culture.

The four essays on music in the Thematic Section represent very different approaches to their topics. These differences obviously reflect the manifold nature of the contemporary culture of music and the multitude of possible philosophical approaches to that culture. Małgorzata Szyszkowska analyzes two compositions by the American composer Steve Reich. Ingeniously employing the category of intertextuality taken from literary studies, she discloses some hidden historical and personal contexts of the pieces which makes her ask about the active role of the listener in the process of apprehending music, and finally draws her to formulating a theory of listening which she calls *attentive listening*.

Anna Bugajska also combines philosophy of music with literary studies, focusing on the ideas of posthumanism which in recent years have been widely discussed. Drawing examples from very recent science fiction novels (belonging to subgenres dubbed *speculative fiction* and *biopunk*) and interpreting them according to the frameworks taken from contemporary phenomenology, theories of embodiment and Speculative Realism, she develops a very original reinterpretation of the concept of musical harmony, one that includes microtones which were excluded from Western music after introducing equal temperament in the seventeenth century. This new concept of harmony leads the author, in turn, to a possibility of a new society which would include human and non-human agents all together.

Eli Kramer's essay is very different in tone, being a personal meditation on music and the thought of Richard Wagner. Recognizing Wagner's music as a manifestation of "musical vitality" and interpreting it in the context of Schopenhauer's ideas, the author explores the realms of philosophical anthropology and philosophy of education by showing how the "musical object" can open for us the depths of our own personhood. In this moving article music is being presented as the vehicle of spiritual development and self-understanding.

My own piece which ends the Thematic Section is aimed at delineating the tension between modernist and postmodern strands in the music of the last and current century. Analyzing different musical examples I claim that this dialectical relation may prove useful as a hermeneutical tool for organizing the apparently chaotic space of contemporary musical culture. I conclude by showing how postmodern music seems to naturally fit to the technological and medial framework of contemporary digital and internet-based culture.

In her essay opening the Forum Section, Agata Bielik-Robson explores another important turn in contemporary culture, namely the “post-secular” one. Marking the crisis of secular narratives of Enlightenment and Modernity, this turn moves back to religion and theology but is far from being univocal, as the author shows in her detailed and precise study distinguishing three different strands of postsecularism. Conor Barry, in the following article, focuses on some non-obvious sources of Charles Taylor’s views on liberty and ethics. He proves that Taylor drew upon the ideas of Isaiah Berlin and Elisabeth Anscombe, taking the negative concept of liberty from the former, and the positive one, as well as the ethics of virtues, from the latter. Charles Herrman’s essay also is devoted to moral and social questions as the author meticulously explores the concept of dignity which leads him to the conviction that dignity and respect are the grounds for ethics and social justice. The Forum Section closes with John Harfouch’s article devoted to the topic of pain. Scientific and medical approaches to pain should be, according to the author, supplemented with hermeneutical investigation of this phenomenon. Drawing from the writings of Francis Fanon, Harfouch interprets the problem of pain in the context of colonial violence, or rather as a consequence of the latter.

Last but not least, I would like to draw the readers’ attention to Tibor Solymosi’s and Bill Bywater’s polemics with Mark Tschaepé in the last section of this issue. Interestingly, it is already the third part of this controversy (after Solymosi’s initial article and Tschaepé’s reply) making it the longest polemical dialogue published in our journal so far. Addressing the very contemporary problems of neuropragmatism in the context of the somehow spooky relation between democracy and new electronic media, Solymosi defends the neuro-pragmatic approach and claims against Tschaepé that audacity is a better attitude than humility in the fight against so called “dopamine democracy.”