

(*Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 140, 2016)

Contemplating Musical Essence:

A Critical Notice of Mark Evan Bonds' *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

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Mark Evan Bonds' book *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* will be read with considerable interest and profit by scholars in music aesthetics, musicology and associated disciplines. Bonds has done a marvellous job of weaving a compelling narrative without sacrificing scholarly values. The writing is clear and engaging. Moreover, the book is timely, given that deploying the idea of absolute music as a genuine option, rather than as something to be publically denounced, is not as beyond the pale as it was in the censorious heyday of so-called 'New Musicology'.

The book begins from ancient Greek thinking, and moves through late antiquity, skipping lightly through medieval period to the Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers. The 68 page chapter on Eduard Hanslick's book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*¹ is arguably the central chapter in the book, nestling comfortably between chapters on Wagner and Liszt. The narrative continues with the critical reception of Hanslick in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is also a useful and interesting appendix, which lists reviews of Hanslick's book, with brief descriptions of their contents.²

There is much to choose from for reviewers of this rich book. We restrict ourselves to focusing on methodological issues and on Eduard Hanslick. There is much fascinating material that we pass over.

Before turning to the central themes we want to address we would like to voice a suspicion. We sense a shyness in Bonds' text. The book is officially limited to describing the history of an idea, but one might think there is a subtext—a partial vindication of the idea. A criticism we have, therefore, is that if that is so, the subtext could have more explicit in the text. Recent English-speaking musicology has been remarkably hostile both to the idea of absolute music and to its prophet—Eduard Hanslick. For example, Daniel Chua's book *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, published in 1991³, is premised on the badness of the idea. Susan McClary has a much cited paper with "Absolute Music" in the title published in 1993, which has a lot of negative attitude, but is rather short on arguments.⁴ And in 2009 Sanna Pederson writes: ". . . but who would

¹ Abbreviated to 'OMB' for references; and references being to the Geoffrey Payzant's English translation, *On the Musically Beautiful*, Indianapolis: Hackett 1986.

² Bonds might have covered significant writers of the Islamic tradition, in particular Avicenna. And the coverage of Kant is very bare. While Bonds is generally a sure-footed guide, he is not infallible. The description of Hume is flawed. Hume (without whom Kant makes zero sense) is quoted by Bonds as holding the view that "each mind perceives a different beauty" and "a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right" (pp. 83-84 and 88-89). But Hume is here describing a view he will argue *against*, while preserving a sentimentalist framework.

³ Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

⁴ Susan McClary, "Narrative Agendas in 'Absolute' Music", republished in her *Reading Music*, Durham: Ashgate, 2007; originally published in 1993.

want to write *for* [absolute music] today?”⁵ So extreme is the hostility of some English-speaking musicologists to the notion that they cannot bear even to write the words “absolute music” without scare quotes encircling the words, like a burning tire ‘necklace’. In this closed-minded context Bonds’ book is especially welcome. It is sign, we hope, of more pluralist and healthier intellectual times to come.

Bonds ends his book saying that we should keep on discussing the issue of absolute music. He writes:

“...the history of the idea [of absolute music] makes it clear that absolute music will always play a role in our attempts to explain an art whose essences remains as elusive as its effect remains real” (p. 299).

But why? If the very idea is a plain error, as so many have thought, then why do we need to carry on discussing it? Surely Bonds must think that there is some truth in the idea. But no, at least officially; he has his neutral “trac[ing] the history of this idea” hat on (p. 5). Bonds retreats into the purely historical mode, the officially non-evaluative mode. But can writing any history be so neutral, especially the history of ideas? If not, then the honest path is to display what one thinks are one’s normative commitments for readers to think about.

It is possible that the vilification of the idea of absolute music in English-speaking musicology has left its scars on Bonds. We suspect that he is not fully out of the closet. We find it hard to believe that he is really just pursuing a value-neutral description of an idea? Or does Bonds hand slip, revealingly, in the passage we just quoted from the end of his book, just as he says that Hanslick’s hand slips at the end of *On the Musically-Beautiful*? Perhaps in a future edition of this book Bonds should delete this suggestion? Bonds seems to have more sympathy with the idea than he is revealing. Does Bonds tip his hand here? Why has he bothered to write a Big Book about the subject? He thinks that the *debate* is important. But why? Evolutionary biologists do not in general think it is worthwhile to debate creationism (except perhaps in Kansas once in every generation) because they think that that idea has vanishing credibility. Someone who thinks that debating creationism is worthwhile is someone who thinks that there is quite a lot to be said for it. Bonds does not come clean and say that there is much to be said for the idea of absolute music, and for the claim that it is explanatorily useful in application to much actual music. This is something that we reviewers are unashamed to do. Professor Bonds: why not join us?

Part One: Methodological Issues

We have three methodological points.

Long and Short Histories

First, one thing that is notable, even remarkable, in Bonds’ treatment is the scope of his historical narrative. For Bonds, the idea of absolute music is one with a longer history than is usually supposed. Bonds traces the idea all the way from Pythagoras to the 20th Century. There is a contrast here with Carl Dahlhaus, and many other writers, for whom the idea has its sources in the 18th and 19th Centuries.⁶ If those other writers are right, it would mean that the idea of absolute music is

⁵ Sana Pederson: “Defining the term ‘Absolute Music’ Historically”, *Music and Letters* 2009: 240 her emphasis.

⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, University of Chicago Press, 1989; originally published in 1978.

somewhat parochial. It would follow that it has less claim on our attention because of that. But if the idea has a longer history, as Bonds thinks, then it must be a somewhat more inclusive idea. And the idea might be more compelling than some mere passing intellectual fashion. (This longer history could be part of a vindication or rehabilitation of the idea.)

This commitment to long roots would be enough to make Bonds' book significant in the history of the history of the idea of absolute music. However, at some point we are bound to wonder exactly what the content of this idea is, which has such a long history. A sceptic might say that we cannot understand the idea of absolute music except via the more specific cultural and musical history of the 18th and 19th centuries. This is an important issue. Is it right to see the notion or notions of absolute music in play at that time as having much older roots? The sceptic might argue that the Greek notion of *musike* is so different from the modern notion of music that it precludes there being a common notion or some common notions of absolute music shared between them and us. For example, is it really profitable to discuss whether the music of the spheres was or was not absolute? For Plato, the idea of *harmonia* in the soul or in political life was no metaphor but a literal musical quality of mind or society.⁷ How close is the Greek idea of *musike* to later post-enlightenment notions of music? For Bonds, to understand the later we must see it as growing from the former (p. 9 and see p. 126). Is this right? Did Pythagoras really have 'the' idea of absolute music, as Bonds says (on p. 16)?

Bonds might say that a long history of the notion is supported by Hanslick's deleted ending of the first edition of *On the Musically Beautiful*, where Hanslick speaks somewhat wildly of the universe and infinity. This passage disappears by stages in the second and third editions. But we doubt Bonds' reading of the content of the deleted ending and we doubt his speculation about why Hanslick deleted it. Bonds thinks that in that passage Hanslick revealed a Pythagorean tendency that underlay the whole book, which he then tried to brush under the carpet in later editions (pp. 183-209). Bonds needs this reading in order to vindicate his long reading of the history of absolute music whereby Hanslick's book is a manifestation of something much older. We address the interpretation of the deletion more fully elsewhere.⁸ We mention just one central problem here, though, which is that the deleted passage does not, as Bonds claims, make a connection between music on one hand, and the universe and infinity, on the other. Instead the universe and infinity are connected to the mind or soul (*Gemüth*) of the creative talent or listener. This paragraph was a rhetorical flourish, and without it the book does not end properly. But the flourish misfired and invited misinterpretation, as his friend Robert Zimmerman pointed out in his review. So Hanslick took it out, leaving a formally unsatisfying ending. There is more to be said about the deletion; but it is clear that it does not support a long history of the idea of absolute music.

The Persistence of Ideas

Second, there is a somewhat theoretical concern that we might have here, which is raised by any excursion in the history of ideas: what does it mean for an idea to have a history? For someone like Gottlob Frege, the founder of much of Twentieth Century Philosophy, ideas are abstract objects, outside space and time.⁹ *People* might have histories; that they think this or that might have a history; but not the ideas themselves. From this perspective one might wonder what the history of ideas could possibly be.

⁷ See Andrew Barker, *The Science of Harmonics in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge University Press 2007.

⁸ See "Hanslick's Deleted Ending", a contribution to a symposium on Bonds' book in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, forthcoming.

⁹ Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference", *Philosophical Review* 1948; originally published in German in 1893.

If ideas do have histories—somehow—then there need not be strict identities over time. An old tree might be the same tree that it was 300 years before, but it may change over time quite a lot. It may grow, for example. Similarly, it seems, an idea can change, to an extent, while remaining in some sense the same idea. Merely being an ancestor is not sufficient for sameness. A tree comes from a seed from a distinct tree. One is the ancestor of the other, but not the same tree. There are general puzzles here, which Bonds might have acknowledged, about what an idea is and what it can possibly mean to write the history of an idea, and to trace one idea as it persists through time. An idea is hardly like an unchanging asteroid drifting through deep space. Bonds might have been more reflective. Writing the history of an idea cannot but raise these issues. Musicology is not a particular reflective discipline, and when it does get reflective there is a tendency to dive into the murky depths of obscure postmodern French ‘theory’, or the more convoluted variety of German idealism, which rather throws up clouds of apparent profundity rather than engendering clarity. Kudos to Bonds for sparing us that! Nevertheless, a little more reflection on what he takes himself to be doing might have helped the reader to think about the enterprise.

What is the idea of Absolute Music?

Third, Bonds is writing the history of an idea... but which idea? We need more than what Bonds gives us to get a fix on the content of the idea that is being traced through history. On the first page we get the statement that it is the idea that music’s essence is “... autonomous, self-contained, and wholly self-referential”. But what does that mean? It surely does not suffice to define anything very interesting. For example, presumably Bonds means “non-referential” by “self-referential”. Bonds many times describes what is at stake, in slightly different ways, but he never really improves on this initial formulation. At the end of the book, the idea is said to be of music as a: “... wholly autonomous art, free from all contingencies” (p. 298). But who would defend *that*?! It seems to imply that composers, musicians and audiences do not eat food, for instance. There seems to be an idea or range of ideas that people have had in mind in debating absolute music; but this cannot be it, or it would not have been worth debating. Nothing would be at stake. Is it the contrast between instrumental and non-instrumental music? Not quite. Or is it that there is something—music—and some things are part of it and some are not; and some think that only what is part of it is important while others seek to relate music to non-music? But is not part of the debate precisely about what is part of music? Alternatively, there might be what Ludwig Wittgenstein would call a ‘family resemblance’ of ideas and issues.¹⁰

We shall not here embark on the task of fixing this problem, and clarifying the idea(s) or dispute(s). But someone needs to do that, some time. This may be a philosopher’s quibble; a certain kind of pedantic philosopher might distinguish 46 different meanings of “absolute music”, during which time most of us will have fallen asleep. Nevertheless, how can it not matter to get clear about the central idea or ideas at issue? Otherwise, what we are talking about?

We note that Bonds says that the idea of absolute music is a “regulative idea” (p.6 and p. 299). However, we never worked out what that was supposed to mean.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Originally written in the late 1930s. See especially sections 65-71.

Part Two: On Hanslick and Essence

Having put some methodological concerns on the table, let us proceed to the hero of the idea of absolute music—or villain, depending on your point of view.

Hanslick's Contemporaries

Bonds' analysis of Hanslick's contemporary philosophical and music-theoretical context is an impressive piece of scholarship and probably the most comprehensive account so far. Bonds' strong focus on the music-theoretical discourse of Hanslick's contemporaries deserves particular praise. This is entirely new, and highly relevant to Hanslick scholarship. Most work in this field has been done on Hanslick's connection with German intellectual history in a rather loose and general manner (prominent in German scholarship from the 1970s and 1980s), and Hanslick's philosophical background. Bonds not only weaves all these threads together, with superior scholarship, he also offers new and surprising insights into the scope of music-theoretical and music-aesthetical ideas that Hanslick adopted from contemporary authors. A name one might want to add is that of Adolf Bernhard Marx whose ideas on "musical logic" are probably an influence on the aesthetics of *On the Musically Beautiful*. Bonds also reviews Hanslick's philosophical context, with a particular focus on his connection with Herbart and Herbartianism in its political context in the Habsburg Empire; a topic that already received considerable interest in Anglo-American scholarship¹¹. Hanslick's philosophical roots are a curious mix, and his indebtedness to Friedrich Theodor Vischer might be a little undervalued in Bonds' book. To this day, however, Hanslick scholarship showed a strong tendency to focus on either the Austrian-Herbartian or the German-Idealist side of his philosophical background and we still lack a broader understanding of how different, rather heterogeneous, philosophical threads are intertwined in the treatise.

Essence and Effect

The Hanslick chapter in Bonds' book is called "Hanslick's "Pure" Music", pp. 141-209, and it introduces part III, "essence *or* effect", and these opposites may well serve as an analytical motto of Bonds' investigation. According to Bonds, Hanslick "decoupled the essence of music from its effect. He acknowledged that music could produce a powerful response in the listener, but he considered this response unrelated to the fundamental nature of the art. In this respect, Hanslick is an essentialist: his treatise is an attempt to define what music *is* without regard to what it *does*, deeming the latter irrelevant to the former" (p. 11ff.). Compared to the Monteverdi-Rousseau-Wagner tradition, Hanslick "viewed music's essence more narrowly, in terms of its material substance" (p. 52) and "eventually chose to treat the essence of music as a thing wholly apart from its effect." (p. 126).

The grandiosity with which Hanslick ignored the *effects* of music, and his bold, radical approach to aesthetic method, can well be considered the main feat of *On the Musically Beautiful*. But "what does he take the positive essence to be? In his *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* David Chua writes: "Beauty, for Hanslick, is a question of *essence*. Music may evoke emotions, but such emotions cannot define its being; it may gather the intellectual trappings of history, but these meanings are not essential but extraneous to the "intrinsic beauty" of music".¹² However, Chua

¹¹ Cf. Kevin Karnes, *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History: Shaping Modern Musical Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna*, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press 2008 (AMS Studies in Music).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

takes a further step on Hanslick's behalf. On his reading of Hanslick, "music in essence is only the score".¹³ But this is not something that Hanslick says in *On the Musically Beautiful*.

Bonds is less outspoken than Chua when it comes to defining what music's "essence", according to Hanslick, is. If the essence is its intrinsic beauty, where is it located? Is it the score? The performance? An intentional object in the mind of the composer? Bonds is not to blame for this obscurity, nowhere in the treatise is Hanslick clear on this point. Elsewhere in the book, Bonds observes that Schenker, "like Hanslick, ... saw performance not as the realization of a musical work but as a source of ontological corruption" with purity "to be found in the score" (p. 285). In a way, one could certainly regard performance as an "ontological corruption", for, as Hanslick states, "the same piece disturbs or delights, according to how it is animated into sounding reality" (OMB, 49). But he also thinks that the score can be an ontological corruption, though of a different sort: "The layout of notation in the score as it presents itself to the eye ... is not a musical determination but an abstraction" (OMB, 81). However, if both performance and score may "ontologically corrupt" the musical work, where is its "essence" to be found?

The usual interpretation narrows the core of Hanslick's aesthetic conception in such a way that the abstract, notational component of (Western classical) music is emphasized at the expenses of its more sensuous aspects. Bonds follows Chua down this path. However, in downplaying the role of the listener, Hanslick, thus interpreted, would no longer be part of a philosophical tradition that aimed to reconcile music seen as an "art of the mind and spirit" with music seen as "merely sensory entertainment" (p. 82). What is important, but many writers miss, is that the most basic concept of Hanslick's treatise is the concept of *tone*, not of *note*. And since tones have to be heard and perceived in some way, it seems difficult to leave the listener entirely out of it. If music concerns the artful combination of tones, and tones involve an audience of some sort, it is not at all clear how the essence of music can be defined without any reference to a listener or to a performance. Bonds claims that the essence of music, for Hanslick, has nothing to do with the listener, or the act of listening. It is true that Hanslick's rhetoric obscures some of his arguments. But if the essence of music lies in tones (not notes) then, contrary to Bonds, performance must in some way be part of the essence of music, for Hanslick.

Tönend Bewegte Formen?

Payzant renders *tönend bewegte Formen* as "tonally moving forms". *Tönend*, as Payzant correctly states, is "an adverb derived from the present participle of the verb *tönen* which in English can mean "to sound" ("Towards a revised reading of Hanslick", in: OMB, 101). The Payzant translation, however, focuses not on the aspect of sound but on the aspect of *tönend* as a "tone-word", related to "tone". According to Payzant, a "tone" is "a sound, actual or imagined, perceived as occupying a position in a diatonic musical scale" ("Towards a revised reading of Hanslick", in: OMB, 95). Bonds observes, in a similar vein, that the element of sound is clearly present in Hanslick's *tönend* (p. 147), but his focus ("tonally animated forms") is also on the tonal-diatonic aspect of its meaning. With a reading of *tönend bewegte Formen* like Payzant's, which even allows for purely imagined tones as a basis of Hanslick's aesthetics, *On the Musically Beautiful* is entirely consistent with the Herbart tradition where tones "should merely be heard, or even ... merely read, yet they please anyway."¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Johann Friedrich Herbart, *Kurze Enzyklopädie der Philosophie aus praktischen Gesichtspunkten entworfen* Ed. G. Hartenstein, vol. 2 of *J F Herbarts Sämmtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1850). p. 111 (§ 71), translation by Lee Rothfarb.

But a closer look at the textual context of that famous phrase makes one wonder about the accuracy of Payzant's solution. The passages subsequent to *tönend bewegte Formen* explain each of the components in order: Hanslick compares *Formen* with the arabesque, *bewegt* with the kaleidoscope. When it comes to explaining the aspect of *tönend*, however, Hanslick does not address tones and their position in a diatonic scale, but the "undervaluation of the sensuous" that Hanslick makes responsible for the fact that "people do not acknowledge the abundance of beauty residing in the purely musical" (OMB, 29). It is understandable, then, that Hanslick does indeed highlight the importance of (not just any but) aesthetically sensitive listening: "True aesthetical hearing is an art" (OMB, 65). According to Hanslick, this "art" of listening involves both the intellectual *and* the sensuous component, though the main aesthetic emphasis is on the intellectual side: "With sensuous and sentimental people, the intellectual aspect can diminish to a minimum, with predominantly intellectual people, it becomes nothing short of crucial. The true "happy medium", in our view, here inclines preferably a bit to the right [the intellectual side]" (OMB, 65). Even melody—the main focus of Hanslick aesthetics (as "theme")—has at least *some* acoustical component, some element of sound (not just notes) as a necessary component: "Each melody must be thought up along with its particular harmony, with its own rhythm and sonority"¹⁵.

If the acoustical component is a necessary requirement for a full appreciation of "the abundance of beauty residing in the purely musical", what, then, is music's essence, for Hanslick? It seems that Hanslick was much closer to a proto-phenomenological point of view than the widespread perception of his aesthetics as a hardcore formalist approach privileging the purely notational components that are typically codified in a score. The essence of music is thus acoustically contextualized in a certain way, though it is hard to tell to which degree. Hanslick might not have deemed Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* still "beautiful" if performed with bagpipes and tubas.

Hanslick's Historicized Musical Beauty?

A second point is more crucial. Hanslick's aesthetics is not only acoustically contextualized with respect to the *tönend* aspect of *tönend bewegte Formen*, it is also historically contextualized with respect to the *Formen* themselves. In a perplexing passage, unchanged in all editions, Hanslick makes a rather unexpected observation: "There is no art which wears out so many forms so quickly as music. Modulations, cadences, intervallic and harmonic progressions all in this manner go stay in fifty, nay, thirty years, so that the gifted composer can no longer make use of them and will be forever making his way to the discovery of new, purely musical directions. ... Without inaccuracy we may say, of many compositions which were outstanding in their own day, that once upon a time they were beautiful" (OMB, 35)¹⁶. The passage has puzzled Hanslick scholars. Karnes leaves open whether "it might have been an incautious slip of the pen that induced Hanslick to use the word *beautiful* (*schön*) in this instance"¹⁷. Bonds acknowledges the passage but concludes: "It is precisely such transitory issues of musical style that occlude the deeper quality of immutable beauty" (p. 178). However, this suggests that the concept of "immutable beauty" lies in the center of Hanslick's aesthetics, while the described exhaustion of forms, as "transitory issues", have to be located in its periphery. Indeed, one of Bonds' central claims is that the "essence" of music that Hanslick

¹⁵ OMB, 34. The German original has "*dieser Klanggattung*" where the Payzant translation has "sonority". A more literal translation might refer to a "specific genre of sound" instead of Payzant's "sonority".

¹⁶ Payzant's phrasing "purely musical directions" is not quite correct. *Züge*, the word used by Hanslick, might be best translated as "features".

¹⁷ *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History: Shaping Modern Musical Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna*, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press 2008 (AMS Studies in Music), p. 52.

attempted to uncover is fundamentally ahistorical, that his treatise can in fact be read “as an attempt to deny the force of history by ignoring it altogether” (p. 183).

But this is difficult to defend, even if we limit the scope of the aforementioned passage to musically less significant changes in cadences, modulations, and the like. From the 6th edition onwards, Hanslick included a footnote taken from his review collection *Moderne Oper* (“Modern Opera”, 1875) that leaves little doubt about the weight he assigns to the force of history: “The well-known saying that the “truly beautiful” can never lose its charm, even after a long time, is for music little more than a pretty figure of speech. (And anyway, who is it to be the judge of what is “truly beautiful”?) ... All music is the work of humans, product of a particular individuality, time, culture, and for this reason permeated with mortal elements of various life-expectancies. ... The public, like the artist, has a legitimate inclination toward the new in music, and criticism which has admiration only for the old and not also the courage to recognize the new undermines artistic production. We must renounce our belief in the deathlessness of the beautiful” (OMB, 41). It is difficult to square this with Bonds’ interpretation. Bonds might object that Hanslick’s examples here are taken from opera, not from instrumental/absolute genres. But the argument is consistent with other claims about a historically relativizing element in the very foundations of musical aesthetics. As early as in the 1st edition of 1854, and also unchanged in substance in all later editions, Hanslick conceded that “our tonal system also will undergo extension and alteration in the course of time”, though he thought that “yet so many and such significant developments are still possible within the prevailing laws of music that a basic change in the system seems a long way off. If, for example, the extension consisted in ‘the emancipation of the quarter tone’ ... then theory, the teaching of composition, and musical aesthetics would change completely” (OMB, 71). To be sure, any such possible change is seen as no more than an option and does not affect the actual aesthetics of music that Hanslick intended to develop. But as Geoffrey Payzant has put it, “if the very material out of which musical compositions are made is itself subject to change, then obviously it would be impossible for products made of it not to be.”¹⁸

One might now ask how this more “liberal” reading of Hanslick that we are suggesting, which allows for acoustical as well as historical contextualization, could be compatible with passages that clearly seem to promote an aesthetic of unchanged beauty. “The beautiful is and remains beautiful”, Hanslick stated in a well-known passage that he added in the 2nd edition of the treatise, “...even when it arouses no emotions, indeed when it is neither perceived nor contemplated. Beauty is thus only *for* the pleasure of a perceiving subject, not generated *through* that subject” (OMB, 5, here cited in Bonds’ slightly more accurate translation (p. 189). Certainly, one of the troubles with Hanslick’s rather brief treatise is the openness of many of its key concepts. His use of “beautiful” is essentially twofold: in one sense, it is a term designating properties and relations that inhere in an object of musical aesthetics; but it is also a term that defines an aesthetic ideal (as the opposite of “ugly”). In a way, Hanslick’s theory thus oscillates between a proto-phenomenology of music, on the one hand, and a traditional normative approach to aesthetic judgment on the other. With these different perspectives in mind, it is not always easy to determine which meaning of “beauty” Hanslick has in mind. When used in the normative sense, a sentence like “the beautiful is and remains beautiful” could indeed indicate that Hanslick believed in timeless aesthetic ideals: once the beauty of an object is established, no other aesthetic judgment about that object is correct. When used as a general term to designate aesthetic attributes, however, we arrive at the—somewhat trivial—conclusion that the aesthetic (in our case: the specifically musical) attributes of an aesthetic object remain the same also when that object is not perceived: the score not read, the performance not heard. It is doubtful that Hanslick intended the sentence to hint at a timeless, ahistorical

¹⁸ “Hanslick on Music and Time”, in: *Hanslick on the Musically Beautiful: Sixteen Lectures on the Musical Aesthetics of Eduard Hanslick*, Christchurch: Cybereditions 2002.

dimension of the musically beautiful. It was taken from Robert Zimmermann's review of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*,¹⁹ but Hanslick hesitated to also adopt the following sentence: "For the beautiful is founded in unchanging relations".²⁰ Obviously, this hardcore Herbartian doctrine was a view that Hanslick did not share. Although he certainly subscribed to many convictions of Herbartian aesthetics—Bonds (pp. 158-162) gives a useful and well researched account—Hanslick remained remarkably reserved with respect to its static, ahistorical outlook on "relations" as a fixed and unchanging basis of aesthetics. Hanslick remained much closer to Friedrich Theodor Vischer, an aesthetician that Hanslick held in high regard throughout his life.²¹ It thus comes as no surprise that instead of adopting Zimmermann's Herbartian claim about unchanging relations, Hanslick added what could easily be seen as a reflection on a thought by Vischer.²² At any rate, we think that Bonds is incorrect when he takes the history out of Hanslick's conception of musical beauty.

Methodological Purity?

On the Musically Beautiful, although rightly praised for the clarity of its arguments and the relieving absence of the jargon typical of 19th century German aesthetics, is an open text in many ways, with different possible perspectives and interpretative angles. Bonds takes Hanslick's talk about "purity" to concern the essence of music. However, Hanslick's talk of purity may be more a matter of his views about aesthetic discourse. An alternative reading of Hanslick might see the core of his aesthetic approach not in his search for music's "essence" but rather in his attempt to define what music-aesthetic discourse is, or should be, about, and how we are to talk about music in an objective manner. A more methodological reading might be particularly suited for Hanslick's "obsession with the idea of purity" that Bonds detects in the treatise and considers a central element of his "essentialism" (p. 183). "Pure", as Bonds observes, "is a word that appears over and over" in Hanslick's book. (p. 154). But when Hanslick "made purity the hallmark of 'true' music" (p. 12), he did so in order to isolate the elements that can be considered "specifically musical" from other, non-musical aspects: "We have deliberately chosen instrumental music for our examples. This is only for the reason that whatever can be asserted of instrumental music holds good for all music as such. ... Of what instrumental music cannot do, it ought never be said that music can do it, because only instrumental music is music purely and absolutely" (OMB, 15).²³ The suggested method is consistent with similar claims by Herbart and Bolzano; it aims at gaining an autonomous music-aesthetical point of view that can only be developed when examining instrumental music that is unmixed with other genres and can thus be considered "pure" and "absolute". But also musical aesthetics itself has to remain "pure" in order to avoid confusion with non-aesthetical perspectives (such as sociology of music, history of music etc.): "While the connection between art history and aesthetics seems necessary from the methodological point of view, yet each of these two sciences must preserve unadulterated its own unique essence in the face of unavoidable confusion of one with the other" (OMB, 39; "unadulterated" is *rein*, "pure", in the German original). Hanslick's use

¹⁹ Rudolf Schäfke was the first to make this observation (*Eduard Hanslick und die Musikästhetik*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1922 (Sammlung musikwissenschaftlicher Einzeldarstellungen 1).

²⁰ „Denn das Schöne beruht auf sich gleich bleibenden Verhältnissen.“ Cf. Hartmut Grimm, *Zwischen Klassik und Positivismus. Zum Formbegriff Eduard Hanslicks*, Ph.D. thesis Berlin 1982.

²¹ Barbara Titus, "The Quest for Spiritualized Form: (Re)positioning Eduard Hanslick", in: *Acta Musicologica* 80/1 (2008), S. 67–98, p. 82ff.

²² Cf. Vischer 1851, p. 13: "Das Schöne ist ... wesentlich Erscheinung, also für ein anschauendes Subjekt." ("Beauty is ... essentially appearance, which is for a perceiving subject"). The context of the passage is Hanslick's introduction of the concept of "Anschauung" (contemplation) that Zimmermann, in his review, regarded as rooted in Vischer.

²³ The term "absolute music" that Hanslick uses in the German original (with *Tonkunst*, "art of tones", as another German term for music)—*reine, absolute Tonkunst*—is somewhat obscured in the Payzant translation.

of “purity” is strategic, it is a means of separating analytical spheres in order to avoid the sort of confusion associable with the highly synthesizing methods of German Idealism. It is in this sense that Hanslick states: “System-building is giving way to research” (OMB, 2). Hanslick’s method and even its wording are remarkable similar to Hans Kelsen’s later attempt to secure an autonomous sphere of juridical argument in his *Reine Rechtslehre* (“pure theory of law”): In order to establish such an autonomous method, and to isolate it from other aspects of law such as history and sociology, we need to separate the contingent contents of legal norms from its structural components. Consequently, this can only lead to the conclusion that an objective approach must capture “form and only form” (*Form und nur die Form*).²⁴ The legal norms themselves change in the course of history. It is only their *form* that counts from an objective, autonomous point of view. This line of argument is methodological, not ontological, its goal is to establish proper rules of discourse. Just as Kelsen did not attempt to uncover any ahistorical essence of law but rather tried to define the rules of juridical discourse as an autonomous, objective endeavor, one could perhaps reconstruct Hanslick’s aesthetic program along similar lines as being primarily concerned with the establishment of a proper “scientific” perspective.

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Lastly, we want to emphasize that this is an excellent book, which will greatly benefit future discussion of the nature and value of music. If we have criticized aspects of it, it is because the issues raised are of central importance, which have lurked in the shadows of academic discussion of music for too long. It is healthy that these issues are out in the open and can be debated in the light of proper scholarly investigation of their content and their origins. Bonds’ book is a beautifully crafted invaluable resource.

²⁴ *Hauptprobleme der Staatsrechtslehre, entwickelt aus der Lehre vom Rechtssatze*. Tübingen 1911, p. 92.