

# On the destruction of musical instruments

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## Abstract

In this article, I aim to provide an account of the peculiar reasons that motivate our negative reaction whenever we see musical instruments being mistreated and destroyed. Stephen Davies has suggested that this happens because we seem to treat musical instruments as we treat human beings, at least in some relevant respects. I argue in favour of a different explanation, one that is based on the nature of music as an art form. The main idea behind my account is that musical instruments are not mere tools for the production of art; rather, they are involved in an essential way in artistic appreciation of music. This fact not only grounds our negative reaction to their mistreatment and destruction but also has a normative force that is lacked by the account proposed by Davies.



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Why do we think it is wrong to destroy or mistreat a musical instrument, and what grounds our reactions when we see musical instruments being damaged or destroyed? This is the question Stephen Davies tries to answer in his essay “What is the Sound of one Piano Plummeting?”<sup>1</sup> As far as I am aware, this article is the first contribution by a philosopher of music to the issue of instrument mistreatment. In this article, I briefly summarize his position and offer an alternative account. My proposal has the merit, I contend, of showing how the mistreatment of musical instruments is essentially related to the role instruments play in music as an art.

There are various artistic contexts in which instrument mistreatment or destruction takes place. This paragraph provides a brief account of the variety of cases in which musical instruments

have been destroyed or mistreated. Some contemporary pieces of music or performance art entail an improper use of an instrument or even its destruction. More famously, certain musicians in the world of popular music, especially rock, have the habit of sacrificing their instruments to the stage at the end of their show. Davies names Hendrix, Pete Townshend and Keith Moon, and the list could of course be much longer. Jerry Lee Lewis was one of the first artists in popular music to destroy an instrument, setting fire to his piano at the end of a show. Deep Purple guitarist Ritchie Blackmore used to involve in the spiral of destruction his Marshall amplifier too. Guitar smashing is certainly the most infamous pastime of rock musicians, but other instruments are sometimes involved, as Moon’s example shows. (He was the drummer in the band *The Who*.) Paul Simonon of The Clash

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destroyed his bass on stage, an act immortalized in a photograph that became the cover of the band's album *London Calling* (1979). It is unsurprising to find instances of musical instrument mistreatment and destruction in a nihilistic and self-destructive aesthetics such as the one that characterized the punk movement. Moving to metal music, we find a characteristic shift in the attitude toward instrument mistreatment. A more regulated lifestyle than the one favoured by the musicians of the 60s and 70s often accompanies the high level of virtuosity often showcased by players of this genre. This different approach to music making, seen perhaps more as a profession rather than as a self-expression and social critique, is perhaps what is behind the relative lack of popularity of guitar smashing in the metal world. There are, however, relevant exceptions. Neoclassical metal guitarist Yngwie Malmsteen has destroyed guitars on stage in a way that closely resembles the guitar smashing acts performed by Ritchie Blackmore, one of Malmsteen's musical heroes. Moreover, I have personally seen Malmsteen snapping one by one the six strings of his Fender Stratocaster—a less brutal mistreatment than the usual smash, but equally an example of apparently gratuitous violence on the instrument.

The German industrial metal band Rammstein provides another instance of musical instrument destruction. At the end of some live performances of the song *Los*, keyboard player Christian Lorenz "Flake" destroyed a portable keyboard by smashing it on the stage. This is not the only act of violence represented in the German band's performances. During the song *Bück dich*, Flake engages in a pretence act of sodomy with singer Till Lindemann, who has a plastic dildo tied to his waist. As happened with the cases of musical instrument destruction in high art and punk music, we find here that the practice of destroying instruments is often related to a more general presentation of violence in an artistic context.

Moving away from metal, a recent example of instrument destruction is provided by Matthew Bellamy of the band Muse. Bellamy retains the Guinness world record for the number of guitars smashed in a single tour, with a remarkable 140 destroyed instruments.

As anticipated, high art also offers examples of musical instruments mistreatment and destruction.

In the piece *One for Violin Solo* (1962), Fluxus artist Nam June Paik smashes a violin on a table after having slowly lifted it over his head for five minutes. Al Hansen, another member of Fluxus, destroyed a piano in the performance artwork *Yoko Ono Piano Drop*, in which the instrument is dropped from a tall building. More recently, Christian Marclay has produced a video installation entitled *Guitar Drag* (2000). The installation consists in the footage of an amplified electric guitar being dragged through a rugged rural landscape by a pickup truck.

Seeing a musical instrument being mistreated or destroyed provokes strong reactions in musicians and music lovers alike. Even those who enjoy watching their favourite guitar hero smashing a guitar on the floor would probably concede that destroying instruments is excusable only under particular circumstances, which compensate, as it were, for the loss and make it acceptable, although not something that should be done in a light-hearted manner. Once we have stated the fact, though, we are left with the need for an explanation. In many cases, objects are destroyed and we do not seem to have anything against it. When we change the expensive tyres of our cars, we do not typically hesitate when it is time to separate from them and we do not think about the fate that awaits them, after the loyal service they have offered us. Moreover, in those cases in which we consider it wrong to destroy objects, were it only because "it's a waste," we do not seem to have reactions as strong as the visceral feeling that we experience when we see a musical instrument purposely ruined or even destroyed.

To account for these reactions, Davies suggests three hypotheses, which he subsequently rejects, and finally proposes a fourth. This last idea, qualified and refined, constitutes the bulk of what I call the *honorary person theory*, which is how Davies intends to account for the special regard we have toward musical instruments.

As some readers might not be familiar with Davies's position, I briefly review the three theories he rejects, along with the main objections raised against them. For the sake of clarity, I took the liberty to assign a name to each of the proposals.

1. *The value theory*. Instruments are valuable objects. They might be handcrafted and, in this case, each of them is unique. Mass-produced

instruments coming straight from the assembly line can also have high monetary value, and they are often checked by experts who ensure that they meet certain standards of quality. That is why we do not want instruments to be mistreated or destroyed. Davies points out how this account does not explain why we would cringe at seeing the destruction of cheap plastic recorders, nor—more importantly—why we consider it bad to do certain things which do not cause any permanent damage to the instrument but imply its mistreatment.

2. *The tool theory.* We could suggest that our reaction to instrument mistreatment is similar to the one we have when we see tools being used inappropriately. A skilled carver is not likely to be pleased by the view of an expensive wood chisel being used to open a can of baked beans. Likewise, music lovers cringe when they see objects made for the purpose of music making being mistreated or destroyed. Davies observes that this theory does not allow us to understand why we find it uncomfortable to see a piano being burnt, even when we know that the instrument has already been damaged beyond repair by time. If the lack of usefulness as a tool does not inhibit our reaction, then the reaction must be grounded in something other than, as it were, the instrumental value of instruments.
3. *The tradition theory.* To be able to accommodate the fact that even unplayable instruments deserve some respect, we might want to suggest that instruments are to be respected in virtue of the long tradition they represent. A modern violin carries in its organological features the signs of a long history of modifications, during which masterpieces have been written for its musical ancestors. A broken-down violin is still to be paid respect as a representative of that tradition. However, as Davies notices, not all musical instruments have such a long history or important musical pieces written for them. Yet we would not forgive somebody for smashing a Theremin on the ground that it is a recent invention with comparatively few works employing it, or, similarly, for snapping the strings of a Chapman stick without a good reason.

After having rejected these views, Davies proposes the theory he favours. According to it, we regard musical instruments as “honorary persons.” Particularly, it is common to refer to the instrument as an extension of the player’s body. It seems that we are willing, although of course only metaphorically, to endow it with the same life we recognize in the musician, and consequently, we are bound to treat it with the same respect we treat him. The intimacy between the instrumentalist and his instrument is a kind of bond which is strengthened by hours of daily practice and goes well beyond the mere relation between, say, the car keys and its possessor. If the instrument is to be treated like a living being, then it is clear why we value it intrinsically, not because of its instrumental value, its lineage, or monetary value.

This view has problems as well, and Davies readily admits that we need to refine it if we want to defend it from criticism. He points to two reasons why his theory could be considered problematic.

Firstly, when human beings are damaged in one of their bodily parts, the object of our compassion is not the part that got damaged or was lost, but the patient, that is, the actual person to whom the part belongs to. If the blame associated with the mistreatment of instruments is a consequence of thinking of the instrument as a part of the musician’s body, our concern should be directed to the musician, but this is clearly not the case.

Secondly, the fortunately rare cases in which mutilations and damages are inflicted (normally self-inflicted) to human beings for the purpose of art production are regarded as worse than the damage or destruction of musical instruments. Davies mentions the *Wiener Aktionismus*, a group of artists that, in the 1960s, manifested its opposition to the values of the Austrian middle class by means of performance art involving mutilations, self-inflicted injuries, public masturbation and defecation.

Nonetheless, Davies believes that there is a relevant sense in which the analogy with human mutilation can actually explain our attitude toward musical instruments. He asks us to imagine a knife cutting into the skin of a completely anaesthetized arm or the bistoury of the surgeon entering a dead body at the start of an autopsy. Nobody is actually getting hurt, and everyone is doing their duty, yet

we focus on the damaged part rather than on the individual, and seeing it undergoing such a process triggers an unpleasant reaction. This reaction, Davies argues, is one that is tied to the value we attribute to personhood and is similar to the one we have when we see instruments being damaged or destroyed.

In the remainder of this article, I suggest a different account of our attachment to musical instruments. I believe that this account avoids a number of objections that could be raised against the honorary person theory. These will be discussed while I present and defend my account, which I call *artistic value theory*.

The final part of the article is devoted to distinguishing two cases in which an instrument can be mistreated. These two cases are laid out in the examples already offered: sometimes, the destruction or improper use of an instrument is part of a certain musical composition; other times, musicians make the destruction of an instrument a part of their live shows, without apparently thinking of their guitar smashes as a part of their songs. I try to explore our intuitions about this difference and our evaluation of it and briefly suggest a way in which my account could make sense of artworks involving the mistreatment or destruction of musical instruments.

I suggest that we think of instruments as something that should not be mistreated or destroyed because of the same reasons why works of art, in general, are not to be mistreated or destroyed. One should not scratch a fresco, nor drop a portrait, or set fire to a wooden sculpture. Mistreating these works of art in ways which do not entail their permanent damage would normally also be regarded as inappropriate, albeit less blameworthy than compromising the object's properties irremediably. One should not spit on a marble statue, although saliva is hardly likely to damage it. Similarly, one should try to avoid planting flowers in a precious Chinese ceramic vase. The underlying assumption behind these precepts seems to be the following: what has artistic value is to be paid a certain reverence and respect. We should avoid doing certain things to artworks, even if these actions do not have long-lasting consequences for the artwork or do not hinder people from appreciating it.

Extending these moral precepts to musical instruments for the reason I just suggested might

seem at first puzzling. After all, musical instruments are not artworks in themselves, were it only for the fact that we take music's medium to be sound, and instruments are not sound, they are—unsurprisingly—the *instruments*, that is, the *tools*, which allow us to produce that sound.<sup>2</sup> It would be strange to regard Giotto's brush as part of the fresco we can admire in the Arena chapel in Padua. However, music is a performance art. This fact implies that musical instruments do not have the same role as the painter's brush or the sculptor's chisel. Seeing or hearing the action of the performer on his instrument is a relevant part of our experience of music, or at least this can be the case. When we listen to music, we are sometimes able to *see* the unfolding of the work by appreciating the performer's action on the instrument. Before the advent of technologies that allowed music to be recorded and subsequently replayed, whenever there was music there also had to be someone playing close enough for us to hear them. Even in those cases in which we do not actually see the instrument being played—as happens with audio recordings—the musician's action on the instrument is part of the unfolding of the musical piece we are listening to. I think that every music lover who is also a player, even at the most amateurish level, has felt the desire to be able to view the performance of a virtuoso on the instrument that they are familiar with, whereas an excellent performance on an instrument we do not know well leaves us less impressed, because we are not able to fully appreciate the musician's skills. Philip Alperson has stressed the crucial importance of the "instrumentality" of music: appreciating the performance of a musical work is to appreciate the work-in-performance, that is, the work of music as presented by the musician through his/her action on the instrument. From this point of view, a number of properties of the piece depend on the appreciation of the relationship between the performer and the musical instrument. Alperson notes that: "Musical instruments play a key role in our appreciation of many of the skills of music making. When we think of a musician's virtuosity or even of his/her expressiveness or musicality, we think of these things as specifically tied up with what he/she does with the particular instrument he/she plays."<sup>3</sup> These observations do not mean anything precise for the ontological side of the problem; they just point to the fact that the instrument's role in music is different from the role a brush has in painting.

Its role is not that of mere instrumentality, because the actions of the player on it and his/her mastery of its expressive possibilities are the subject of our attention and of our artistic appreciation. It is worth noticing how the “tool theory” discussed above seemed to anticipate some of these concerns. According to it, our reaction to the destruction of musical instruments is negative because of their values as music-producing tools. This idea is not incorrect, although it needs to be qualified. As suggested by Alpers’s reflections, musical instruments are not mere tools. They share with tools their instrumental role in the production of music: we need instruments to make music. Unlike ordinary tools, however, the appreciation of the final product (music) requires the appreciation of the musician’s work with his/her tools, that is, the appreciation of his/her mastery of musical instruments. It is on this functional shift of tools—from being mere means to an end to being a very part of what they produce—that I intend to ground a different account of instrument mistreatment and destruction.

I believe that music instruments should not be mistreated or destroyed because they can be the object of artistic appreciation in a sense in which the painter’s brush cannot and in a sense that transcends the fact that one might aesthetically appreciate the instrument as a handcrafted object (as one could appreciate a beautifully crafted chair). This appreciation is related to the possibility of the instrument’s being played and that possibility makes disrespect toward the instrument similar to a blameworthy lack of respect toward a fresco or a statue. Let’s call this view the *artistic value theory*.

It is important at this point to stress a relevant difference between my account and the honorary person theory. Whereas Davies is offering what looks like a psychological rationale for our reaction to the mistreatment and destruction of music instruments, my account has a direct normative force. Under the assumption that one ought not to destroy or damage artworks in virtue of their role in artistic appreciation, the artistic value theory both explains why we react negatively when instruments are mistreated and enjoins us not to mistreat or destroy musical instruments.

There is one objection Davies might raise. He rightly points to the fact that burning an old useless piano, on which no beautiful music can be

played anymore, is equally regarded as wrong. The artistic value theory does not seem to be able to account for this. If an instrument cannot be successfully played, there is no possible artistic value to get from it. I suggest three answers to this objection.

Firstly, some of our reactions to mistreated or destroyed unplayable instruments might be more grounded on the reverence we generally have for old objects, especially ancient objects, rather than on the specific musical quality of that object. I would not mind throwing away a broken chair I bought a few weeks ago, but I have to admit that getting rid of an old and modestly crafted piece of furniture which belonged to people who are long gone would require of me some effort, even in the case in which I did not know anything about them. That piece of furniture was part of somebody’s life; it was used, touched and repaired. Perhaps, it witnessed some of the events which shaped those people’s lives. In Davies’ article, this feeling is aptly mirrored by the reaction a composer had to the piece *Piano Burning*: “Somebody must have loved that piano.” That piano was useless as a piano, but it once was of importance to somebody. Of course, certain objects are more likely to foster these reactions. That is probably why one would find it sadder to see an old pipe being smashed on the ground or burnt than a chair ending its days in a similar way. When should then one be able to distinguish the role played in our consideration by what we could call the “antiquarian value” of instruments. Although this kind of value is among the factors that ground our reaction to the destruction of instruments, it is not the kind of value that is specific to music instruments as performance tools.

Secondly, it seems to me that the destruction of an unusable piano should still be regarded as less blameworthy than the destruction of a brand new Steinway (and it normally *is* so regarded). This, it is worth noting, applies marginally to human beings. This answer to Davies’s possible objection draws attention to a weakness of the honorary person theory. Only if pushed by the arguments of the utilitarian would one admit that one would rather prefer the death of the old and diseased to that of the young. Seeing an old man tortured to death is probably as unsettling and disturbing as seeing these things done to a young boy, yet this does not seem to carry over to the case of musical instrument.

Thirdly, I would like to draw attention to a possible story involving an unplayable instrument and look at how this story could favour the one theory rather than the other. This story allows us to look closer at another case: that of playable instruments transformed into other instruments. I have recently seen an advertisement by a player who was selling his medieval lute. There are no remaining medieval lutes (though we have a number of lutes from the Renaissance). Medieval lutes that are around today are made from scratch. In that case, an old German lute guitar (a lute-shaped guitar) was transformed into a medieval lute by a luthier. That old guitar was unplayable—I do not know the details, let's assume it for the sake of the argument—but instead of restoring it or, worse, committing it to the flames, the skilled luthier transformed it into a playable medieval lute. I suppose it is fair to assume that we all agree about the moral quality of the luthier's action. What he did was good and irreproachable. I believe that the artistic value theory could account for the moral quality of this operation better than the honorary person theory. If the original instrument was to be paid the same kind of respect we pay to a person, should not the restoring option be a better one than the transformation? This might look like stretching Davies' metaphor a bit too far, but we cannot deny that we would consider it better to restore the original aspect of the instrument rather than to give it a completely new shape, if we thought of the instrument as some kind of honorary person. It is better to use plastic surgery to restore the aspect of a body part as it was before an accident than using such surgery to fashion our appearance as we like. One could speculate that the average music lover does not clearly prefer either of the two possibilities: restoring the instrument's earlier condition or transforming it into another instrument is something that leaves him indifferent. This is something the artistic value theory seems to be able to explain better than the honorary person theory, which seems to result in the idea that restoration is invariably the best option. We are not taking away that instrument's personality when we change it into something else, and this is because the instrument was never, not even metaphorically, thought of as a person. More importantly, I believe that the artistic value theory can explain why many people would agree that turning an old German lute guitar into a medieval or Renaissance lute is actually a

*better* choice than restoring its past appearance and functionality as a guitar. This is so, I suggest, because of the artistic value the instrument will acquire in the transformation. There are many guitars around and several of them are better than old German lute guitars. If these instruments can be given the opportunity to disclose to us the wonders of the lute repertoire, then we would have no reason to reject the possibility of a transformation; I dare to say that we should strongly encourage it.

Let us now turn to another story, the one about instruments being transformed even in the case in which they are perfectly playable. This is the fate many Renaissance lutes had to face. This popular (at the time) instrument typically had six or seven courses (double strings) in the sixteenth century. The evolution of musical taste required lutes with a more extended bass register. In order to achieve these features, some lutes were modified, and additional courses were added. This normally required a modification of the peg box and a substitution of the bridge. In the case of fretted courses, the transformation required as well the substitution of the instrument's neck. This operation can hardly be thought of as something reproachable and this, I submit, for the same reasons given above. The music played on the Renaissance lute was less fashionable: the development of musical culture in Europe urged that transformation, and such a transformation was promptly made. I want to suggest that, in this case too, the artistic value theory fares better than the honorary person theory. The instruments in question were still in perfect health, and yet a change in fashion caused them to undergo the bistoury of the luthier, so to speak. There are of course people who regard this transformation as a baleful thing: early music lovers. In fact, as a consequence of those transformations, we do not know as much as we could about the Renaissance lute. Various lutes from the Renaissance have survived, but in most cases they are so heavily modified that we cannot discover much from them about their original characteristics. Although I am probably one of those who think that it is a pity not to have more surviving original instruments, I believe that this feeling is grounded more on historical and musicological curiosity, rather than on what I value in instruments. Lacking those original instruments means lacking a source of knowledge we would like to possess and perhaps

lacking some more museum artefacts to put at the right place in a display cabinet. I do not believe that even the strictest advocate of historically informed performance would ever blame those luthiers who, in past centuries, have transformed lutes in the way described. And if he did, he would probably be blaming them for their lack of historical consciousness, not for their lack of respect for musical instruments.

For the reasons expressed in the previous paragraphs, I believe that the artistic value theory can better accommodate certain facts about the ordinary things people do with musical instruments because it can account for our intuitions about these practices in a more precise way. It is surely true that we sometimes treat instruments like human beings. But this is not by itself enough to see in that behaviour the reason why we do not like to see them mistreated or destroyed. Moreover, the artistic value theory can account for the normative side of our intuition about the unpleasant character of instrument destruction. Not only do we often have a strong reaction to the sight of musical instruments being mistreated and destroyed, we also consider it as gratuitous wrongdoing.

As a further element in support of the artistic value theory, I should point to the fact that the conception of musical instrument as human agents is not a trans-historical and cross-cultural *datum*; rather, it is proper of certain musical contexts, while it is rejected in others. To substantiate this claim, I present some relevant cases in which instruments are seen as analogous to *machines*, rather than to human beings. This fact might further undermine the plausibility of Davies's approach. Although he is right in contending that we do sometimes treat musical instruments as human beings, this is by no means always the case, and no general explanation of our reaction to the instrument destruction could therefore be based on that fact.

Let us first examine two cases in which musical instruments are treated in ways that present analogies with human agents. Critics discussing the work *Guitar Drag* have stressed the anthropomorphic character of the guitar in that performance. More specifically, the artist intended to refer to a recent episode of violence connected with racial hatred, in which a black man was killed by being dragged behind a pickup truck, just as it happens to the instrument featured in *Guitar Drag*.<sup>4</sup> It is common to refer to parts of musical instruments borrowing

words from human anatomy. A guitar has a "body" and a "neck," a cello's "voice" is darker than a violin's, and so on. The musician's relationship with the instrument is often one that stresses the quasi-bodily character of instruments, which are often described as an extension of the player's own body. Before the seminal guitar sacrifice performed on 18 June 1967 at the Monterey Pop Festival, Jimi Hendrix engaged in what is sometimes considered a mimicked sexual intercourse, an extreme way to explicit the anthropomorphic relation with his Stratocaster.

Anthropologist Eliot Bates stresses how only certain instruments are considered as agents. When this happens, however, musical instruments seem to be endowed with what he calls a "social life."<sup>5</sup> From our point of view, Bates' perspective hints to the fact that, although an anthropomorphic view of musical instrument is widespread, it does not constitute an anthropological universal and, when present, is generally limited to certain instruments.

Woody Guthrie implicitly likened his acoustic guitar to a machine when he famously painted on it the warning "This machine kills fascists." Deep Purple bass player Roger Glover stressed how the title of their 1972 album *Machine Head* came from a general interest for the concept of "machine" and "metal" in music, and is based around the idea of considering the instrument as a sort of machine ("head," in the album title, refers to the bass guitar's headstock, which figures in the back of the record's sleeve). According to Glover, this anticipated a widespread use of machinery-related language in rock music, something evident in the subsequent development of heavy metal.<sup>6</sup>

Futurism is another case in point, with its emphasis and praise of technology and machinery. Futurist aesthetics, rather than being incompatible with instrument making, inspired Luigi Russolo to produce a new sort of music instrument, the so-called *intonarumori*, an acoustic noise generator.

The German band Kraftwerk adopted a futuristic aesthetics inspired by the fast-paced technological development of the contemporary world. Their instruments, which represent pioneering efforts to put electronics to the service of music making, look often like minimalistic operating units, stripped bare of anything that could interfere with the musician's manipulation of sound.

As anticipated, I conclude this article by exploring the difference between two cases of instrument mistreatment and destruction. Let us recall the distinction in question. Sometimes, instruments are damaged or destroyed because this is what is required by the performance of a “musical” piece or by the performance of some kind of artwork. In other cases, instruments are destroyed for the sake of the adrenaline flow that comes with it, as a show of personal wealth, or as the result of being enraged with an obnoxious audience or with a cameraman who gets too close. To make the distinction clear: Jerry Lee Lewis setting fire to his piano at the end of the show is a different case of instrument destruction than *Piano Burning*, a piece by the New Zealand born American composer Annea Lockwood, which requires a piano to be burnt. What happens to the instrument is more or less the same thing, and yet there is enough room to trace a distinction. It is important to notice that, at least in principle, this distinction is not one between instrument mistreatment in classical and popular music: we could equally imagine the case of a popular music piece that entails the destruction of an instrument, although no example is known to me.<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, we could imagine a violin player smashing his instrument on the ground after a flashy performance of Paganini’s *Caprice No. 24 in A minor, Op. 1*—again, though, no actual example comes to mind.

This issue could be dealt with in several ways. I should firstly notice that we might reject the distinction I traced. We could assume that, if we cannot find relevant differences in the attitude people have toward the one case or the other, we should not construe the distinction as relevant. Alternatively, we could assimilate the two cases by considering the guitar smashing as a part of a work of art that is constituted by the concert event. In this case, the destruction of the instrument would be on the same ontological safe ground as an improvised solo. The distinction with pieces with a scored mistreatment or destruction of an instrument could therefore be downplayed. However, I assume for the sake of the argument that the distinction holds. Note that there does not seem to be a clear-cut opinion about which case of instrument destruction is less reproachable. Hard rock fans are not against seeing a guitar smashed to smithereens at the climax of a gig—I surely am not. But the same people also deplore that an instrument of the kind

they have to save money to buy goes to musical heaven for the silly purpose of showmanship, and they would also agree that guitar smashing is the prerogative of guitar heroes only, not something everyone should do. Their intuition seems to be that, *in some cases*, to sacrifice a cheap guitar is not blameworthy because it enhances the display of power or rebellious attitude that can be part of rock aesthetics. In a similar way, people who appreciate contemporary art are perhaps able to find some meaning in Javanese gamelan brass pots being filled with water, as happens in Adrian Sherriff’s piece *A Little Water Music for Gamelan* (1998). It seems thus that both the extemporary destruction of an instrument and its planned destruction in the context of an artwork can be given value and meaning at least under certain conditions and by certain people.

In order to substantiate these claims, let us consider in more detail the case of instrument destruction in rock music. As suggested above, this practice can be linked to the aesthetics of rock music, which has in noise, energy, raw self-expression and violence some of its defining characteristics.<sup>8</sup> The sacrifice of an instrument embodies many of these aspects: it is uncontrolled, frenzied, noisy, and brutal. Equally relevant to rock music is the fetishist veneration of the fans for the artist, and again we find a connection with instrument destruction: the audience is often offered what is left of the instrument as a precious relic (a term that stresses once again the connection between the instrument and the musician’s body).

I would like now to offer a more speculative take on the implicit artistic meaning of instrument destruction. Walter Benjamin famously claimed that the technological reproducibility of art deprived it of its “aura,” that is, of its unique presence.<sup>9</sup> As rock music is mainly consumed through records, Benjamin’s idea surely applies to the prototypical rock song as a work of art. My discussion of the role of instruments has stressed their intimate connection with music making. It is therefore interesting to see whether technological reproducibility has also affected this aspect of musical culture. By far, the most common case of instrument destruction in the case of rock and metal music is that involving a cheap version of the musician’s instrument. These mass-produced instruments, although worth a significant amount of money, do not have the monetary value of the high-end instruments



played by the artists on stage. They also normally lack other attributes of the musician's personal instruments: they have not been modified in order to be adjusted to their specific needs; they have not been personalized with stickers, drawings, or signatures; they do not have the "lived" aspect of the instruments one has owned and played for years. These facts could all be of little artistic import and be simply related to a matter of practical and financial convenience. However, I wish to suggest that the destruction of mass-produced instruments stresses their replaceable quality, as opposed to the uniqueness of the artist's personal instrument. The destruction of the instrument, rather than being what deprives us forever of the aura of that particular instrument, is what shows that the instrument, as a mass-produced object, has never possessed such a unique presence. The implicit meaning of acts such as guitar smashing could be therefore related to the substitutable and replaceable character of musical instruments in the age of mass production and distributions of *both* music and music-producing tools, set against the musician's desire to express his/her uniqueness and non-substitutability.

From this discussion, it should be clear that the destruction of musical instruments in rock music, far from being a wanton display of violence, is embedded in a complex network of aesthetic and artistic meanings.

I conclude by suggesting the following scenario regarding the cases in which instrument mistreatment or destruction is considered part of the relevant musical piece or, more generally, artwork. If we think that the artwork in question has artistic value, then the artistic value theory can deal with this: the instrument is sacrificed to the production of artistic value, so its sacrifice is justified. If, on the contrary, we think that such an artwork lacks artistic value, the artistic value theory seems still to fare equally well: the instrument's destruction is to be blamed because it has no redeeming outcome. In other words, the artistic value theory seems to let us to remain agnostic as to the value of the artwork requiring the destruction of an instrument, allowing for different reactions and norms according to the artistic value of the artwork in question.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Stephen Davies, *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 108–18.
2. On the issue of the music's medium, see David Davies, "Medium," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, eds. Andrew Kania and Theodore Gracyk (New York: Routledge, 2011), 48–58.
3. Philip Alperson, "The Instrumentality of Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66, no. 1 (2008): 37–51. Alperson further notes that "To appreciate the performer's performance, I would argue, is to appreciate a particular kind of human achievement. As we have seen, what the performer does is perform a work with an instrument that is both recalcitrant—insofar as it must be 'mastered' so that the instrument can be utilized in the service of the production of musical works—and intimate—insofar as musical instruments are inevitably connected with the bodies and bodily actions of the performer. I want to suggest that the performance of musical works is a kind of musical practice in which the object of aesthetic appreciation is legitimately regarded as the work-in-performance" (Ibid., 47).
4. See Carlos Kase, "'This Guitar Has Seconds to Live': Guitar Drag's Archaeology of Indeterminacy and Violence," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 30, no. 3 (2008): 419–42.
5. Eliot Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," *Ethnomusicology* 56, no. 3 (2012): 363–95.
6. Interview contained in the documentary *Classic Albums: Deep Purple—Machine Head*, Eagle Vision, 2002.
7. An interesting case is the one of Pete Townshend. He attended lectures by Gustav Metzger at the Ealing Art College in London, and learned from him about Auto-Destructive Art. From there the inspiration came to smash guitars on stage.
8. See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), especially Chapter 4, on the role of noise in rock music.
9. Walter Benjamin et al., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
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