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# MUSICAL AFFECTS AND THE LIFE OF FAITH: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RELIGIOUS POTENCY OF MUSIC

Mark Wynn

The paper argues that the religious suggestiveness of music can be illuminated by reference to a number of themes drawn from contemporary philosophy of music, in particular the idea that the affective states expressed in music lack material objects, are often grasped "sympathetically," may escape verbalisation, and lack action-guiding content. Together these themes suggest that music may express, and enable its hearers to take on, an affectively laden "world-view." The paper explores the thought that such "attitudes" may be religiously important not only in setting the affective tone of our relationship to the world, but also in relationship to God.

It has long been supposed that among the arts, music has a preeminent claim to religious or metaphysical significance. In this paper, I shall argue that this ancient theme can be substantiated in the terms provided by recent discussion in the philosophy of music. Specifically, I shall examine the idea that music is religiously potent because of its implications for the quality of our felt responses to the world. I begin with some brief general remarks on the emotions, before considering the relationship between music and the emotions. I shall then apply these reflections to the question of how music may be religiously important.

## *I. The emotions*

For the purposes of this discussion, I shall follow Robert Roberts and think of the emotions as serious concern-based construals.<sup>1</sup> On this account, my being afraid of a dog, for example, is a matter of my construing the dog as dangerous, and doing this "concernfully," that is, in such a way as to take the dog to pose a threat to something I value. More exactly, it is enough that the dog should appear to me to pose a threat, even if I would not assert as much: in that case, the construal will count as "serious." While analytically distinguishable, these various elements of construal, concern and seriousness constitute an integrated state of mind in their life setting. For instance, my construal of an interviewer as threatening may involve my taking her to be powerful and contemptuous, where these qualities are "filtered through" my concern to make a favourable impression.<sup>2</sup>

On Roberts' account, our construal of situations lies to some degree within our control, and accordingly, in certain cases, we can choose which



emotion to feel. For instance, if I am taking a significant risk in order to rescue someone, then I may well feel fear; but this emotion can be overcome, at least in principle, by refocusing my attention, so that I construe the situation not as one of risk, but as an opportunity to bring someone to safety. In this case, there need be no shift in my judgement about whether or not the situation is indeed dangerous (such a shift may well lie outside my control); instead, the change has to do with which aspects of the situation are salient in my construal of it.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on this same analytical framework, Roberts also seeks to understand the relationship of actions and physiological states to the emotions. For example, in envy my concern for self-esteem may be channelled through my construal of someone as a rival for recognition, with the result that I behave in ways that are calculated to undermine his reputation.<sup>4</sup> (Hence emotions may themselves generate concerns, in this instance the concern to undermine a person's reputation.) Roberts also allows, naturally, that sensations are typical of many emotions. And he adds that we may come to adopt a certain concerned construal of a situation on feeling a sensation of the kind that is often conjoined with that sort of construal. For instance, the sensation of blushing may contribute to my sense that I have done something embarrassing.<sup>5</sup>

This account of the emotions as unified states of mind, which can be understood in terms of the notions of construal, concern and seriousness, while brief, will suffice I think for our purposes.

## *II. Music and the emotions*

There is a long-standing tradition of associating music with the emotions.<sup>6</sup> Despite the antiquity of this theme, there continues to be disagreement over how this relationship is to be understood. Drawing on two recent works on the subject, I shall set out one general approach to these issues. Although written independently of one another, these two works agree in broad outline, and while there are, of course, other schools of thought, the account expounded here commands enough respect within the philosophy of music to provide, I suggest, a worthwhile starting point for our enquiry.

On some views, "pure" or "absolute" music (including symphonies, string quartets and other instrumental works) is incapable of expressing definite emotions, because it cannot express thoughts, and the differentiae of the emotions are given by the different thoughts (or construals) of which they are constituted. On this understanding, while music may be the occasion for the formation of various emotions, the connection is one of adventitious association, and accordingly variable from person to person and time to time, and of no value for understanding the intrinsic character of music. The authors I wish to examine both contest this claim.

In his book *Music, Value and the Passions*, Aaron Ridley argues that the association between music and various affective states need not be merely subjective, or a matter simply of convention, but can be grounded in the resemblance which music may bear to the human voice and the expressive movements of bodies, especially the human body. Hence he sees vocal and dynamic "melisma" as the key to music's expressiveness.<sup>8</sup> Following

Ridley, I shall take dynamic melisma as the more important case, and confine my comments to this case.

To illustrate dynamic melisma, Ridley considers the first eight bars of the funeral march in Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony, and in this connection he takes issue with Donald Ferguson's reading of this same passage for reasons that have some bearing on our topic. Ferguson writes: "Grief permeates every note and every rhythmic step; but there is no yielding — no indulgence in the alleviating misery of tears. It comprehends heroically and is unafraid."<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging the sensitivity of Ferguson's account to the particular movements and tensions of the passage, Ridley objects that he over-describes the music in rather the way that it would be over-described if we took the music to recount the movements of a beetle struggling to push some dung over a series of mounds. Both the case of the beetle and the case picked out by Ferguson's description, Ridley argues, fit the music to the extent that both involve movements of the kind that are embodied in the music, that is, movements that suggest "perseverance, fortitude, firmness" and other such qualities.<sup>10</sup> But the music falls short of identifying particular states of affairs of the kind that we would require to weave a story around such movements. Clearly, the music stops short of describing a beetle; but on Ridley's view, it also lacks the kind of representational power that is presupposed in Ferguson's account, and specifically it lacks the capacity to represent the thought that someone has suffered a loss, a thought which Ridley takes to be necessary if a state of mind is to count as grief. Hence Ridley writes that while Ferguson's description of the music as "slow," "heavy," "effortful," and so on, may carry conviction:

his claim that "grief permeates every note" cannot be justified in the same way; for the difference between grief and profound sadness is that grief quite specifically involves the loss of something loved, and the movements of music could never suggest *that*.<sup>11</sup>

To this it may be objected: even if a piece of music cannot express Mary's grieving (because it cannot represent individuals), why should it not express grief considered abstractly? Ridley's position here turns on the thought that the expressive power of a piece such as the funeral march is grounded in the resemblance between its movements and the expressive movements of bodies. So his claim that the march cannot express grief as distinct from profound sadness comes down to this thought: either these two states cannot be differentiated from one another simply by reference to the patterns of expressive behaviour with which each is associated, or if they can be so differentiated, then the movements of a piece of music fail to present any correlative distinction. Ridley endorses this thought, I suggest, because he thinks that grief can be distinguished from profound sadness only by introducing an element of narrative. For whereas profound sadness need have no narrative component (a person can just feel sad, where this sadness has no particular reference), grief involves reference to the sustaining of a loss. And our expressive behaviour (or at any rate expressive behaviour of the kind that can bear a resemblance to the movements of a piece of music) is not sufficiently discriminating, he thinks, to pick out this narrative structure.

Similarly, we might suppose that envy, remorse and embarrassment, for instance, all have a narrative component: if I feel envy, then I construe someone as enjoying a benefit, and (as Roberts notes) various prospective actions are likely to be implied thereby; and if I feel remorse, then I construe myself as having done wrong, and at least implicitly commit myself to righting the wrong if the opportunity should arise; and if I feel embarrassment, then I construe myself as being in a condition that may lower my standing in the eyes of others, and at least implicitly I am committed to removing this condition if able to do so.<sup>12</sup> Ridley's view, then, is that music cannot express emotions of these kinds; for they are defined by their narrative structure, and this structure can only be picked out by reference to particular states of affairs, and these states of affairs cannot be identified simply by reference to patterns of expressive behaviour. Hence, he proposes, music expresses not so much emotions as what are commonly called "moods," that is, affective states shorn of any reference to particular states of affairs. Among moods, we may include melancholy, sadness, elation and joy, where these states infuse our experience of the world in some relatively general way, rather than having a specific state of affairs as their target.

Ridley chooses to define such states as "feelings." Feelings, he notes, lack "material objects" (that is, concrete objects), but they do have "formal objects." For example, if I get out of bed and feel a generalised depression, then there is nothing in particular about which I am depressed (my affective state has no material or concrete object); instead, things in general are felt to fall under the description "profoundly unpromising" (where this description gives the formal object of depression).<sup>13</sup> Such states of feeling, Ridley comments, may "colour our world." And if we wish to think of them taking a material object, then that object may best be thought of as simply "the world."<sup>14</sup>

So far we have seen that Ridley subscribes to these two claims: "pure" music expresses affective states by virtue of the resemblance between its movements and the expressive movements of bodies, especially the human body; and accordingly, music can express "feelings" or moods but not "emotions," since it cannot pick out the particular states of affairs (involving loss, wrong-doing or whatever it may be) which serve to differentiate the emotions. There is one further aspect of Ridley's account that I wish to introduce for present purposes. Ridley wonders how it is that we manage to recognise the resemblance between the movements of a piece of music and the movements of human beings or other creatures.<sup>15</sup> He notes that sometimes we can register in a purely dispassionate way how the dynamic qualities of a piece of music resemble the bodily movements of (for example) human beings, where these movements are expressive of feeling. (Perhaps rather unhelpfully, he speaks of this as a "robotic" recognition of the resemblance; in other words, it is the sort of recognition that does not depend upon the quality of our felt response to the music.) But often, he suggests, particularly with unfamiliar pieces, we come to identify the states of feeling expressed in the music by virtue of our affective responses. This sort of recognition involves a mirroring response to the music, so that the character of the music's expressiveness is grasped by way of the feeling that it engenders in us:

It is rather like my coming to appreciate the melancholy of a weeping willow only as the willow saddens me: I could, of course, merely identify the expressive posture that the willow's posture resembles; but instead I apprehend its melancholy through a kind of mirroring response. I respond to it *sympathetically*.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth emphasising that Ridley is not endorsing a simple "arousal" account of the expressiveness of music. What makes a piece of music "sad," for example, is not that it typically arouses in its listeners a response of sadness. On the contrary, it is the fact that the music is sad that explains why it gives rise to this sort of response. Its sadness is to be understood then not in terms of the affects it arouses, but in terms of the resemblance between the music's dynamic qualities and the movements of bodies where these movements are expressive of sadness. So the expressiveness of a piece of music consists not in the fact that it simply calls to mind certain states of feeling (the "robotic" case), nor in the fact that it causes certain states of feeling (the mirroring response case), but in the fact of resemblance between the movements of music and the expressive movements of bodies, where this resemblance can in principle be grasped either sympathetically or dispassionately.

We have seen that on Ridley's view, while music is capable of expressing for instance sadness, it cannot express grief, or we might add pity, since these emotions are individuated by reference to particular states of affairs, and music lacks the representational power to pick out particular states of affairs. This might suggest that music can express at most a relatively indeterminate kind of affective state — sadness in general rather than a particular variety of sadness such as grief or pity. However, Ridley adds that where the expressive force of a piece of music is recognised by means of a mirroring response, then its expressiveness assumes a very precise character, which can be specified by reference to the particular episode of feeling that the listener experiences: here the music is taken to express not just sadness, but the kind of sadness which has precisely this phenomenological feel. In this way, Ridley feels able to endorse Mendelssohn's often cited remark that "a piece of music that I love expresses thoughts to me that are not too imprecise to be framed in words, but too precise."<sup>17</sup> Of course, in elaborating his theory in this way, Ridley is after all endorsing a form, albeit a "weak" form, of the arousal theory: in general terms, it is the resemblance between the movements of music and of the body which grounds the possibility of music's expressiveness, but it is by virtue of our felt responses that we are able to ascribe to music a really precise expressive significance (a significance which may exceed our powers of description).<sup>18</sup> Ridley insists, however, that these felt responses, which enable us to attribute to music a very particular expressive force, are not merely conventional, or based on personal associations of some kind, but grounded in the character of the music itself, and above all in its dynamic melismatic properties.

I turn now to examine, more briefly, another account of musical expressiveness, one which is broadly in agreement with Ridley's approach. Like Ridley, Stephen Davies addresses his remarks to the claim of Eduard Hanslick and others that music cannot express definite emotions because it

cannot capture the thoughts of which they are constituted, and that a music critic should therefore take no interest in the affective responses aroused by a piece of music.<sup>19</sup> As we have seen, Ridley responds to this proposal by supposing that not all affective states need be counted as emotions, and that music expresses moods or feelings, rather than emotions in the strict sense. Davies also thinks that reference to objectless affective states provides the best way of turning aside Hanslick's challenge, and like Ridley he makes reference to weeping willows, and also to the face of St Bernard dogs, to explain how something may be expressive of an affective state, without our having to suppose that this state is directed at a particular state of affairs, or that it is felt at all.<sup>20</sup> Like weeping willows and St Bernard dogs, Davies suggests, music is expressive because it presents "emotion characteristics in appearance" (in other words, because it captures the look we associate with various states of emotion).<sup>21</sup> However, whereas the willow is expressive because of its shape, music is expressive on account of its dynamic character, and the resemblance this bears to human beings' gait, bearing, carriage and so on.

Moreover, like Ridley, Davies supposes that music sometimes arouses the affective states of which it is expressive (though again like Ridley, he rejects simple forms of the arousal theory: the expressive force of a piece of music is not to be reduced to its tendency to arouse a given affective response in its listeners.) Moreover, he maintains that these mirroring feelings remain "uncluttered by the motives, desires, and the need to act that are their usual accompaniments."<sup>22</sup> Again, this is not least because the feelings in question lack a material object, and are therefore abstracted from the specificity of context that usually underpins the action-guiding character of an affective state. (Compare Roberts on envy.) We can explain in the same way the comparative mildness of the feelings aroused by music, in so far as relatively intense affective episodes are typically informed by beliefs about particular states of affairs. Lastly, Davies echoes Ridley's thought that the affective states expressed in music can infuse our experience in general. Hence he comments that because the feelings expressed in music lack material objects, they can be taken to express "the composer's experience of affective life in general."<sup>23</sup> However, Davies notes that, even so, a mirroring response to music is not simply an objectless mood. It is true that such responses may lack an "emotional object" (for instance, when I am moved to sadness I need not be sad about anything in particular), but they still have a perceptual object (the music itself).<sup>24</sup> Hence they are like perceptual object generated moods (see again the examples of the willow and St Bernard).

So Davies' account is broadly in agreement with Ridley's. There are some differences of emphasis, however. Notably Davies does not give much attention to Mendelssohn's thought about the precision and consequent ineffability of the feelings expressed in music. But when he does make reference to this idea, citing Mendelssohn, he does not dispute the suggestion that the affects aroused in mirroring responses to music may escape verbalisation; he just rejects the idea that this feature of musical experience is distinctive or of any importance for understanding its expressive power: "the most mundane perceptual experiences," he writes, "lead to the acquisition of ineffable truths — for example, that the apple in front of me has a distinctive hue. Such facts

are usually of no special importance. They do not comprise inexpressible knowledge of a type that anyone is likely to feel compelled or inspired to communicate."<sup>25</sup> So while Davies does not dispute Ridley's claim about the particularity of our responses, he does not assign this fact the same significance in understanding the expressive force of music.

In summary, the works of Ridley and Davies reveal a striking consensus on the following issues. Firstly, the affective states expressed in music lack material objects. To put the matter in Davies's terms, they are states of the kind that can be communicated by an emotion characteristic in appearance, and therefore states which can in principle be expressed by someone's (dynamic) appearance without our knowing what he or she is thinking. Accordingly, both authors suppose that "pure" music cannot express, for instance, remorse, embarrassment, or envy, but can express sadness and happiness. Moreover, since they lack material objects, the affective states expressed in music are capable in principle of suffusing our experience in general, or "colouring our world." And while they reject simple arousal theories of musical expressiveness, Ridley and Davies also agree that we often come to recognise the expressive significance of a piece of music by way of a mirroring response, where this response may be too precise to be captured in all its particularity in words.

It is worth noting that similar themes emerge in some other, rather different responses to the claim that music cannot express particular emotions because it cannot express the thoughts of which they are constituted. For example, Geoffrey Maddell has argued that the affective states expressed in music do after all have a "material" or "emotional" object, namely, the movements of the music itself, and accordingly music is capable of expressing emotions in the everyday sense:

It is false that music can evoke emotion only if it can represent some extra-musical object of that emotion. The object of desire, or quasi-longing, is not some extra-musical state of affairs, but *a feature of the music itself*, viz., the resolution on the tonic. That is not a state of affairs which is *represented* by the music; it is a feature of the music.

Although adopting this rather different theoretical framework (one which takes the music to have a material object supplied by the tonal and harmonic features of the work itself, and which has no use for the idea that music bears a resemblance to human expressive behaviour), Maddell still endorses two of the themes that we have identified in the work of Davies and Ridley. He agrees that we often recognise the expressive force of a piece of music by way of a mirroring or sympathetic response;<sup>27</sup> and he agrees that "the distinctive balance of intentional affective responses evoked by music may be too subtle for words to capture."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, it is worth casting some of these observations about the character of the affective states expressed in music in the terms provided by Roberts' theory. In particular, we might ask how Roberts' account may be applied to the mirroring responses that are central to the discussions of Ridley and Davies. Although Roberts does not allude to moods in the paper I expounded earlier, these responses can be treated as concerned



construals, I suggest, albeit that "moody" concerns and construals are distinctive since they make no reference to particular states of affairs. For instance, a listener who responds sympathetically to a piece of music may find herself feeling an object-less depression, whereby things in general are taken to be profoundly unpromising, without any particular state of affairs being picked out in these terms, or treated as an object of concern.

As we have seen, because mirroring responses fail to identify particular states of affairs, we should also expect any concomitant concerns to be relatively mild. Ridley provides a further perspective on this thought when considering the question of why people should choose to listen to sad music. (After all, who would want to experience a mirroring response of sadness?) To meet this difficulty he suggests that emotions such as grief, humiliation, shame and jealousy are all necessarily unpleasant for their subjects, because they all necessarily involve reference to some sort of difficulty or reversal in the subject's circumstances. By contrast, he comments, the affective states experienced in mirroring responses to music make no reference to the subject's circumstances, and are therefore not necessarily unpleasant.<sup>29</sup> Hence the concerns which arise in this connection will tend to be relatively mild, for they will lack the element of frustrated self-regard that is characteristic of states such as humiliation. For the same sorts of reason, to revert to a point made by Davies, we may expect mirroring responses to lack the action-guiding force that is typical of affective states which pick out a particular context, and to be devoid of the powerful sensations that accompany certain emotions. Lastly, mirroring responses may also be said to be "serious" in Roberts' sense, in so far as things in general have the appearance of being (for example) profoundly unpromising, even if the subject of the experience would decline to assert that this is in fact how things stand.

### *III. The religious power of music*

Drawing upon the work of Ridley and Davies, we have seen that there is a degree of consensus on the character of the affective states which can be expressed in music. The following claims seem to be especially significant for an account of the religious significance of music:

- (1) Music is expressive of (material) object-less or mood-like affective states.
- (2) The expressive force of a musical work can be appreciated by way of a sympathetic response, whereby the listener takes on the affective state herself.
- (3) The affective states expressed in music may be too precise to be identified in all their particularity in words.
- (4) The affects that are evoked in sympathetic responses to music are lacking in self-reference and (as Davies puts it) "uncluttered by the motives, desires, and the need to act that are their usual accompaniments."

I shall explore the implications of (1)-(4) in turn, with a view to identifying

several distinct respects in which music may be said to bear a religious significance.

Following Ridley, we may distinguish between “feelings” (in his sense, i.e. affective states which lack a material object) and the “quality of an affective life.”<sup>30</sup> The quality of a person’s affective life has to do with the kinds of affective response to which they are predisposed in general, that is, regardless of the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. For instance, if the affective tone of my life is one of timidity, then I will tend to construe the world as threatening, and will be predisposed therefore to experience episodes of fear. Hence the quality of a person’s affective life amounts to a kind of implicit *Weltanschauung*, that is, a sense of the significance of the world, where this sense may well lack any theoretical articulation. Now a person who is experiencing a “feeling” of timidity resembles someone whose quality of affective life is timorous to this extent: while the mood lasts, he will be inclined to construe his environment in general as threatening. In so far therefore as music is expressive of “feelings” in Ridley’s sense, it is also expressive of something like a world-view, that is, an affectively laden way of reading the significance of things in general.

Now the religions are, of course, typically concerned to inculcate world-views of this kind, in so far as they seek to promote some generalised, affectively toned sense of the significance of human experience, a sense that extends not just to this set of circumstances or that, but to a person’s life in its entirety. This is part of what is involved, for example, in stories of creation and the end-time: such stories serve to frame human experience in an utterly general way, so providing a larger context in terms of which we can assess the significance of the particular states of affairs with which we reckon in day-to-day living. Suppose for instance that a faith tradition emphasises the operation of divine providence in the workings of the world. Such a tradition will find a state of habitual timidity inappropriate (at any rate where such fearfulness is directed at the way things turn out in the world); and accordingly, we would expect members of this tradition to aspire to a rather different quality of affective life, one marked by a greater degree of confidence in the workings of the world.

Contrary to the spirit of this example, some commentators have supposed that it is generalised affects that come first, and that metaphysical systems can be “read off” from such affects. For example, Pierre Hadot has argued that the ancient schools of philosophy were concerned with “philosophical discourse” (an abstract, metaphysical account of the nature of things) only in so far as such discourse helped to foster an affectively toned sense of the meaning of things whose appropriateness was already evident. Hence he suggests that the basic Stoic attitude was one of “tension” and “duty” or vigilance, and the Epicurean attitude one of “serenity” and the “joy of existing.”<sup>31</sup> (These attitudes we can interpret as “feelings,” I suggest.) And he proposes that the Stoic and Epicurean metaphysical systems were constructed simply for the sake of instilling general attitudes of these kinds. In a similar vein, William James has argued that metaphysical perspectives are answerable to prior affective orientations of a general character. He notes, for example, that any metaphysical system which required an attitude to everyday experience of fear, disgust, despair and doubt would be unsustainable. For

the purposes of our discussion, there is no need to resolve this dispute about the priority of the quality of an affective life vis-à-vis a metaphysical worldview. It is enough to note that there is a close relationship between the two, in whichever direction the dependence runs. (Indeed, it seems most likely that there will be a degree of reciprocal influence.)

So here is a first respect in which musical expressiveness proves to be religiously significant: the religions seek to inculcate a certain quality of affective life, and the affective states expressed in music (because they lack material objects) can be taken to represent various qualities of affective life. Moreover — turning now to the second point on our list — it is not just that music enables us to identify abstractly various ways of apprehending the world in general from an affective point of view. On the contrary, in so far as the expressiveness of a piece of music is grasped by way of a mirroring response, we will find ourselves experiencing first hand the correlative “feeling” or mood. Ridley puts the point thus:

Music, then, ... can be expressive of attitudes. For in coming, through certain pieces of music, to grasp the dominant character of an affective life not our own, we may also become aware of the attitude toward the world embodied in it, as the attitude inherent in the feeling which, sympathetically, we experience. Thus, in grasping the dominant affective character of Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony we become aware of what it would be like to have a cheerful outlook on the world, what it would be like to think the world amenable and uplifting.<sup>33</sup>

So musical expressiveness is religiously relevant not only in so far as it reveals various possible qualities of affective life, but also because the “feelings” expressed in music can be apprehended in such a way that we come to know “from inside” what it is like to have such feelings. Accordingly, music can shape the quality of our own affective response to the world in new ways, at any rate while the mood engendered by the music lasts.

We might ask next whether musical experience can also effect a more enduring transformation of a person’s affective sensibility. Here it is worth recalling Roberts’ comments on how the emotions fall within our control in so far as we are free to choose which construal of a situation to adopt. Now, as we have seen, in so far as they are mood-like, mirroring responses to music present us with various general construals of things. And accordingly, by drawing various construals to our attention, and allowing us to adopt them first hand for a time, mirroring responses to music may enlarge our repertoire of generalised construals of the world; and thereby they may help us to make a choice between various such construals. It is also possible that if we are exposed to a given construal often enough, through our immersion in a particular musical tradition, then adopting that construal may become to some degree habitual, independently of any deliberate exercise of choice. In this way, a person may find themselves drawn into a certain quality of affective life simply by virtue of their participation in a musical tradition. It may be that we can understand this phenomenon in part by reference to Roberts’ comments on how a sensation (such as blushing) may lead a person to construe their situation in a way that conforms to the sensa-

tion. Analogously, we might suppose that if a person finds themselves (at all frequently) in the position of construing things in general as, for example, "amenable" and "uplifting" (on account of a mirroring response to music), then they may be led to suppose, perhaps somewhat unreflectively, that this is indeed the nature of their circumstances.

So far I have been talking about the in principle relevance of musical expressiveness to religious concerns without any consideration of how an explicitly religious context may contribute to the expressiveness of music. If we follow the analysis of Ridley and Davies, we shall have to say that the expressiveness of a particular piece (played in a certain way) will not vary across secular and religious contexts, for both authors are insistent that expressiveness is a property of the music itself (relating above all to its dynamic properties). However, context may make a difference to the way in which a piece is played, and where several such interpretations are equally valid, but give rise to differences of dynamic property, we may suppose that context can indirectly make a difference to musical expressiveness. But quite apart from its contribution to expressiveness, a change of context may of course make a difference to the kinds of affect which the listener is likely to experience; for a listener's affective state may reflect both their mirroring response to qualities inherent in the music and also the setting in which the music is heard. An explicitly religious setting can also ensure that the general construals that are typical of mirroring responses are interpreted in new ways, without necessarily making any difference to the quality of feeling aroused by the music. For example, in listening to the *Agnus Dei* of a Byrd mass, I may experience a generalised feeling of peace, and if the music is heard in its liturgical context, or if the words are given serious consideration, then this feeling can be assigned a precise, religious meaning: the peace I feel is a peace befitting my situation as one whose sins have been taken away. Here the more detailed construal supplied by the words, or by the larger religious context, does not change the particular, mood-like quality of the mirroring response, but it enables me to see that generalised feeling as befitting a particular state of affairs, albeit one that is seen to call for a pervasive transformation in my sense of the world.

So we should expect to find certain differences between the secular music-lover listening to a Byrd mass while sipping a cocktail and someone who listens to the mass with devotion in a liturgical setting. The first person may not adopt a mirroring response to the music at all, and even if they do, their response may be overlaid by other, less religiously suggestive affects drawn from their context (the sense of peace may be transmuted into a sense of bodily well-being, for example). And even if the secular music-lover does adopt a mirroring response, and this response is not overlaid by other, less religiously resonant affects, they will presumably fail to assign the response the particular meaning that it bears in its original context: the generalised feeling of peace will not be understood as appropriate in the light of our status as forgiven.

By way of contrast with the secular music-lover, consider this religiously informed response to music:

I entered the little Portuguese village. ... It was the evening and there

was a full moon. It was by the sea. The wives of the fishermen were going in procession to make a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. ... There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.<sup>34</sup>

In this passage, Simone Weil is describing an episode of musical experience that has, clearly, a religious context. She takes the hymns she hears to express “heart-rending sadness,” and this, we may suppose, is the “feeling” (in Ridley’s sense) which she experiences by way of a mirroring response to the music. And she assigns this feeling a specifically religious meaning, influenced no doubt in part by the religious context, and also by her own preoccupations: this feeling reveals a quality of affective life that befits “slaves,” and this is indeed how we ought to feel, she says, if we are Christians. Significantly, Weil’s identification with Christianity here proceeds initially not by reference to some abstract credal characterisation of what Christians stand for, but by reference to the “attitude” (of “slavery”) that she takes to typify the Christian life. To this extent, the passage seems to endorse the thought, one we have explored already, that the quality of affective life inculcated by a religious tradition is central to the identity of the tradition, and not merely derivative from its theoretical, dogmatic claims.

Having considered the secular music-lover and Simone Weil, I offer one final example of how music may be appreciated, of a rather different character again:

Suppose that a captive in his prison, delivered to hatred and seeing the sky only “beyond the rooftop,” hears a Bach fugue. ... He can not doubt that this world of Bach exists, even if it is reserved for enjoyment by others. There is joy, and it is of little importance which particular objects manifest it.<sup>35</sup>

Drawing again on the Ridley-Davies framework, we may suppose that the captive recognises the expressive force of the music by way of a mirroring response of joy. And the joy he experiences is, we may think, a “feeling” — hence he can remark that “it is of little importance which particular objects manifest [this joy],” implying that it does not have a particular material object, and is instead free to range over an indeterminate range of such objects (indeed what is there in his immediate environment that might serve as its object?) This case seems to fall somewhere between those of the cocktail-sipping secularist and Weil. The captive enters into the mirroring response with real seriousness, since he takes the response to reveal something important about the possibilities of human experience. But he does not commit himself to the thought that the affect he comes to feel has any general application in human life. By contrast, in a religiously engaged hearing of Byrd’s *Agnus Dei* or the hymns in Weil’s example, the listener not only enters into the mirroring response (of peace or heart-rending sadness) with a certain gravity, but takes the correlative quality of affective life to be appropriate for human beings. So the listener described in this pas-

sage remains, it seems, religiously unengaged (or at any rate, if this response involves a kind of spiritual-cum-religious engagement, it is less far-reaching than that found in our other examples, because it does not involve some general conception of the human condition and the quality of affective life that befits this condition). But at the same time, because his reading of the mirroring response reveals a degree of existential seriousness, the captive's appreciation of the music is also to be distinguished from that of the cocktail sipper.

Before proceeding to consider, more briefly, points (3) and (4) on our list of themes drawn from Ridley and Davies, it is worth noting that the features of musical expressiveness that we have been discussing appear to be somewhat distinctive of music. For example, because of their richer powers of representation, a story or painting may well engender an affective state that is targeted at some rather restricted state of affairs. Even stories concerning God, the source and goal of the whole creation, can be construed in this relatively limited way, we may suppose, so that they engender patterns of felt response to God considered as a particular object, rather than giving rise to a more general affective disposition. To this extent, non-musical art forms may lack the sort of religious relevance that we have been ascribing to music, that is, the relevance that derives from the generalisable character of the affects expressed in music.

Moreover, again because of their richer representational content, non-musical art forms may well result in an empathic rather than a sympathetic or mirroring response. For instance, if a story describes a person's grief upon being bereaved, my response may well involve pity for this person (and will not normally involve grief, in so far as I do not take myself to be bereaved). By contrast, when my response is of the mirroring kind, I take on the very affects which are expressed in the work. It may be that this feature of musical expressiveness is also important in understanding the distinctive character of music's religious relevance. At any rate, a mirroring response can seem more intimate than an empathic response: the latter kind of response directs my attention towards some more or less precisely circumscribed state of affairs (the grieving person, for example); by contrast, a mirroring response appears to be simply a state of inwardness, one which does not require me to feel joyful or depressed (or whatever) about anything in particular. The depth of emotional experience that many people associate with music, in distinction from other art forms, is, at least in part, I suggest, a consequence of this aspect of musical experience, whereby we simply mirror the movements of the music, rather than directing our attention to an emotional object (something we are sad or happy about). (Compare T.S. Eliot's remark: "You are the music while the music lasts.")<sup>36</sup> If music does indeed speak to us with a special intimacy for these reasons, that suggests once more that musical expressiveness may be particularly important for the formation of a certain quality of affective life.

Point (3) on our list of the religiously significant features of musical expressiveness recalled Ridley's claim that the affects expressed in music, when grasped in a mirroring response, may exceed our powers of verbalisation. It is easy to imagine an objector protesting that Ridley has failed to show how this sort of expressiveness is really grounded in the music. After

all, on his own account, the resemblance between the dynamic qualities of a piece of music and the expressive movements of bodies will be of a fairly indeterminate character, enough to allow us to characterise the music as say slow and effortful, and therefore sad, but prohibiting any more precise identification of its expressive significance. However, suppose we grant Ridley's claim that such mirroring responses are a mode of apprehension of qualities in the music, and that capturing their expressive significance in full may well exceed our powers of description. If he is right about this, then a further dimension of music's religious potency comes into view. For on these assumptions, it is at least possible that some religiously important affects can be grasped by way of mirroring responses to music, but not by verbal means.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it may be that certain religiously important affects can be grasped only by way of a particular musical tradition, or even, only by way of a particular piece of music. In that case, music could prove to be indispensable for the full articulation of the meaning of a religious tradition considered in terms of the quality of affective life that it commends. Readers can no doubt test this thesis against their own musical experience. Are there pieces of music, or traditions of musical expression, that communicate a quality of affective life, where at least part of what is communicated is relevant to the "attitude" that (say) Christians should display, and where what is communicated in this respect cannot be expressed in all its religiously relevant detail in any other way?

I turn now to point (4) on our list, the idea that the affects expressed in music are lacking in self-reference and "uncluttered" by any impulse towards action. There is, of course, a long-standing tradition which has found aesthetic experience religiously or spiritually significant because it fosters a kind of detachment, encouraging us to be absorbed in the work of art for its own sake, and apart from any thought of its usefulness in satisfying the cravings of the ego.<sup>38</sup> Ridley and Davies together provide a way of articulating the idea that musical experience can free a person from self-referential concerns, though their account makes appeal not so much to the character of aesthetic experience in general, as to the character of perceptual object directed moods. Hence Ridley notes, as we have seen, that mirroring responses to music necessarily lack any self-regarding character, because they fail to pick out particular circumstances and their bearing on the well-being of the subject. And for the same reason, we should expect to find (as we evidently do) that musical affects are typically devoid of action-guiding content: a mirroring response to the sadness expressed in a piece of music makes no reference to particular states of affairs, and therefore invites no thought about how I might effect some change in things.

In these respects, we may well detect a further religiously suggestive feature of musical expressiveness. For in so far as musical affects have this character, then they involve a "transcending" of the ego-centric, action-guiding perspective of ordinary life, and this sort of transcendence may be religiously important, in so far as the religions think it appropriate (not in every circumstance, evidently) to adopt a contemplative attitude towards the world, that is, an attitude that does not see the world as an object of use, or take it as a resource for satisfying my desires. It is also worth recalling here the idea that the affects experienced in mirroring responses to

music are typically mild in character. The mildness of musical affects might also be deemed spiritually significant in some religious traditions, in so far as extremes of emotion are considered unwholesome. But it seems likely that the censuring of powerful emotions that is characteristic of some religious traditions derives from a sense that such emotions are grounded in egocentric concerns. And in that case, the mildness of musical affects will not present a distinct consideration after all.

So far I have been exploring the religious relevance of musical affects in so far as such affects help to foster the adoption of religiously appropriate "attitudes" towards the world. Next, and more briefly, I would like to consider the possibility that musical affects may be religiously relevant in helping to cultivate a certain quality of affective life in relationship to God (or the sacred otherwise characterised).

#### *IV. Extending the model*

I have been considering the religious importance of musical affects considered as attitudes towards the world. But on some views, our attitudes towards the world and towards God ought to be in some degree mutually defining. And if that is so, then we should reckon with the possibility that musical affects are directly relevant to a person's relationship to God (and not relevant merely in so far as they suggest an attitude towards the world that is religiously fitting). This association between the attitudes which are apt in relationship to God and in relationship to the world arises most simply in so far as the world is considered as a theatre of divine activity, and therefore revelatory of God. A particularly striking example of this sort of approach is evident in Maimonides' treatment of the divine attributes. Hence he writes that:

We see, e.g., how well He provides for the life of the embryo of living beings; how He endows with certain faculties both the embryo itself and those who have to rear it after its birth, in order that it may be protected from death and destruction, guarded against all harm, and assisted in the performance of all that is required [for its development]. Similar acts, when performed by us, are due to a certain emotion and tenderness called mercy and pity. God is, therefore, said to be merciful.<sup>39</sup>

Maimonides goes on to generalise this example to reach the conclusion that "all attributes ascribed to God are attributes of His acts."<sup>40</sup> Or more exactly (as becomes clear later in his discussion), he proposes that the divine attributes involve either a reference to God's effects in the world (as in the passage just cited) or (where they concern the divine essence in itself) a denial of certain creaturely properties of God.<sup>41</sup> So on this account, many of the divine attributes can be read as compressed references to the way the world works in general (in terms of the preservation of embryos, and so on). And accordingly, in some cases at least, affective attitudes will be transferable from God to the world, and vice versa. For example, if it is appropriate to have confidence in the divine mercy, then it is appropriate



to have confidence in the workings of the world, since God's being merciful comes down to the fact that the world works in certain ways. And in that case, it seems possible that certain musical affects, in so far as they imply a religiously appropriate attitude towards the world, will also thereby imply an appropriate attitude towards God.

It might be objected that this is to commend an idolatrous interpretation of the significance of music: we are being invited to transfer attitudes that are appropriate to the world to God; and these attitudes, furthermore, are seen to have their origin in music, and not in some acknowledgement of God and what God has done for us. On the first of these points, I would agree, of course, that not every attitude towards the world will be applicable to God. Following Maimonides, I am suggesting that a theological rationale can be provided for treating some attitudes in this way. Specifically, if we follow Maimonides, then we may suppose that having confidence in God's mercy logically commits a person to having confidence in the world's progress, because God's mercy is realised in his direction of the world. On the second point, I would recall what was said earlier about the contribution of religious context to our appreciation of music. Given such a context, it is possible to assign a precise religious meaning to a mirroring response to music, a meaning which does recognise what God has done for us.

For an example of a musically induced "feeling" being applied to God, we may turn to John Paul II's "Letter to Artists."<sup>42</sup> The Pope writes that: "In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God." Cast in the terms we have been using, we could take John Paul to be saying that the "feelings" of joy and love can be aroused by way of a mirroring response to music. And (reading our own theory into his remarks somewhat) we might suppose that these feelings are appropriate both as "attitudes" towards the world and in relationship to God, because of certain specifically Christian truths. Thus because of what we know of "the saving intervention of God," our everyday experience should be received in a spirit of love and joy; and these same affects should also be displayed in relationship to God, not least because it is God who confers this sort of significance upon our everyday experience. Here the applicability of an affective attitude both in relationship to the world and in relationship to God is grounded not so much in general truths concerning God's activity in the world (as in Maimonides) as in a specifically Christian claim concerning the ultimate telos of human existence.

Remarkably, there is a whole tradition of spiritual formation which seems to be founded upon the idea that such mood-like responses should inform our relationship to God. I am thinking here of an approach to spiritual direction that was widespread in Catholic circles at least until the middle years of the last century. In this tradition, it was common practice to distinguish various phases of spiritual development (broadly, the purgative, illuminative and unitive) and to suppose that the later phases were marked by a movement away from discursive forms of prayer towards a state of wordless, affective contemplation. Expounding this general tradition in a text which served as a standard spiritual handbook in the early years of the twentieth century, Adolphe Tanqueray writes that, as it

matures, "the soul seeks solitude and silence; it gradually builds in the heart a *sanctuary* where it finds God and converses with Him heart to heart."<sup>43</sup> In keeping with the larger spiritual tradition of which he is speaking, Tanquerey supposes that in this intimate relationship to God, one particular affective state will come to predominate. And the resulting condition, he writes, "soon extends to our whole life" so that it "persists all day long," whatever else we may be doing.<sup>44</sup> Here Tanquerey seems to have in mind a mood-like condition, to the extent that the predominant affect extends to our experience in general; and it is through such "moods," he is suggesting, that a person may converse with God "heart to heart." So here we find a further way of taking "feelings" to be important in a person's relationship to God, and accordingly a further way of developing the thought that musical affects are at least in principle religiously significant.

Tanquerey's characterisation of these predominant affects as mood-like suggests that they should inform not only our relationship to God but also our dealings with the world (since they will persist through our day-to-day activities). This suggests that Tanquerey's discussion, like the others we have examined, invites, in certain cases, an association of the attitudes applicable to God and those applicable to the world. And there is implicit in his account a theological rationale for this association. In particular, he notes that the character of the dominant affective state will vary from person to person, and that for some the focal point of this state will be Christ's passion, and for others the eucharist, and so on.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that the eucharist, the passion, or some other cardinal truth of the Christian faith is taken to disclose the ultimate significance of human experience; and for this reason, certain attitudes (joy, for example) can be deemed appropriate not only in our relationship to God but also in our engagement with the world.

### *Conclusions*

Schopenhauer famously thought that music carries metaphysical significance because the movements of a melody offer a kind of analogue for the movements of the will as it seeks satisfaction first in one thing and then in another. Hence he comments that: "the nature of man consists in this, that his will strives, is satisfied and strives anew, and so on for ever. ... And corresponding to this the nature of melody is a constant digression and deviation from the key-note in a thousand ways..."<sup>46</sup> The account developed in this paper is founded upon a different model of musical expressiveness, one which appeals to the resemblance between the movements of music and human expressive behaviour (rather than a resemblance between music and the movements of the will). On this account, there is no need to adopt Schopenhauer's Buddhist metaphysic to find music metaphysically suggestive. It is enough to note a number of proposals drawn from contemporary philosophy of music.

Firstly, the affective states expressed in music lack material objects, and can be grasped in "feelings" formed by way of a mirroring response. If that is so, then music can help to inculcate a certain quality of affective life, and this is enough to establish its religious significance in principle; for the faith traditions are concerned, of course, not only that believers should profess

right doctrine, but also that they should exhibit a correlative quality of affective life in their dealings with the world. Moreover, in so far as musical affects are lacking in action-guiding content, then they may have a part to play in fostering a "spiritual" or contemplative attitude towards the world; and in so far as they cannot be replicated by other means, they may even prove to be indispensable for the full articulation of a faith perspective, considered in terms of the "attitude" towards the world that it seeks to commend. Moreover, on certain quite widely adopted theological assumptions, some of the attitudes that are rightly displayed in relationship to the world should also be displayed in relationship to God, and in this respect too, the mirroring responses engendered by music may prove to be religiously resonant. Lastly, we have also explored the theme that the religious potency of music in these respects may be unrivalled by other art forms, especially in so far as musical affects are more readily generalisable, and are experienced more intimately, than those evoked by other art forms.

That music is religiously powerful is for many people an obvious datum of experience, and it is natural to wonder how music can impinge so profoundly upon human lives. This paper shows, I hope, that the affinity between our musical experience and the life of faith is not simply a "brute" fact, but can be illuminated in some degree using the categories supplied by contemporary philosophy of music.<sup>47</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Specifically I shall follow the account given in Robert C. Roberts, "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch," *The Philosophical Review* XCVII, 1988, pp. 183-209.

2. *Ibid.* p. 192.

3. *Ibid.* p. 199.

4. *Ibid.* p. 205.

5. *Ibid.* p. 208.

6. Plato and Aristotle may be counted in this tradition. Both considered music in terms of the acting out of dramatic parts in song and dance, where different musical modes were associated with different character types. As Nancy Sherman notes, this involved an "emulative and empathetic kind of identification" with the character being played: *The Fabric of Character. Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) p. 182.

7. This view is expressed famously by the nineteenth century music critic Eduard Hanslick. He writes that "there is no invariable and inevitable nexus between musical works and certain states of mind," and he concludes that feeling cannot provide the basis for an aesthetic appreciation of music: *On the Beautiful in Music*, reproduced in John Andrew Fisher, *Reflecting on Art* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Pub. Co., 1993) p. 284.

8. See *Music, Value and the Passions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). Ridley introduces the notion of melisma in ch. 4.

9. *Music as Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), cited in Ridley, *ibid.* p. 109.

10. *Ibid.* p. 111.

11. Ibid. p. 112.
12. For these and other examples, see Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions. The Philosophical Theories* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) p. 4.
13. On the distinction between material and formal objects in this context, see Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) pp. 189-94.
14. Op. cit. p. 33.
15. The case of vocal melisma he takes to be relatively straightforward: here the connection between the character of the music and its expressive power is obvious, he thinks (ibid. p. 111).
16. Ibid. pp. 128-9.
17. Cited in Ridley, ibid. p. 116.
18. Ibid. pp. 135-8. Indeed, Ridley says that in the responsive listener, these sympathetic responses may be "infinitely particular," corresponding to the infinite particularity of the musical gestures whose character they recognise (p. 138).
19. Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
20. Ibid. p. 227.
21. Ibid. p. 228.
22. Ibid. p. 271.
23. Ibid. p. 272.
24. Ibid. pp. 302-3.
25. Ibid. p. 161.
26. Geoffrey Maddell, "What Music Teaches About Emotion," *Philosophy* 71, 1996, p. 71.
27. In fact his position seems to require him to identify the expressive force of a piece of music with the character of these responses. Hence he comments: "music expresses emotion when it evokes emotion in such a way that the listener comes to identify with the course of the music" (p. 75).
28. Ibid. p. 79. The sympathetic response theme is developed on pp. 69-70. In fact, Maddell grants that music does not provide the sort of material object that is required for many of the emotions, and this suggests that his position is not so sharply distinct from that of Ridley and Davies as may first appear. It seems to be an implication of his view that music does not express grief, for example, so much as an "analogue" of grief: ibid. pp. 80-81.
29. Even sadness, he suggests, need not be experienced as a "negative" emotion: op. cit. p. 168.
30. Ibid. p. 160.
31. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, tr. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p. 35.
32. William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," reproduced in William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Press, 1948) p. 18.
33. Ibid. pp. 162-3.
34. Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, tr. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) pp. 19-20.
35. Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, tr. Edward S. Casey et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) p. 519. The reference is from Verlaine.
36. *The Dry Salvages*, quoted in Maddell, op. cit. p. 63.
37. It might be objected: surely we could just invent a term to denote the particular feeling embodied in a given mirroring response. Ridley would not deny this; but we might well suppose that any such term will be practically

useless, in itself, for the purpose of inducting someone into the correlative quality of affective life: what is required is experience of the relevant mirroring response.

38. This understanding of aesthetic experience is expressed with particular clarity and authority in Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950). For similar (also broadly Platonic) reflections on art's power to release a person from the egocentric perspective, see Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) pp. 85-90.

39. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, tr. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover Publications, 1956 2nd ed.) ch. liv, p. 76.

40. *Ibid.* p. 78.

41. *Ibid.* p. 83.

42. Delivered Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999.

43. Adophe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life. A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, tr. Herman Branderis (Tournai: Desclée et Cie, 1930 2nd ed.) p. 602, italics in original.

44. *Ibid.* p. 640, italics in the original.

45. *Ibid.* p. 639.

46. *Op. cit.* p. 336.

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