

THE MUSIC IN MY PHILOSOPHY

Arnold Berleant

Music has not been as prominent in philosophy or as influential in aesthetics as the visual arts, at least in the Western tradition. Reflecting on my years of experience as both a philosopher and a musician, I am increasingly intrigued by speculating if and how today's aesthetic discourse might have taken a different direction if music been its central focus. It is tempting to wonder whether, in some cases, the musical art may indeed have had an influence, even if less conspicuous than some other arts.

The hidden presence of music on philosophy struck me years ago when teaching Bergson's "An Introduction to Metaphysics." Bergson was particularly fond of music and knowledgeable about it, and the influence of musical experience may be recognized in his distinction between relative and absolute ways of knowing a thing. Relative knowledge, he held, comes from our external relations to an object, whereas absolute knowledge is acquired by directly entering into it.¹ Bergson's characterization of absolute knowing bears a close resemblance to musical experience. But apart from the content of "An Introduction to Metaphysics," I discovered a more recondite but profound musical influence on Bergson's essay. Its structure bears a striking resemblance to what in music is known as sonata-allegro form, commonly used for the first movements of symphonies, concerti, sonatas, and other standard compositional types of the classical repertory. Exposition, development, and recapitulation of thematic materials, followed by a coda, are the basic components of sonata-allegro form, and Bergson's essay embodies an identical structure.

I have no idea whether Bergson's metaphysical sonata was fashioned deliberately. And while I have studied and played music nearly every day from the age of twelve and have degrees from a major music conservatory, I had not until now thought to consider whether

music might have had something of a similar influence on my own philosophical work. Both passions have co-existed in mostly separate domains. For most of my life I seemed to have lived in two worlds, pursuing each on its own terms. In one I taught piano and music theory, performed with orchestra as piano soloist, organized and played in a chamber music group that gave concerts for nine years, and performed as an accompanist and soloist. I have also composed songs and instrumental music, including the chamber ballet, "Theodora," one of whose productions was in 1979 for the ASA meeting at the Banff Center in Canada, in which several members of the Society played in the instrumental ensemble.

But as I look over my philosophical work, which includes eight published books and numerous papers, I am struck by music's inconspicuousness. Only a handful of my essays are on music. In fact, among my philosophical colleagues, few are aware of my musical background, and on only rare occasions have I included performance as part of a presentation at an aesthetics meeting. The most notable instance was at the XVII International Congress of Aesthetics in Ankara, Turkey in 2007, where, at the invitation of the organizer, Jale Erzen, who long before had become acquainted with my musical interests, I offered an artist's presentation. This presentation combined the performance of several works involving piano with a formal paper called "What Titles Don't Tell." In that presentation I played (on the piano) some eighteenth century harpsichord pieces, Schumann's *Kinderscenen*, and lastly Rousset's *Joueurs de Flûte* with the talented young Turkish flautist, Onur Türkes. This presentation surprised many of the international colleagues I had known for years and yet who had no inkling of my musical background. Only in the last year or two have I given deliberate thought to the relationship between my musical and philosophical worlds, and now, for the first time, have begun to articulate it.

This process led me to some unexpected associations. "The *aesthetic field*," the central idea (and title) of my first book,² reflects, I think, the contextual character of musical experience in recognizing the interdependent collaboration of composer, musical sound, audience, and performer that constitute the four dimensions of the aesthetic field. At the time of its publication in 1970, the importance of performance was not generally recognized in the current aesthetic

literature, and this book was one of the first works in recent times to give it a central place. The correspondence of the aesthetic field with the musical situation was not deliberate but rather circumstantial, and only recently has the resemblance become clear to me.

Another musical influence, equally central, appears in the concept of *aesthetic engagement*, which I first developed in my book, *Art and Engagement* (1991), and subsequently refined in other essays and books. Offered as a clear alternative to Kant's aesthetic disinterestedness, the idea of aesthetic engagement formulates what, at the same time, is central to musical experience, at least in my own practice as a performer and listener. To be sure, that was not the motive for developing the idea. Rather, I had been struck by the practices in the contemporary arts that subverted the dualism of art object and appreciator, deliberately breaching their separation. I had first noted the significance of this transgression in a paper I published in the *JAAC* in 1970 called "Aesthetics and the Contemporary Arts," and am now gratified that this observation anticipated what has taken many forms to become one of the most conspicuous trends in contemporary art, from audience participation in theater, fiction, and other arts, to relational art, performance art, and the growing interest in the aesthetics of everyday life. Musical experience, like the appreciative experience of dance and film, has, I think, always invited aesthetic engagement, which is why I continue to wonder what would have been the consequences for aesthetic theory if music, rather than painting, with its apparent (but misleading) dualism of object and viewer, had been taken as the paradigmatic art.

In the last thirty years and more, environmental aesthetics has become an important focus in contemporary aesthetics, attracting international and interdisciplinary attention. Both Finland and China have hosted multiple conferences on the topic that included a wide range of international participants, and environmental philosophy, as well as the environmental movement, has recognized the relevance of aesthetics. As one of the early contributors to the development of this side of the discipline, I am pleased at the attention and influence environmental aesthetics has generated. In the context of my comments here, I am led to wonder whether there are any additional ways in which influences and parallels are discernible between music and environmental aesthetics.

There is, of course, the observation that music may be thought of as an environmental art. This characteristic of music has been exploited in obvious ways. Songs and dances in traditional cultures are characteristically used to influence weather patterns, and music is employed today to promote environmental awareness and action, from the UN Music & Environment Initiative to folk singers.

I suspect that music provides more here than a causal or rhetorical contribution, and that part of its influence could stem from its inherent environmental character. For example, it is misleading to localize music in the performer. Doing so confuses its source with its perception. Even though most musical production has a directional character, musical sound has a powerful ambient quality. In an acoustically successful concert hall, sound surrounds the listener, the hall acting as a great resonating chamber. This ambience of musical experience has long been recognized. Antiphonal singing has been used since antiquity and occurs in the liturgical and folk music of many cultures. In the sixteenth century Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli used antiphonal choirs of voices and instruments in the great resonant space of St. Mark's Cathedral, which has two opposed choir lofts, to create what became celebrated as the Venetian antiphonal style, and in the eighteenth century Bach was one of many composers to use divided choirs. These are but illustrious examples of a common practice that makes artistic use of music's environmental character, a practice that continues to the present day.

It's not my intention to digress into musical aesthetics as such, but rather to reflect on whether the ambient character of musical experience has some resemblance to environmental perception more generally. The way in which my work in environmental aesthetics has developed may have some parallel in the music I have engaged in daily. For example, I try always to distinguish between 'environment' and '*the* environment' and I find the difference crucial. *The* environment objectifies the setting of spatial experience; it turns environment into an object distinct from the perceiver. However, the ecological and behavioral sciences, as well as personal perception, recognize the continuity of humans and the setting of which we are a part. There is no dividing separation or barrier. Rather, lines of influence radiate in all directions, from sound and space to the mutual influence of humans and the things and

activities in which we engage. There are certainly perceptual foci in environmental experience, and so, too, do these occur in musical experience. And as our conception of environment has enlarged to include the built environment and social relations, along with the many intangibles of experience, so musical sound has expanded to encompass the ambient sounds of urban and everyday life, sometimes in musical form, sometimes literally. One can cite numerous twentieth-century examples, the most notorious (and overworked) one being John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), consisting entirely of chance environmental sounds, but Gershwin's *An American in Paris* imitates traffic sounds, Honneger's "mouvement symphonique" *Pacific 231* (1923) evokes a steam locomotive, while Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* reaches its climax with the cock's crowing. Of course, the classic example is the musical rendering in Beethoven's *Sixth (Pastoral) Symphony* of the flowing water of a brook, peasant dancing and revelry, the passage of a thunderstorm and the shepherds' joyful song of thanksgiving.

Music may have had a still more subtle influence of on my philosophical work. There are probably as many ways of writing music as there are of writing philosophy. Having done both, I detect a personal resemblance in method and sensibility, and the idea is worth pursuing in its own right wherever it may lead. I am hardly the first to consider philosophical writing an art.

In the last few years I have come to recognize the central place of sensibility in aesthetics. Indeed, I think of aesthetics as the theory of sensibility: the study of the central role of perceptual discrimination, of sensory nuance and resonance in our engagement with the various arts and with environment under the unique conditions of each circumstance. I think sensibility is a powerful factor and an essential guide in the creative activity of artists and composers, just as sensibility guides perceptual attention in appreciation. Sensitivity to the perceptual possibilities and demands of music, as of any art, guides the development of the musical materials and encourages coherence. In any case, I have come to recognize that similar processes play a critical part in my philosophical writing as they have in my music, and I expect that I am not alone in benefitting from their aesthetic and philosophic mutuality.

As for the relation itself of music and philosophy that I've been considering here, does it designate an influence, a common way of thinking, or something else? Perhaps it would be

better not to trivialize the resemblance by attempting a simplistic explanation, causal or otherwise. So I end, as philosophy began, in wonder and admiration at both music and philosophy as striking instances of the creative interpenetration of all the factors in the aesthetic field. Whereas philosophy, Schopenhauer had claimed, can convey the inner nature of the world only in general concepts, music expresses the inner being of the world, the will, distinctly and directly,³ so that “the most philosophical sensibility will be a musical sensibility.”⁴

¹ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903) (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. 21.

² *The Aesthetic Field, A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Springfield, IL: CC Thomas, 1970).

³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1859) (The Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), Vol. I, p. 264-5.

⁴ Robert Wicks, “Arthur Schopenhauer,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011,5.1. Accessed 23 July 2012.