



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

MISSING THE WRONG TARGET: ON ANDREW BOWIE'S REJECTION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

TOMAS MCAULEY INDIANA UNIVERSITY

As everyone who is acquainted with him knows, Andrew Bowie is a wonderful jazz saxophonist.¹ He's also an expert improviser more generally. I say this not only to share my high regard for his music, but also to explain the provenance of this article, which originated in a formal response to Bowie's keynote address at the inaugural conference of the Performance Philosophy Network (University of Surrey, April 2013). Bowie's talk at this event was improvised from outline notes, and since my improvisation skills are not, I admit readily, as finely honed as Bowie's, I decided not to attempt to respond impromptu to his address. I responded instead – with the blessing of the conference organisers – to his 2007 book *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* as it related to some key themes of his talk. The same is true of the present short article: although it appears alongside the written-up version of Bowie's talk and focuses on themes arising from that piece, it remains a response primarily to those themes as expressed in his book.

Music, Philosophy, and Modernity has two central themes. The first is the rejection of what we might call 'the philosophy of x,' an approach whereby, on Bowie's account, human practices are seen as objects of philosophy or as problems for philosophy to solve. These human practices could, in principle, range from architecture to zoology, but Bowie's preferred example, in his book and elsewhere, is the philosophy of music. Bowie rejects the philosophy of music. The second of Bowie's two themes is the proposition of an alternative to the philosophy of music, namely a philosophy, or a type of insight, that arises *from* music. In his book, Bowie asks from a variety of angles what philosophy might look like were it to take music as a point of departure. Music, to

take a simple example, can draw our attention to the non-linguistic or non-conceptual aspects of human existence, and this may serve as a starting point for a philosophy that aims for more than conceptual clarification. A key feature of Bowie's work is that these themes are seen to be two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, Bowie's rejection of the philosophy of music, and of the whole 'philosophy of x' approach, leads him to seek alternative ways of doing philosophy; on the other hand, Bowie's proposition that we might practice a philosophy arising *from* music leads him to reject the philosophy of music.

Although Bowie takes the phrase 'philosophy of music' primarily to denote philosophy as usually practiced under that name (and the supposedly objectifying tendencies of such philosophy), he also suggests an alternative meaning of that phrase: that it could be used to denote precisely that philosophy that might arise from music (Bowie 2007, 11). For the sake of simplicity, however, I use the phrase 'philosophy of music' only in Bowie's primary sense; for Bowie's alternative approach, I use the term 'philosophy from music.'

I agree entirely with Bowie that there is much to be gained by asking what philosophy might look like were it inspired by music, and some of the ways in which he explores how this could be the case are quite ingenious. In particular, his recuperation to this end of too-often ignored themes from the history of European philosophy (an ongoing project reaching back at least as far as Bowie [1990] 2003) is of unequivocal significance. I disagree with Bowie, however, that his proposal of a philosophy from music necessitates a rejection of the philosophy of music, or that there are sufficient grounds simply to dismiss the philosophy of music on the basis of its own faults. For the sake of interest, I focus here on these disagreements.

Particularly with regard to Bowie's rejection of the philosophy of music, his writing is often strongly worded, taking the form of a prosecution in a court case, and much of what follows is my attempt at putting forward the case for the defence. Worth noting, however, is that my own professional background is not as a philosopher of music, but as a historical musicologist. I may be playing the role of *defender*, but I am not the *defendant*. This is notable for two reasons. First, whilst Bowie's work has often been ignored within the philosophy of music, it has received significant attention in musicology. Of the several excellent reviews of Bowie's book that came out in the years following its publication, for example, three (Currie 2008, Dammann 2008, and Garratt 2010) came from authors with musicological backgrounds. (Other reviews include Goehr 2009, from a philosopher seriously engaged with musicological pursuits, and Khalifa 2009.) Second, and more importantly, musicology has itself often been dismissive of the philosophy of music, for reasons usually left unstated, but which tend to run along the same lines as Bowie's critique. Whether this is due to Bowie's own influence or should be traced rather to shared intellectual roots is not of consequence here. The key point is that Bowie's rejection of the philosophy of music has found a welcome – if not uncritical – reception in musicological circles.

Bowie's rejection of the philosophy of music is, however, illegitimate. It is illegitimate for two reasons. First, he mischaracterises the philosophy of music. Second, even if his characterisation of the philosophy of music were a faithful representation of that discipline, his reasons for

rejecting it would still not be sufficient. We might usefully label his characterisations of the philosophy of music as premises, and his reasons for rejecting such philosophy as his argument. Couched in this language, his premises are false and his argument is invalid.

More simply, he aims for the wrong target – and misses anyway.

Let's start with Bowie's characterisation of the philosophy of music. Bowie seems to have two main criticisms of such philosophy. The first is that it sees music as a static object out there in the world, as opposed to an ever-changing human practice. This is apparent, allegedly, in the way that the philosophy of music seeks always to make universalising claims, and in its relentless focus on musical works. As Bowie puts it in his contribution to the present volume:

the philosophy of x makes x the object of conceptual determination: this can be exemplified in the way that the analytical philosophy of art is often just an exercise in ontology, which seeks to establish the criteria, for example, of a 'musical work,' on the basis of whether it is the score, a performance, all performances, etc. (Bowie 2015, 53; for examples of similar claims in Bowie 2007, see pp. 1-4 and 378-79.)

Now, I'm no philosopher of music, but I know just about enough of the subject to be able to see straight away that this criticism is unfounded. It is unfounded because it ignores the large body of literature in the philosophy of music examining music as a human practice, such as that engaging issues of improvisation and performance. I am thinking here, for example, of the work of Philip Alperson (1984) or Paul Thom (1993). It is unfounded because even in its most ontological enquiries, the philosophy of music is sensitive to the genre of the music under investigation. This is the case, for example, in Theodore Gracyk's investigations into the ontology of rock music (Gracyk 1996, see especially chapters 1-3). It is unfounded because even in the case of work-based instrumental music, ontological investigations frequently reach historical conclusions. Such is the case, for example, in the hugely influential work of Jerrold Levinson (1990). I have been careful here to choose examples that pre-date Bowie's book, but in the years since the book came out, the philosophy of music has continued to diversify, engaging topics ranging from evolution (Davies 2012) to feminist musicology (Zangwill 2014), and much else besides.

Bowie's second objection to the philosophy of music is as follows:

Even in the contemporary philosophical situation, where grand foundational systems have largely been abandoned, the problem for the 'philosophy of music' is that it must rely upon whatever other philosophical assumptions are adopted by the person producing it. Such philosophy is therefore likely just to confirm the non- or extra-musical assumptions that precede its application to music... the 'philosophy of music' inevitably just limps behind whatever philosophical bandwagon happens to be running at a particular time or is adopted by the philosopher of music. (Bowie 2007, 10)

This objection is also unfounded. Again, it is unfounded because it does not reflect what actually goes on in the philosophy of music. It is certainly true that philosophers of music often approach their topic with a prior philosophical theory. Their philosophical assumptions, however, are not simply applied *to* music, but are tested *against* it; and if the theory in question does not work in the particular case of music, this theory will be revised or rejected. This often leads to theories of art in general being affirmed or refused on the basis of their applicability to musical issues.

Further, Bowie's whole distinction between philosophy *of* music and philosophy *from* music, whilst methodologically useful, crumbles in the face of key works in the mainstream philosophy of music which precisely do take music as their starting point. Again, there are many cases to choose from, but one might cite here Aaron Ridley's use of examples ranging from Delius to Ives to interrogate concepts such as musical understanding (Ridley 2004), or the meditations of Garry Hagberg (2009) and Jerrold Levinson (2013) on jazz improvisation and jazz standards as ethical microcosms.

One has to ask from where Bowie gets his own particular impression of the philosophy of music. The figure on whom Bowie draws most heavily in characterising this discipline is Peter Kivy, and much of Bowie's criticism of Kivy's work is valuable (see especially chapter 1 of Bowie 2007). The philosophy of music, however, is – as I have already pointed out – a diverse field, and influential though Kivy's work has been, his own personal views can in no way be taken as representative of the tradition as a whole. Indeed, much of his work has been critiqued extensively from within the philosophy of music (see, for example, the objections to Kivy's theory of musical expressiveness in part four of Robinson 2005). Further, despite discussing some of Kivy's most important works (such as Kivy 1993), Bowie nonetheless engages only a small portion of Kivy's extensive output, excluding, for example, any consideration of Kivy's ground-breaking work on musical performance (Kivy 1995). Bowie's characterisation of the philosophy of music, then, is inaccurate and, as such, his rejection of this tradition on the basis of such a characterisation is untenable.

I feel at this point that my argument has been somewhat lacking in sophistication – that I have done little more than to outline a few recent (or, rather, not so recent) trends in the philosophy of music. The unfortunate truth, however, is that this is all that is needed to rebuff Bowie's hollow stereotype of this field. Nonetheless, I would like to raise another, broader issue. This is that the way in which Bowie rejects the philosophy of music is questionable *even by his own standards*, and would remain so even if his characterisation of the philosophy of music were accurate. Bowie's rejection of the philosophy of music is, in fact, questionable on the very same grounds on which he criticises the philosophy of music. Let me explain what I mean.

One of Bowie's major objections to the philosophy of music is that it treats music only as a static object, rather than as an ever-changing human practice. And as we have seen, the philosophy of music is not guilty on this count. Bowie, however, does have a case to answer on this very same count. He has a case to answer precisely because of the way in which he characterises the philosophy of music. Such philosophy is a rich, diverse, and ever-changing human practice. Yet Bowie insists on treating it as a single, static object, making sweeping generalisations about what

it is and what it does.

We might put this another way by examining Bowie's views on the relation between self and other. Near the beginning of his book, Bowie draws approvingly on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, in order to make a point about different ways of encountering one's other. Bowie writes:

For Gadamer, encounter with the other in the form of coming to understand their languages, including the language of music, can tell us more about what we are than many of the objectifying forms of studying human behaviour. It is when we *don't* understand and have to leave behind our certainties that we can gain the greatest insights. (Bowie 2007, 11)

In the present context, Bowie's 'other' is the philosophy of music, yet Bowie refuses to attempt to understand the language it speaks or to leave behind his certainties. In direct contradiction of his own wise counsel, Bowie refuses seriously to engage with his other.

Since Bowie's work is, here, my own other, I'd like to conclude on an upbeat note. First, I would stress again that the positive side of Bowie's project, the proposition of a philosophy arising *from* music is rather brilliant. I would also suggest, though, that the arguments that Bowie employs in the course of his dismissal of the philosophy of music *could* be of use, if only it were admitted that they were simply arguments against particular trends or theories in the philosophy of music, rather than arguments against the philosophy of music as a single whole. Were this made clear, and were it spoken in a language that philosophers of music could understand (on this point, see also Dammann 2008, 461), then Bowie's work could end up broadening its influence beyond its already wide readership to become instrumental, canonical even, precisely *within* the philosophy of music. Indeed, this is pretty much the opposite of Bowie's intentions, but his work could even end up breathing new life into the very discipline that he has spent so long trying to dismiss.

Notes

¹ In addition its provenance at the inaugural Performance Philosophy conference, this material was also presented as part of a colloquium paper at Indiana University in January 2015. I thank the audiences at both events for their insightful questions and comments. For advice, assistance, and good conversation at various stages of writing this piece, my thanks go to Nick Zangwill, Jerrold Levinson, Elizabeth Stoner, Andrew Mead, and Elizabeth Swann. My gratitude goes also to Andrew Bowie for his good humour, amongst much else.

Works Cited

Alperson, Philip. 1984. "On Musical Improvisation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1): 17-29.
Bowie, Andrew. (1990) 2003. *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*. 2nd edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- . 2007. *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2015. "The 'Philosophy of Performance' and the Performance of Philosophy." *Performance Philosophy* 1: 51-58. <http://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/31>.
- Currie, James. 2008. Review of *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, by Andrew Bowie. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal*. <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23563/?id=13328>.
- Dammann, Guy. 2008. Review of *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, by Andrew Bowie. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (4): 459-61.
- Davies, Stephen. 2012. *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garratt, James. 2010. Review of *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, by Andrew Bowie. *Music & Letters* 9 (3): 429-31.
- Goehr, Lydia. 2009. "Normativity without Norms." Review of *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, by Andrew Bowie. *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (4): 597-607.
- Gracyk, Theodore. 1996. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Hagberg, Garry. 2009. "Jazz Improvisation and Ethical Interaction: A Sketch of the Connections." In *Art and Ethical Criticism*, edited by Garry Hagberg, 258-85. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Khalifa, Kareem. 2009. Review of *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, by Andrew Bowie. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47 (3): 481-82.
- Kivy, Peter. 1993. *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1995. *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Levinson, Jerrold. 1990. *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press. Reprinted New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . 2012. "Popular Song as Moral Microcosm: Life Lessons from Jazz Standards." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 71: 51-66.
- Ridley, Aaron. 2004. *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Robinson, Jenefer. 2005. *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thom, Paul. 1993. *For An Audience: A Philosophy of the Performing Arts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Zangwill, Nick. 2014. "Friends Reunited: Susan McClary and Musical Formalism." *The Musical Times* (Winter): 63-69.

Biography

Tomas McAuley is Post-Doctoral Scholar and Visiting Assistant Professor of Musicology at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. His research centers on music and philosophy, and on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music. He is currently working on a monograph on the relationship between philosophy and musical thought in the late eighteenth century, investigating the links between changing conceptions of music and changing conceptions of ethics, knowledge, and time. Together with Nanette Nielsen and Jerrold Levinson, he is co-editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy*. He is Chair of the Royal Musical Association Music and Philosophy Study Group (www.musicandphilosophy.ac.uk).

© 2015 Tomas McAuley



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).