

Music and Morality

Música y Moral

ROGER SCRUTON

Recibido: 16-Enero-2014 | Aceptado: 19-Marzo-2014 | Publicado: 19-Diciembre-2014

© El autor(es) 2014. | Trabajo en acceso abierto disponible en (*) www.disputatio.eu bajo una licencia *Creative Commons*.

La copia, distribución y comunicación pública de este trabajo será conforme la nota de copyright. Consultas a (✉) boletin@disputatio.eu

El presente ensayo hace una reflexión sobre la relación entre la música y la moral, y en particular, ofrece una respuesta filosófica a dos cuestiones importantes: ¿Puede atribuirse un carácter moral concreto a la música?, y, de ser así, ¿cómo afecta este carácter moral musical al sentido moral de las personas que escuchan esa música? Estas preguntas llevan a una reflexión final sobre los límites de la interpretación crítica de la obra musical.

Música · Lenguaje musical · Carácter moral · Virtudes y vicios · Interpretación · Analogía · Metáfora · Teoría musical · Adorno · Elgar.

This essay reflects on the relationship between music and morality, and in particular, provides a philosophical answer to two important questions: Can moral character be specifically attributed to music?, and, if so, how does this moral musical character affect on the moral sense of the people who listen to this music? These questions lead to a final reflection on the limits of critical interpretation of the musical work.

Music · Musical language · Moral carácter · Virtues and vices · Interpretation · Analogy · Metaphor · Music Theory · Adorno · Elgar.

Music and Morality

ROGER SCRUTON

THE WAYS OF POETRY AND MUSIC ARE NOT CHANGED anywhere without change in the most important laws of the city». So wrote Plato in the « *Republic* (4.424c). And Plato is famous for having given what is perhaps the first theory of character in music, proposing to allow some modes and to forbid others according to the character which can be heard in them. Plato deployed the concept of *mimesis*, or imitation, to explain why bad character in music encourages bad character in its lovers. The context suggests that he had singing, dancing and marching in mind, rather than the silent listening that we know from the concert hall. But, however we fill out the details, there is no doubt that music, for Plato, was something that could be judged in the same moral terms that we judge one another, and that the terms in question denoted virtues and vices, like nobility, dignity, temperance and chastity on the one hand, and sensuality, belligerence and indiscipline on the other.

The targets of Plato's argument were not individual works of music or specific performances, but *modes*. We don't exactly know how the Greek modes were arranged; they conventionally identified *styles*, instruments and melodic and rhythmical devices, as well as the notes of the scale. Without going into the matter we can venture to suggest that Plato was discriminating between recognizable musical idioms, as we might discriminate jazz from rock, and both from classical. And his concern was not so very different from that of a modern person worrying about the moral character, and moral effect, of Death Metal, say, or musical kitsch of the Andrew Lloyd Webber kind. Should our children be listening to this stuff? is the question in the mind of modern adults, just as «should the city permit this stuff?» was the question in the mind of Plato. Of course, we have long since given up on the idea that you can forbid certain kinds of music by law. But three important questions remain: whether musical styles and idioms have a moral character, whether individual works have such a character, over and above that of the idiom in which they are composed, and finally whether the character of an idiom, or a work, rubs off, in some way on its devotees. And even if we don't forbid musical idioms by law, we should

remember that our laws are made by people who have musical tastes; and Plato may be right, even in relation to a modern democracy, that changes in musical culture go hand in hand with changes in the laws. It is not implausible to suggest that a Parliament of Mozart lovers, all of whom play in string quartets, is likely to pass different laws from a Parliament of pop fans, none of whom has mastered an instrument. Actually the pop culture hit Parliament in a big way with Tony Blair and his cronies, and I am tempted to draw a lesson from this example.

These questions are complicated for us by the fact that music is now appreciated in many different ways: people dance to music; they work and converse over a background of music; they perform music; and they listen to music. People happily dance to music that they cannot bear to listen to – a fairly normal experience these days. You can talk over Mozart, but not over Schoenberg; you can work to Chopin, but not to Wagner. And it is sometimes argued that the melodic and rhythmic contour of pop music both fits it for being overheard, rather than listened to, and also encourages a *need* for pop in the background. Some psychologists wonder whether this need follows the pattern of addictions; and more philosophical critics, like Adorno raise questions of a deep kind as to whether listening has not changed entirely with the development of the short-range melodies and clustered harmonic progressions that are typical of songs in the jazz tradition.

It is worth reflecting a little on the impetus behind Adorno's critique. We must surely recognize that there is a great difference between a musical culture based in serious listening to extended movements of highly intricate musical thought, and a musical culture based in hearing quickly exhausted and largely predictable melodies, which occur in the background, supported by mechanical rhythms and off-the-shelf harmonies, and which quickly exhaust their sparse musical potential. The transition from the one culture to the other does not represent a transition in the realm of music only. Vast social and even political changes can be read into this transition, and Adorno was surely right to notice this.

This is one of those aspects of music that we don't find surprising until we think about. From the dance of the Israelites around the golden calf, to the orgies of Hip-Hop, the musical distractions of ordinary people have called down the maledictions of their priestly guardians. The priests have throughout history tried not merely to control what is sung and played in the temple, but to confine and if necessary forbid the revels that take place outside. We no longer

think we can do this by law. But we are still deeply concerned by changes in musical practice, in just the way that Moses was, when he descended from the mountain and cast the tablets of the law to the ground on seeing the idolatry of the masses. This was perhaps the first recorded protest against «mass culture». Adorno is a latter-day Moses, and his hero Arnold Schoenberg tried to set the episode from the Old Testament to music, as an illustration of the way in which we must never sacrifice difficult truth to easy communication. In the contrast between Moses and Aaron in Schoenberg's unfinished opera we see dramatised the clash of cultures that preoccupied Adorno. There is a culture of long-term thought and abstract conception, represented by Moses; and a culture of short-term pleasure and easy communication, represented by Aaron. Schoenberg's treatment of this theme reminds us that many of the worries expressed, down the ages, concerning the depravities of popular musical culture reflect the fear of idolatry –of false gods, false worship and false emotions. And if you want to know why people still feel this way, then all you have to do is to watch the video and listen to the music of «Bleed» by the Swedish death-metal group Meshuggah.

Adorno's reputation did not suffer from his attack on popular culture –and this at first seems strange, given the fate of anyone who attacks popular culture today, who will be dismissed as an elitist, out of touch, nostalgically attached to a vanished past, and so on: I don't need to remind you of the normal response of the offended psyche to the sudden encounter with judgement. Adorno was able to criticize mass culture with impunity because he was a Marxist, and used the Marxist categories, in his own eccentric way, in order to package essentially reactionary thoughts in a progressive idiom. The musicological establishment was taken in by this, and thought that Adorno was pointing *forward* and not backward in his criticisms of the Hollywood scene. As a result you will find Adorno singled out as the most important philosopher of music in the 20th century, by people who also believe that the tradition of American popular music is a serious topic of study, and one that contains some kind of liberating message for us all. Adorno's actual criticism of the jazz tradition was designed to support the opposite judgement. He wanted to show that the freedoms seemingly enjoyed by the American people are illusory freedoms, and that the underlying cultural reality is one of enslavement –enslavement to the fetishes of the market and the consumer culture, which by placing appetite above long-term values lead to the loss of rational autonomy. Popular music was not, for Adorno, something that Americans had been liberated *to*, but something which they must be liberated *from*.

We are clearly in deep water here; and we are not going to save ourselves simply by taking the kind of non-judgemental approach that is so often promoted by courses in music appreciation. In this area to be non-judgemental is already to make a kind of judgement: it is to suggest that it really doesn't matter what you listen to or dance to, and that there is no moral distinction between the various listening habits that have emerged in the age of mechanical reproduction. That is a morally charged position, and one that flies in the face of common sense. To suggest that people who live with a rhythmic pulse as a constant background to their thoughts and movements are living *in the same way*, with the same kind of attention and the same pattern of challenges and rewards, as others who know music only from sitting down to listen to it, clearing their minds, meanwhile, of all other thoughts –such a suggestion is wildly implausible.

Put laconically, the difference between those two ways of responding to music is the difference between preventing silence, and letting silence speak. Music in the listening culture is a voice that arises from silence, and which uses silence as a painter uses the canvas: silence is the *prima materia* from which the work is composed, and the most eloquent parts of the classical sonata movement are often the parts when nothing can be heard. That is seldom true of pop music today. Moreover the difference here is surely the kind of thing that is morally relevant –like the difference between temperance and intemperance in eating habits or in sex. It seems to me therefore that we have to face the three questions that I mentioned head-on: whether musical styles and idioms have a moral character, whether individual works have such a character, over and above that of the idiom in which they are composed, and finally whether the character of an idiom, or a work, rubs off, in some way on its devotees. Those are questions that have the greatest bearing on modern life, and how to manage it. And they are questions that are, in the first instance, philosophical.

First, then, the question whether musical idioms can exhibit moral virtues and moral vices. Well, it is obvious that we *describe* musical idioms in this way, and it is worth reminding ourselves of some familiar examples. The idiom of the Gregorian chant is almost universally acknowledged to be spiritual and uplifting. The style of Bach's keyboard works is scholarly and dignified. The classical idiom of Haydn and Mozart is courtly, well-mannered and correct. The idiom of Beethoven is passionate and defiant. New Orleans Jazz is lively, invigorating, innocent. By contrast Death Metal is oppressive, dark, morbid. Indie music is complacent and self-satisfied; the American songbook is sentimental and nostalgic. There are whimsical idioms, aggressive idioms, and

idioms that strike us as self-indulgent, self-pitying or narcissistic.

All that is familiar. But it doesn't get us very far. For all those descriptions are figurative: they involve applying to musical idioms terms whose sense is fixed by their application to human characters. There is no *a priori* way of fixing what these terms mean when they are attached to music. A parallel example might help us to see this. We use metaphors of character, and even of virtue and vice, in describing trees and species of tree. The oak is noble and dependable, the ash familial and domestic. The pine is dark and brooding, the willow feminine, the cypress melancholy, the maple good-humoured; and so on. Nobody thinks that those descriptions convey very much. And even if they convey something, it has no bearing on the moral status of the trees or their real relation to people. The virtues and vices of trees don't rub off on the people who live in their shadow. You don't get noble people living under oaks, and light-hearted people under maples. These descriptions are part of an elaborate game we play, not very different from that suggested by Wittgenstein, in asking us to decide whether Wednesday is fat or lean, or that suggested by Gombrich, in asking us to sort everything in the world according to whether it is «pong» or «ping». It is second nature for human beings to extend language in this way, sometimes guided by an impression of similarity, sometimes guided by their own responses, sometimes just playing around. But whether it has any foundation in the thing described, or a further foundation in the life of the person so describing it, are questions that cannot be settled just by looking at the language.

This doesn't mean that those descriptions of the character of musical idioms are meaningless, or that they are unimportant. But it does mean that we cannot use them to say anything about the moral significance of music. We can understand this easily enough by reflecting on another context in which we use this language –when describing the appearance of people. I may say that Jim has a severe and censorious appearance. But that says nothing about Jim's character: he may be mild and accommodating, for all I know. Appearances can deceive. In the case of music we have *only* appearances to go by. When it comes to music, there is no reality behind the appearance, otherwise Mark Twain might have been right to describe the music of Wagner as «better than it sounds».

The same difficulty attaches to the second of our questions: whether individual works of music have a moral character, over and above that of the idiom in which they are composed. Again, there is no hesitation to use virtue and vice words of individual works of music. Bach's *Art of Fugue* radiates

authority, wisdom, profundity. Beethoven's Leonora no. 3 is noble and life-affirming; Schubert's G major Quartet is anguished, dignified and tender in the face of suffering. The last movement of Tchaikovsky's sixth is mournful and unsmiling. So it could go on, through all the well-known virtues and vices of mankind. Of course, there are some virtue words, and some vice words, that never seem to be called upon, when describing music. «Just», for example, «cowardly», «unwise», «discreet», «reliable». Even with such words, however, a game could easily develop, of sorting works of music by means of them. Among just works should we not count the overture to *The Mastersingers*, and Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture* –works that attempt to do justice to forms of human life and all that they contain?

Here I want to register a protest against a familiar move in the philosophy of music, and especially in theories of expression. This move tries to ground metaphor in analogy. It goes something like this: we begin from the question what does it mean to describe a piece of music as sad, noble, etc? (Notice that emotion terms and virtue terms tend to be treated together, since they both involve the spontaneous transfer of language from the mental to the musical context.) We respond with a suggestion: we mean that the music is *like* a sad or noble person. In what way like? Here I refer you to some of Kivy's writings on the subject, which tell us that sad music shares the dynamic properties of sad people, it is slow-moving, drooping, ponderous and so on. And noble music is up-standing, fully presented, with straightforward gestures and clear, honest cadences. Then I want to protest, wait a moment, you haven't advanced us one bit: you said that sad music shares properties with sad people; and then you proved this by describing those properties in two ways –using literal language of people, and figurative language of the music. Music doesn't *literally* move slowly, droop or ponder. The analogy turns out not to be an analogy at all, but a way of replacing one metaphor with another. I still have the question, what do these metaphors *mean*, and what do they tell me about the thing to which they are applied? And there is a strong tradition of argument, beginning with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and taking in myself and others – including the illustrious Donald Davidson– which says that you don't explain the meaning of a metaphor by looking at the metaphorical use, but by looking at the literal use. The thing that needs explaining is not the *meaning* of the word «sad», «noble» or whatever, but the purpose of using just that word in just this context. And whatever the purpose, it is not that of describing or picking out analogies.

But suppose these analogies exist. Suppose you can give sense to an emotion

term or virtue word when used of music, by pointing to similarities between the work of music and the mental state or disposition referred to by the literal usage. Would this show that the term identifies something aesthetically interesting and morally relevant in the thing to which it applies? My answer is no. Everything resembles everything else, and most resemblances are insignificant; what makes resemblance interesting is the context that puts it to a use. You may have a striking resemblance to Elvis Presley. But, because you can't sing, can't move in a sexy way, can't do anything to put your resemblance on display, it remains insignificant. We notice many resemblances in music. The opening theme of Beethoven's Op. 18 no 1 is like someone signing a cheque: boldly putting down the hand, and then lapsing into a squiggle. But that resemblance (supposing we allow it) has nothing to do with the music or what it means. Naturally, therefore, we need to distinguish accidental from significant resemblances: and that is precisely what we cannot do, if the only ground for the use of mental predicates to describe music is the kind of analogy pointed to by Kivy.

Here I think we can begin to distinguish the first two of our questions: that concerning musical idioms and that concerning musical works. Virtue and vice terms used of musical idioms can, in a way, be taken for granted, as posing no particular problems from the point of view of aesthetics. Like the description of tree species as noble or dignified, the description of an idiom as joyful or aggressive has no particular moral significance. The case parallels that of architecture in the classical tradition. The Ionic order was considered masculine but adolescent, the Doric order manly, the Corinthian feminine. And particular styles of ornamentation have been graced with similar epithets down the centuries. But nobody thinks that very much hangs on this, or that these epithets are a clue to the meaning of any particular building, or even to the beauty in general of a particular style. This kind of figurative language comes naturally to us: it is part of our way of being at home in the world, that we bring new objects under old categories, and extend our predicates to meet the need. The language of the virtues begins to bite only when we apply it to the individual work.

Here is an example. Youthful grace and serenity adhere to the Ionic Order in Greek architecture, much as joy and innocence adhere to New Orleans jazz. That, for us, is the character of the Ionic Order, which possesses this character in something like the way the oak possesses nobility and the weeping willow grief. The use of the word seems apposite, without, however, committing us to any judgement. There are good and bad Ionic buildings, just as there are good

and bad works of New Orleans jazz and first rate and third rate oak trees. When Cockerell in his amazing designs for the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford used the Greek Ionic Order, however, he produced one of the great works of architecture of the classical revival, and one in which youthful grace and serenity are both exhibited. But now the description begins to mean something. I cannot say «Look, there is youthful grace and serenity», and then add, «but of course, it is a piece of architectural rubbish, mere pastiche», not without feeling a tension, if not a contradiction, between those two pronouncements. The first has said something about the meaning of Cockerell's building, something that justifies the attention we might pay to it. Cockerell meant us to notice this youthful grace; it represented, for him, an idea of education and its transforming effect on the young mind. The youthful grace of the building, as vivid today as it was when first it was built 180 years ago, is part of what it *means*. And the serenity, amplified by the ingenious mixture of the honey-coloured Oxford stone and the white Portland marble, is also telling us something. We stand before this building as we might before a serene young person, on whose clear brow the light of learning has dawned. Oxford is proud of this building, because the building is proud of Oxford.

Now there I have started to use the figurative language in another way, a way that indicates why this building matters and what it means. I am committed, by my description, to a judgement. It is a way of saying *look at this, because...* Let us go back to music for a moment. When Plato banished the myxolydian mode from his ideal Republic it was in terms similar to those that might be used of an architectural style, or a species of tree. No gloomy pine trees on our campus; none of that aggressive Bauhaus fenestration. These are, if you like, aesthetic judgements; but they leave entirely open the rejoinder that a pine tree just here, a jaunty pilotis with a glass wrapped corner just there would help us along. Plato has failed to persuade precisely because he was talking about modes – idioms, as we might describe them – and not about individual works of music. Of course, he could have been right. Maybe, in a campus forested all over with pine trees students go crazy; maybe a Bauhaus campus would suffer the death from graffiti that it deserves. And maybe when the youth all go to pop concerts and dance to the aulos playing in that excruciating myxolydian mode they all start to go downhill, acquire nasty habits, become sexually promiscuous and contemptuous towards their elders, as Plato feared. It could be. But this is all speculation –by-passing the realm of aesthetic judgement, and not in itself vindicating the view that pine-trees, the Bauhaus style or the myxolydian mode really exemplify the vices conjured by the words that we use to describe them.

What I mean can be put more simply. The use of the language of virtue and vice to describe musical idioms is simply a special case of a much wider phenomenon, which has aesthetic and non-aesthetic instances. It does not, in itself, say anything about the moral impact or meaning of music. It is a wheel that turns without turning anything else in the mechanism, to use Wittgenstein's image.

When it comes to using these moral terms of individual works, however, we are in a different realm, not only in music, but in architecture too. The nobility of Elgar's Second Symphony is there to be heard: it stands before us from the very first bar, and in following the music you are also participating in the unfolding of this virtue. You are in the *presence* of something –the very thing that your words describe when you describe this music as noble. Although the word «noble» is here used figuratively, you can very quickly understand that it is being used to describe something *in the music*, something that must be understood by the one who listens properly to it. This music does not merely remind us of the old virtues of imperial Britain: it *exemplifies* them. And that is part of what we appreciate in listening to it, and part of what we react against, should those old virtues seem tainted in our eyes and not truly virtues. The question then becomes: how can you hear such a thing in music?

The question might make us think of figurative paintings. I look at Constable's picture of Salisbury Cathedral, and I describe the Cathedral. If someone asks, how can you see such a thing in a 2 foot square piece of canvas?, then we know how to answer. A cathedral is something we see: and that which we see we can also see *in* a picture. Hence there is nothing special about a cathedral that forbids us from seeing it in a picture. Going back to music, however, we encounter a difficulty. Nobility is not something that we hear: it is not an *audibilibium*. A virtue of this kind consists in a disposition to behave, to understand, to relate to others. It is displayed over time, by a person's conscious and self-sacrificing behaviour. You don't put your ear to a person's heart, and listen for the nobility. And yet you hear nobility in music. So how is that possible?

As I remarked, we are not talking of analogies or similarities here. We are not saying that the music is similar, in this or that respect, to a noble person, even if it is. Similarity is significant only if something is *made* of it –as in figurative painting. Nothing is made of the similarities, such as they are, between noble people and the great first subject of the first movement of Elgar's 2nd Symphony. But much is made of that first subject. A tremendous process of musical

development is launched by it, and it is through this musical process that the nobility comes across.

I think we will come closer to answering our second question if we move on to the third. How does the nobility in Elgar's music *rub off on* the listener? Remember Plato's worry about the pop music of his day –that it damages the character of those who dance to it. It isn't difficult to see how such a thing might be true. After all, dancing is something you do. It involves relating to your own body, and to the bodies of others, in a conscious manner. Ways of dancing are bound to have an impact on such things as sexual display, courtship and erotic gestures. Ways of marching likewise –think of the goose-step, for example. Dancing affects the *embodiment* of the dancer, and embodiment can have virtuous and vicious forms. Thus, there is a whole spectrum of conduct, from modesty to lewdness, in the matter of sexual presentation. Modesty has traditionally been regarded as a virtue, and lewdness as a vice. For our ancestors these were, indeed, paradigms of virtue and vice. And it is very clear that these traits of character are displayed in dancing. Plato's thought was, that if you display lewdness in the dances that you most enjoy, then you are that much nearer to acquiring the habit –the vice, so cheerfully celebrated on some of your favourite Greek jars. I don't see any reason to doubt that.

Now dancing is not just moving, nor is it moving in response to a sound, a beat or whatever. Animals can do that, and you can train horses and elephants to move in time to a beat in the circus arena, with an effect that looks like dancing. But they are not dancing. To dance is to *move with* something, conscious that this is what you are doing. You move with the music, and also (in old fashioned dances) with your partner. This «moving with» is something that animals cannot do, since it involves the deliberate imitation of life radiating from another source than your own body. That in turn demands a conception of self and other, and of the relation between them –a conception which, I would argue, is unavailable outside the context provided by language use and first-person awareness. To say this is not to deny the very remarkable *coordination* that can exist between non-human animals. The ability of flocks of birds and shoals of fish to change direction suddenly, each bird or fish responding instantly to the smallest impulse from its neighbour, and the whole moving as though a single organism guided by a single will –this is something that moves us to astonishment and wonder. And it is here that the neuroscientists step in with talk of mirror neurons, postulating a mechanism that according to some of them (Ramachandran, for instance) is the root of self-consciousness in people. That, however, is nonsense: there is no I-You intentionality that links the fish to

its neighbour in the shoal, and no bird has felt that strange fascination with another's self-sufficient movement that Shakespeare conveys:

When you do dance I wish you
A wave of the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that... (*Winter's Tale*, IV, iv.)

You dance with music, and that means understanding the music as the source of the movement that is also flowing through you. Since the movement in you is a movement of life, in which your position at one moment propels you to your position at the next, so do you understand the music. You are moving in sympathy with another source of life. Yet the thing you are dancing with is not alive, even if it is produced by someone alive –an increasingly rare event in itself. The life in the music is there *by virtue of* the fact that you can dance with it. The ultimate source of the life is you, the dancer. The life in the music is an *imagined* life, and the dance is your way of imagining it.

And here is one thing that might be said in answer to our third question. The moral quality of a work of music rubs off on the one who dances to it, to the extent that he moves in sympathy to that feature of the music. I don't say that the dancer *acquires* the virtue or vice in question. But he or she learns to sympathize with it. The process is really not so different from that which occurs in the theatre or when reading a novel. You come to sympathize with a character and moral qualities are the usual target of this sympathy –not necessarily, of course. Misfortune might awaken sympathy without any judgement of character; but misfortunes suffered by villains don't on the whole elicit our sympathy. Few people have difficulty in understanding how virtue and vice can be portrayed in literature, and how the portrait might educate our sympathies, and in doing so bring about some small moral improvement.

Now, of course, we are sorely tempted beings, and our moral knowledge is often eclipsed in the moment of temptation. Whatever we learn through sympathy is likely to have only a marginal influence on our behaviour. But, as Hume pointed out, our sympathies tend to coincide and reinforce each other, while our selfish desires conflict and therefore cancel each other out. Hence whatever rubs off on us through sympathy towards a work of art or the people represented in it is of immense importance, and fully entitles us to make a moral judgement. A work of music that moves through its nobility is one that is

encouraging sympathy towards that virtue, and as this sympathy accumulates so does the work improve the moral temper of humanity, as surely Mozart did through his operas and Beethoven through his symphonies. And this is the kind of effect that Plato had in mind, when he argued against the corybants.

Now not all dancing is a response to the *moral* qualities of the music. Many people have danced to the Rolling Stones or Bruce Springsteen without directing their attention either to the aggression of the one or the sentimentality of the other. Aggression and sentimentality are vices, but they are not necessarily what you dance with, when you dance with aggressive or sentimental music. You can compartmentalise, and if you don't do so these days, you will find it very hard to dance, unless you are lucky enough to have mastered Salsa, Scottish Country Dancing, American Barn Dancing or some similar pre-lapsarian amusement. Such compartmentalisation is harder when listening, however, and it is when listening that the moral qualities of a piece of music come vividly to the fore.

This brings me to the crux. What is the relation of listening to dancing? You don't listen *with* a piece of music; you listen *to* it. But the «withness» of the dance is reproduced in listening. In some way you move *with* the music as you listen to it, and this movement is, or involves, a movement of sympathy. Making sense of that statement is, it seems to me, the hardest task in musical aesthetics, and I want to make a few suggestions, which I will simply list for your consideration.

1.— Although you move with the music in some way, the movement in the music is purely imaginary. All animals hear sounds in sequences, and group them in perception. This grouping forms part of what the psychologist S.A. Gelfland has called «auditory scene analysis», and is the auditory equivalent of *Gestalt* perception in the visual sphere. In listening to music, however, another kind of grouping occurs –one that requires an act of imagination. In hearing music we don't hear sequences of sounds only: we hear movement in and through those sounds. We group sounds in terms of this movement that we hear in them. Melodies begin, move on, conclude; rhythms propel the music forward, harmonies create tensions and resolutions which infect the melodic line. Everything is in motion –but it is a figurative motion, that corresponds to nothing real in the world of sound.

2.— You can move with an imaginary movement, just as you can be moved by a fictional character. Your sympathies go out to Emma or David Copperfield in just the way they would go out to someone real. In dancing our sympathies go out to the life imagined in the music. And in listening something similar happens.

3.— Listening is not the same as dancing: but it is more like dancing than it is like hearing. Many people hear music without listening to it. Listening involves attention –but attention to the imagined movement. The recording engineer listens intently to the sounds that he is recording; but he might be tone deaf, and entirely baffled by the suggestion that there is more to these sounds than their purely acoustical properties. The person who listens to music is listening to the imaginary movement, following it, and being led by it in something like the way a dancer is led by the music he or she is dancing to.

4.— So there is a way in which the nobility of Elgar’s music rubs off on the listener: through sympathy with the character that the listener hears in, and moves with, in the music. The nobility attributed to the music is not like that attributed to oak trees: it is heard in the individual piece, as presented in and through it. Listening is in some deep way like being in the presence of, and in communication with, a noble person. The similarities here are not between the shape of the music and the shape of a character. They are similarities between two experiences –it is as though we were confronting a noble person, his acts, inspiration and honest manner. We sense the open, responsible way in which he ventures forth on his musical journey: and as the music unfolds his character is in some way put to the test by it.

5.— That last feature is the important one, since it helps us to overcome the objection that I levelled at Kivy earlier. It helps us to say when resemblances are not just accidental, but part of what the music means, part of its character for us, and what it is presenting to us. The nobility is being presented *through* the musical line, and understanding that line is an integral part of understanding the character. It is not that the music is telling a story. Elgar’s symphony is as «absolute» a piece of music as any symphony by Brahms. But we are being invited, all the same, into a kind

of musical journey, and we go side by side into that journey with a companion –which is the music itself.

Seeing it in that way we can see how we can make the most radical and far-reaching judgements of character in music. Many people react to the nobility in Elgar with a measure of distaste. This is imperial music, they say: this bold, honest, open melody also has a belligerent and self-consciously superior character, knocking lesser things down as it marches along. And when, in the second subject, you hear another mood, one of tenderness and longing, this too has something imperial to it, as though it were «home thoughts from abroad», nostalgia for the place that distinguishes me and makes all these adventures outwards worthwhile. And when from time to time the music gets lost in those whispering passages, so strangely bleak and directionless, don't we feel the presence of *doubts*, the very same doubts that rotted the imperial project from within, and which led to its ultimate collapse?

I don't say that is how you *should* hear the Elgar. But you *can* hear it in that way, and it shows how deeply character and our reaction to character are revealed and developed in music –even the most abstract music. As with human character, the moral significance of a piece of music can be undermined by the revealing narcissistic gesture –the gesture that tells you that all this emotionality is not about the other, but about the self. That, surely, is what you so often feel in Skryabin –for instance, in the late piano sonatas, with their perfumed harmonies, and airy, look-at-me melodic lines, in which the tenderness is so evidently «fixed». Someone might wonder about the Elgar in this connection: the constant recourse to the lilting 2 + 1 rhythm, or the equally mesmeric rhythm (3+1)(2+1+1)(2+2) of the last movement: the music might seem stuck in a groove in the same way that certain characters are –unable to revise its fundamental outlook on the world, hence more interested in self than other when it comes to the crisis. Yet it also confesses to crisis, in the many whispered passages where the forward movement is arrested, and in the tender, vulnerable seeming second subject. The character displayed in this first movement is clearly a complex one, with moments of bluster, behind which we sense a vulnerable and domestic affection.

Of course, that raises the question of how much of this is «read into» the piece by the listener, and how we distinguish that which is read in, from that which is «really» there. I shall conclude with a couple of suggestions. The first is that attributing character to a piece of music is a form of interpretation, and the

test of an interpretation lies in performance and reception. If my description of the moral character of the Elgar gives no hints as to how the piece might be performed, and no hints as to how it might be approached when listened to, then it is vacuous as an account of the piece's meaning. In some way the interpretation must translate into a way of playing, and a way of hearing. And surely we are well used to distinguishing performances in this way –criticising a conductor for *missing* the character of a piece, or misrepresenting it, or spoiling it.

The second suggestion is that an interpretation must be *anchored* in the score. That is to say, it should not be reducible to a vague characterisation of the whole piece –comparable to the description of the oak as a noble tree. It should *track the notes*, help the performer and the audience to understand just how one episode follows on another, why this note here, this harmony there. That is the truly difficult task of criticism. It is not enough simply to invent some fanciful story that happens to coincide with the musical movement. There is a test of correctness for criticism of this kind, and that test is the ear of the beholder. It must be that the alert listener or performer, on grasping what the critic is saying, responds with a *changed experience* –yes, that is how it should be played/heard, should be the thought. This does not mean that interpretation homes in on some single, final judgement –nothing in interpretation is final. It means that there is a test that every interpretation must pass if it is not to be a flight of fancy on the critic's part, and that test is the transformed experience of the listening or performing ear. And from that transformed experience comes the outgoing movement of sympathy towards the virtue that is heard in the music.

The same goes, of course, for criticism of musical vices –of the kind that I briefly voiced in relation to Skryabin, and of the kind that Adorno tried to heap onto American popular music *in toto*. But vice is another story, and maybe it is best to leave it untold.

DISPUTATIO

Philosophical Research Bulletin
Boletín de Investigación Filosófica

INFORMACION EDITORIAL DEL TRABAJO

INFORMACIÓN DEL AUTOR | AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Ruger Scruton es Profesor Visitante en la Facultad de Filosofía de la University of Oxford y en la Escuela de Estudios Filosóficos, Antropológicos y Cinematográficos de la University of St. Andrews. Doctor en Filosofía [PhD] por la University of Cambridge. Dirección Postal: Drury House, 34-43 Russell Street, London WC2B 5HA, UK. Email: rogerscruton@mac.com.

INFORMACIÓN DEL TRABAJO | WORK DETAILS

[Artículo. Original] Licencia: CC. Con permiso del autor. Publicado como:

Scruton, Roger. «Music and Morality». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin*, Volumen 3, Número 4 [Diciembre de 2014], pp. 33–48. ISSN: 2254–0601.

Separata: No. Reedición: No. Traducción: No. Licencia: Con permiso del autor.

INFORMACIÓN DE LA REVISTA | JOURNAL DETAILS

Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin, ISSN: 2254-0601, se publica anualmente, bajo una licencia Creative Commons [BY-NC-ND], y se distribuye internacionalmente a través del sistema de gestión documental GREDOS de la Universidad de Salamanca. Todos sus documentos están en acceso abierto de manera gratuita. Acepta trabajos en español, inglés y portugués. Salamanca – Madrid.

E-mail: (✉) boletin@disputatio.eu | Web site: (🌐) www.disputatio.eu