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MUSIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL PUZZLES

ZANGWILL, Nick, *Music and Aesthetic Reality: formalism and the limits of description*, Routledge, Oxford 2015, 228 pp.

What kind of experience is *musical* experience? This is the central question in Zangwill's book. The author premises his answer to this question on two foundations: Formalism and Aesthetic Realism. The former is a thesis concerning the value of music (as well as an evaluative thesis about the nature of music) and the latter a thesis concerning what grounds our attributions of aesthetic qualities to objects and events, what explains the seemingly normative character of such attributions, and what exactly do our aesthetic predicates describe, if they are at all descriptive. Zangwill warns us that the formalism he endorses is not to be understood in terms of the contrast *form vs. content* in literature, since form in this sense is always the form *of* some given content; but the content of music, according to his formalist stance, is no other than "tones and their artistic combination", in Hanslick's phrase. That music is to be understood on its own terms and that whatever non-musical values or functions it may sustain it can only do so because of its primary musical value: such is what is meant here by formalism. But what exactly is such value?

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Picking up the notion of *absolute music*, i.e., purely instrumental music (vocal music without words counts as instrumental) with no program, evocative titles or descriptions, devoid of any functions which are not strictly musical (pertaining to the artistic combination of tones and their appreciation), Zangwill affords it explanatory precedence over *non-absolute music*, i.e., music with some extra-musical function or functions (e.g. music for dancing, praying, political propaganda or shopping). The point is not that there is only absolute music, or that despite appearances all music turns out to be absolute, but rather that it is because of absolute musical value, which valuable instances of non-absolute music also share, that music is able to discharge non-musical functions and thus to exemplify further, non-absolute or dependent musical values. It is the inherent absolute musical value that makes it *rational* for us to use music in order to further extra-musical purposes. In other words, absolute music *explains* non-absolute music, and free beauty explains dependent beauty.

The kernel of such contrast is to be found in the idea of *beauty* (and the open-ended array of properties or qualities that make up beauty in an object). Music is an artefactual kind, i.e., a functional thing, and its peculiar function is to exemplify or embody aesthetic properties such as beauty, delicacy, daintiness or powerfulness. Making use of the Kantian distinction, the formalist here claims that absolute music has *free beauty*, the kind of beauty that is to be found in flowers, cloud formations and objects of inorganic nature, which contrasts with *dependent beauty*, the kind of beauty that depends on how fit the object is for some function (e.g. a library may be a beautiful building *qua* library, i.e., the object has an aesthetic dimension which is not accessible to one who misses the building's function as a library, as a thing of that kind). Zangwill's musical formalism is then the claim that musical free beauty has metaphysical precedence over musical dependent beauty: music can only have dependent beauty if it also has free beauty. In other words: good music for some extra-musical purpose is only good because we can also appreciate it as a freely beautiful musical pattern. Otherwise there would be no point in giving it the extra-musical function. Zangwill points out that this view is compatible with a counterfactual state of affairs where, contingently, all available music would be non-absolute music; however, and rather interestingly, he calls our attention to the fact that ethnomusicologists find examples of absolute music in most or all non-western cultures (he cites the case of improvised instrumental introductions to Greek *rebetika* songs) – with stretches of western music with a dominant religious goal ironically making up

the unusual exception – a phenomenon which goes hand in hand with the universality of “purely formal decorative pattern making”. The reader must be careful not to identify *beauty* with *prettiness*, which is merely one possible way for something to have positive aesthetic value (the key sense of “beautiful”). Dissonance, jaggedness and boisterousness in music may be beautiful, that is, aesthetically positive, depending on how they are realized or embodied.

The book has both a positive and a negative purpose. The positive one is to advance formalism and aesthetic realism about music and our experience of it. The negative one is to disentangle our conception of music and of musical experience from those extraneous subjects that some of us, erroneously according to the formalist, identify somehow as essential to our understanding of music. Two salient dimensions that are taken to bear an essential connection to music and our understanding of it in experience are *emotion* and *politics*. The first section of the book is titled *Music and Emotion* and it seeks to do away with the seeming motivation to place emotion – either arousal of emotions, expression of emotions or representation of emotions – at the heart of at least some musical experience. More precisely, the idea is that a connection with real emotion plays no essential part in the experience of *absolute* music (sung music, where one attends to the semantic properties of the words as well as to pure musical relations, constitutes a case of hybridism which muddles the waters).

Zangwill contends that even though music and musical experience may stand in causal relations with emotions and moods (an emotional state or mood may cause one to make music, or one may enter an emotional state or mood in virtue of listening to some music), the immediate experience of music is neither an emotion nor a mood. Since the music must be the intentional object of musical experience, this makes it impossible for the experience of music to satisfy the rational constraints on the kinds of mental states that emotions are. Namely, emotions bear essential relations to beliefs about their objects, and moods are by definition contentless and as such cannot have the music as their intentional object, for they have no intentional object. Furthermore, even granting that music can express (or “be expressive of”) emotions or that it can somehow represent emotion (an idea which is not without its difficulties in being made sense of), the formalist point is that none of this is essential to what music and musical experience are. To put it another way: music and musical experience are already musical before they are put to any expressive or representational use. One could object to this reasoning, though, by noting that painting is already painterly (exhibiting

aesthetic properties) before any expressive or representational role is imposed on physical marks on a canvas. Still, that doesn't mean its representational role is irrelevant to the appreciation or the experience of painting.

Surely, Zangwill would counter this observation by saying that the beauty something has *qua* pictorial or visual representation is a form of dependent beauty. Musical depictions, should there be such a thing, would have dependent beauty but only because they would also have free or non-dependent beauty if taken as pure "tonally moving forms" (as absolute music). Thus there seems to be an asymmetry between music and visual art: while a depiction of a tree may be beautiful *qua* depiction of a tree but not perhaps if taken as an abstract visual pattern, music, even if there is such a thing as musical depiction, has dependent beauty *only* insofar as it also has free beauty. In other arts (as well as with non-art objects and events), our ability to experience dependent beauty is still explained by our ability to experience free beauty (in a formalist view), but instances of dependently beautiful things need not be freely beautiful when taken in abstraction of their functions. So there seems to be a difference between how music fits its extra-musical functions and a pattern of marks on a surface fits its (pictorial) representational function.

Another more general problem with a formalist conception of what music and musical experience are is that the notion of a *formal* aesthetic property is itself problematic (the notion of aesthetic property, before any such finer distinction between formal and non-formal ones, is already quite troubling): what exactly counts as a formal aesthetic property of an object or event? Zangwill's view is that these are properties that depend strictly on *appearance* properties, i.e., properties that can be seen or heard in those objects and events. But this is a somewhat tricky notion, since what we see depends on more than mere direct visual or aural stimuli. What I see even in a naturalistic representational painting, for instance, depends on quite a lot of non-perceptual background information. That the sound of the Armenian *duduk* sounds mournful to me depends on more than the sheer acoustic properties of the sound. *What* we hear plausibly depends both on the narrowly perceptual properties of the object and on what John Searle momentarily and somewhat obscurely refers to as "the Background".

Another example is this: things that exhibit a kind of *wabi-sabi* beauty (a Japanese aesthetic term) do so by exhibiting it "on their surface", and yet one is unable to perceive something as an instance of *wabi-sabi* beauty without a good deal of background non-perceptual information about "imperma-

nence”, “transience”, “imperfection”, “simplicity”, or even “cycles of life”. (In line with formalist thinking, I’d say there is nothing essentially Japanese about *wabi-sabi*, even if one must first become acquainted with that contingent and historical concept of Japanese culture in order to focus or frame the relevant target-objects in a suitable way). In the words of Tanizaki, “we love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them.” Now, is *wabi-sabi* a formal or non-formal aesthetic property of things? Where does formal end and non-formal begin? Perhaps *wabi-sabi* is more a style than an aesthetic property *per se* (though this is incompatible with the application of the term to natural objects, which have no styles), but one can imagine similar cases with aesthetic properties which are “closer to home” (some of which belong to the cluster of more determinate properties making up *wabi-sabi* and are shared with the “western mind”, allowing us to understand what that quality is). Of course, Zangwill could counter that no matter how “concept laden” our perception may be, there is still a great difference between what we can see or hear on the surface of things, when appropriately primed or “backgrounded”, and properties the thing has in virtue of, say, its causal history or provenance, or functions imposed on it.

One issue that I find problematic in Zangwill’s conception of music is that it seems to identify music with functional sound events, whose proper function is to generate aesthetic properties, which makes musical experience into the experience of those sound events’ aesthetic properties. But here the problem arises of how one is to distinguish between music and *non-musical sound art*, a distinction endorsed, for instance, by Andy Hamilton. All sounds can have aesthetic qualities so this does not give us a distinction between music and other aesthetically oriented sonic activities. However, Zangwill is not particularly concerned in this book with providing a definition of music, so this issue may be beside the point. However, Zangwill seems to me definitely on the right track: whatever reality music has, it is an *aesthetic* reality at its core; or to use Leonard Bernstein’s phrase from his *Norton Lectures*, “music only has an aesthetic surface”. Whatever else music does, it does it because it is a sonic artefact made to provide a peculiar experience of free sonic beauty.

The second section is titled *Describing Music* and it deals with important issues for the characterization of Zangwill’s brand of formalism, the relationship between music and extra-musical domains such as human emotion and politics, and the contrast between realism and anti-realism about the aesthetic domain. In fact, paying close attention to our aesthetic *talk* is something we must do in order to understand the mental states underlying

our experience of music and whatever properties of the sounds constitute the object of such mental states.

Zangwill takes up Sibley's observation that most predicates used to ascribe aesthetic qualities to objects are deployed *metaphorically* (the few exceptions seem to be "beauty", "ugliness", "elegance" and the like, which are used metaphorically for non-aesthetic purposes). In the case of music, philosophers like Scruton have argued that quite a substantial amount of words we use to describe its qualities, even the seemingly more peaceful ones, such as that music "moves", that it "goes up" and "down", that it "flows" or "slides" are employed metaphorically or at least in some extended use, since nothing is literally moving in the sounds. It seems that music is a matter of us "hearing things" *in* sounds, similarly to the way we *see things in* inkblots, squiggles and brushstrokes. This sets the problem of how to describe that experience and the status of the language we use in doing so, as well as what exactly is being described in that way. Zangwill's "Aesthetic Metaphor Thesis" opposes the "literalism" of emotion views of music: literalist theories of the *direct* variety postulate a *literal* connection between music and real emotion, whether that connection is resemblance, arousal, expression, representation or some other connection; and theories of the *indirect* variety postulate a connection between music and *thoughts about* emotion (such as imagining a *persona* expressing herself in the music). Zangwill places emotional descriptions of music together with other metaphorical aesthetic descriptions of it, such as "solid", "turbulent", "soaring" or "fluttering". The Entanglement Thesis further explicates that for each description of a stretch of music in emotional terms, the music will have the corresponding quality in virtue of a cluster or tangle of other properties which are obviously described metaphorically. This seems to make more plausible the metaphorical character of the emotion descriptions. If "sad" as applied to music is a metaphorical description, then no relation to real emotion is implied. And here is one aspect of Zangwill's theory that I find difficult to assimilate: "sad" refers to an aesthetic property of music, a property which we find hard or impossible to describe literally but which bears no relation to real sadness, except our propensity to describe it metaphorically in such terms. Why we do so is supposedly a problem to be further fathomed by empirical psychology, but not a philosophically puzzling one. This renders the aesthetic properties of music described in emotion terms quite mysterious. It is rather more clear why we feel compelled to describe a passage as "turbulent" – in virtue of other dynamic features that may in turn be described metaphorically – than why we would

feel compelled to describe a stretch of music as “sad” when no relation to the phenomenon of sadness (analogously to what happens between the dynamic contour of the music and the property described by “turbulent”) is implied. Zangwill seems to be comfortable with this mysterious aspect of aesthetic properties, and even characterizes his version of formalism as a kind of “this-worldly mysticism”, by which he means the proposition that the aesthetic properties of music are ineffable, i.e., they cannot, beyond an overly simple level, be literally described. In this, our talk about music resembles our talk about sensations, whose description must make use of metaphors, as if gesturing towards their “phenomenology”, that feature of “what it’s like” which does not lend itself to description in literal terms.

Another kind of formalist theory, such as Kivy’s “contour theory”, grounds emotional descriptions of music on resemblances between the dynamic profile of music’s temporal development and dynamic features of human behaviour expressive of emotion. Now, one advantage that Zangwill may claim over this sort of approach is that his view does not commit us to a single kind of explanation for the aptness of metaphors descriptive of music’s qualities: metaphor has a creative dimension to it, and it is unlikely that all emotional descriptions of music (let alone *all* metaphorical descriptions of it) will be apt *in the same way*, as in, e.g., issuing from similarities between the “dynamic contour” of music and human expressive behaviour.

The issue whether emotional descriptions of music are metaphorical or literal has generated some debate, with philosophers such as Stephen Davies and Malcolm Budd siding with the literalist. As well as arguing against the literalist stance, Zangwill develops a Davidsonian view of metaphor as *appropriation* (in metaphors, the literal meanings of words are appropriated and made to perform a different function), a view that diverges from Scruton’s own view by making space for cognitivism: although there are no “metaphorical meanings” besides the literal meanings of the words making up metaphorical sentences, metaphors can be used to make us notice real aspects of the world as well as with a purely expressive or imaginative aim (e.g. to make us see something differently). Scruton’s view of musical experience is similar to Zangwill’s in that it rejects literal connections to emotional states, but differs from it in its anti-realism about aesthetic properties. Scruton views musical experience as essentially imaginative, in that metaphorical descriptions of music in terms of height, motion and emotion express mental states in which a “conceptual transfer” is enacted, whereby we are enabled to imaginatively perceive the sounds under concepts that do not literally apply to them.

Though Scruton and Zangwill share a formalist understanding of musical experience, they differ as to the kinds of mental states involved in that experience: *imagination* for Scruton and *belief* about real (aesthetic) properties of the music for Zangwill. The advantages of coupling formalism with aesthetic realism rather than anti-realism are set out in terms of providing a univocal account of the use of aesthetic predicates and a better account of the normative aspirations of both our descriptions of the more “substantive” aesthetic features of the music and our “verdictive” evaluations of it, in terms of the more “thin” concept of beauty and its opposite.

Another disputed issue is that of the relation obtaining between non-aesthetic concepts and aesthetic concepts expressed by a single predicate word P, which is metaphorically used in aesthetic contexts but literally in non-aesthetic ones. What connection is there for an utterer of P between possession of the aesthetic concept and possession of the non-aesthetic concept? Is that relation one of parthood, constitution or a causal one? Scruton bypasses this difficulty since in his view no property is being ascribed and thus no other concept besides the non-aesthetic one is being deployed. But for Zangwill aesthetic judgements express beliefs about the real world rather than imaginative states akin to seeing aspects in clouds, and as such he must explain the cognitive difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgements using the same predicate. Particularly, how do we come to acquire the aesthetic concepts allegedly expressed by those predicates when used metaphorically? At this point, I’m not sure whether or not the idea that one and the same word “expresses” a different concept when used metaphorically clashes with Zangwill’s view of metaphor since he rejects the idea that there are metaphorical meanings apart from the literal meanings of the words used in a metaphor. If a metaphor is to be conceived as a pointing device made of nothing but literal meanings, how can the words at play express a different concept without changing the metaphor itself?

The second section includes a delicious chapter on music and politics. Music may be described in terms of class, gender, national or otherwise cultural affiliation, etc. But what weight should we give such phenomena? Is music itself gendered, bourgeois, proletarian, French, English or Russian? Is there an intelligible sense in which music may be said to “reflect” or “express” features of the wider cultural context in which it was created? For instance, when we say of a certain music that it “sounds English” or that it “sounds Russian”, does this entail anything more than that the music resembles other music made in certain places or by certain people, perhaps that it resembles

folk music, which in turn only sounds English or Russian because it resembles other folk music with which it shares formal features? If this is so, then there is nothing essentially English or Russian about English or Russian music, since there is no such thing as what “englishness” or “russianness” *sound like*. A piece of music does not reflect or express nationality, but merely resembles other pieces of music, in conjunction with which it forms *styles* that can be fully appreciated formalistically. According to Zangwill, there is not a more interesting sense in which music has a political dimension than there is a sense in which it has an emotional dimension: in either case it stands in certain causal connections with emotional states and political contexts, but there is no essential connection between what we hear in the music, its aesthetic surface, and emotions in the composer, performer or audience, or cultural and political features of the context of production. It is as arbitrary to say that music has a national, gender or ideological character as it is to say that it has essential connections with the Zodiac.

In discussing the case of gendered descriptions of music as the subject is treated by writers such as Susan McClary, Zangwill proposes that such descriptions are to be understood in the same way as other more or less apt metaphorical descriptions of the music: as gesturing towards aesthetic properties that have no essential connection with the non-aesthetic concepts that those predicates express when applied literally in non-musical contexts. Furthermore, the same predicate can bear positive or negative moral and political connotations depending on the ideology one endorses while describing a piece of music or interpreting a description of it some ideologically motivated critic has provided. The fact remains that any metaphorical gendered description of the music can be replaced by an equally apt metaphorical description in terms that do not smack of ideology, e.g., in terms of meteorological events.

The final section, *Musical Experience*, closes with a discussion of aesthetic experience and aesthetic realism. Since the experiences of music are immensely varied and no qualitative feature introspectively accessible will be common to all, Zangwill focuses on the role of aesthetic experiences in grounding aesthetic judgements. He combines aesthetic realism (the view that aesthetic judgements are descriptive and express truth-able beliefs), with a view of such judgements as subjective, i.e., made on the basis of a felt response, namely, a response of pleasure or displeasure. Aesthetic properties are not, strictly speaking, perceptual; they are not represented in visual or aural experience but rather revealed by the pleasure. What distinguishes plea-

sure in the aesthetic is not some phenomenological feature, since we have no way of distinguishing pleasures other than describing their objects and aesthetic features are not detachable from the non-aesthetic features on which they supervene, but rather the normative aspirations attaching to the judgements made on the basis of such pleasure. Zangwill argues that only realism can successfully explain the normative aspirations and preserve the rationality of our aesthetic life, as opposed to a number of anti-realist strategies, from Hume's way of grounding aesthetic normativity on the virtues of the ideal critic, to Kant's notion of a free play of the cognitive faculties, to Blackburn's "quasi-realist" approach, and Scruton's attempt to anchor aesthetic normativity on moral normativity. Should those normative aspirations turn out to be a mere delusion or a quirk, this alleged advantage of aesthetic realism vanishes into thin air. However, one cannot reach such a conclusion without a few rock solid arguments.

There are other issues discussed in the book that I have not glossed over here, such as the principle that should connect empirical data with philosophical reasoning; the implications for emotion theories of empirical findings on musical experience and autism; a dispute about the possibility of private languages and the impossibility of a wholly literal set of aesthetic predicates in a public language; as well as an interesting discussion of whether listening to music constitutes joint activity – in which case there could be said to be an interesting sense in which music has a social dimension, in addition to being the product of socially embedded actions – or whether musical experience is irremediably individualistic.

Zangwill's book is thrilling, engaging and a pleasure to read. Anyone interested in music and the philosophical puzzles it raises will benefit from it and enjoy it deeply, I believe, whether they are more sympathetic to a formalist or anti-formalist view of musical experience and the value of music.