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**A TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT  
AGAINST MUSICAL FORMALISM**

*Alessandro Bertinetto, Universidad de Murcia  
(Spain); Università di Udine, Centro  
Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sulla  
Morfologia, Italia*

**Abstract**

Musical formalists deny that instrumental music without words (which somebody calls ‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ music) is a language, has semantic content, can tell stories or express ideas, and maintain that it can work as a representation only in very few cases. Hence, music has a semantic import and dimension only if it is accompanied by words (text, title or programm); nonetheless it can be expressive of emotions (‘enhanced formalism’). On the other hand, according to the supporters of the content approach to music, musical formalists simply presuppose the autonomy of music – i.e. the fact that music is not a (kind of) language, has no content and can convey no meaning – on the basis of their assumptions that meaning is a pure linguistic notion and that music is not a language. The transcendental argument I put forward shows the fallacy of musical formalism, without needing to demonstrate or suppose that music is a language. A transcendental argument establishes the conditions of possibility of what is said, in the very act of saying what it says. In other words, it aims at avoiding the performative contradiction induced by the denial of a certain thesis. When applied to musical understanding, the transcendental argument works in the following way: By claiming that instrumental music has no meaning nor content, formalists impede the possibility of an important kind of musical analysis (and so, as I will argue, deprive music of part of its value). But also the technical and emotive musical analysis practised by formalists involve a semantic analysis of music in terms of content: for example, a lot of concepts used by the technical analysis of musical works have a meaning the understanding of which is an important part of our music experience, because they are ways to explain our music experience. Therefore, in order their musical analysis to be telling and understandable not only by expert musicologists but also by normal listeners, they have to implicitly presuppose what they explicitly deny: the possibility of a semantic analysis of instrumental music, i.e. the possibility that (at least a part of) instrumental music is not merely ‘sonic design’, but an art which can have a semantic dimension.

**Musical Formalism**

Renewing Eduard Hanslick’s musical formalism, contemporary musical formalists, such as Peter Kivy, hold that music has semantic import and dimension, only if it is accompanied by words (text, title or programm).<sup>1</sup> They think that pure music, that is, instrumental music without text, programm or title, has no meaning and therefore it

conveys any: it lacks a semantic dimension. Moreover, they deny that music is a language and maintain that it can work as representation only in very few cases (if any).<sup>2</sup> According to them music does not refer to (concret or fictional) persons, objects, states of mind, events, situations; it does not tell stories; it does not expound, state or somehow express philosophical theories or concepts of any kind.<sup>3</sup> More: music does not do this, because it *can not* do this. Music is not the kind of thing that can refer to something else. Hence, as Peter Kivy writes,

Formalism is best defined, initially, in negative terms: that is, of what music *isn't*. According to the formalist creed, absolute music does not possess semantic or representational content. It is not of or about anything; it represents no objects, tells no stories, gives no arguments, espouses no philosophies.<sup>4</sup>

But why, according to the formalist, is music not a language, and hence has no meaning? The arguments offered by the formalist in defense of his negative thesis are, *prima facie*, very simple and intuitive: they are common-sense arguments. Principally, the formalist argues that music is not a kind of language because it lacks the conditions to be a language. A language has syntactical as well as semantical components.<sup>5</sup> But instrumental music has no meaning: it refers to nothing, it is about nothing. And if it has no semantic, music cannot be a proper language. Another argument is the following one. A language – say English – can be translated into another language – say Italian; but music cannot be translated in any language at all. Music is therefore not a language – although lot of musicians and ordinary listeners use to speak of music as a kind of language. Then, because music is not a language, it conveys no meaning. More: *It can not convey meaning*.

Nonetheless, people often give some meaning to musical pieces. This symphony means a lot positive things for me, because I associate it with a happy event in my life. This jazz-standard reminds you something bad and, therefore, it means sadness for you. Kivy admits that this a common phenomenon, but it denies that it has something to do with meaning. Meaning has nothing to do with people's idiosyncratic feeling. A similar argument is the following one. We can call this argument the "argument from disagreements". Critics and ordinary listeners interpret the meaning of a piece in different ways. They do not share the same interpretation as to what is the piece about. But meaning must be intersubjectively sharable and negotiable. If meaning is merely private, it is no meaning at all. Hence, again, music has no meaning.<sup>6</sup>

As a consequence, the analogy often made between music and fiction breaks down. Without words music can not be considered as a narrative form of art. Literature and narrative arts in general have plots, and music has not proper plots. A plot is the structure of a narration, in which facts and events are told: they are forms plus contents. Musical 'plots' are not proper plots, because of the lack of content: "The forms of absolute music are plots without content [...], purely musical stories".<sup>7</sup> And music has no content, because, being not a language, it tells nothing. But according to Kivy there is another peculiarity of music, which shows the difference between narrative arts and pure music. Music makes a great use of repetitions, "to an extent, that would be intolerable in a narrative structure". Music "thrives on repetitions".<sup>8</sup> Literature, plays and movies do not. Narrative arts are constructed through successions of different chapters and scenes: if the same chapter or scene would appear again and again throughout the course of a novel or a play, the same way a theme is repeated again and again throughout the course of a musical work, the novel or the play would be odd and unbearable for the great part of the

reader or spectators. It would be absurd to construct narrative arts with the repetitive structure, which on the contrary is essential for music.

Hence, instrumental music should be rather understood in terms of design, because 1. it lacks content and 2. it 'thrives on repetitions'. Music is constructed upon the connection of sound patterns: that is why it should be conceived as a kind of 'sonic design' or 'sonic wallpaper'.<sup>9</sup> Visual design patterns, Kivy says, have no meaning, nor they represent anything; they are enjoyed only because of their form and color. The same happens to music, as argued by formalists. The only difference is that, in the case of music, there are not designs and colors in space, but designs (sound structures) and colors (instrumental timbres) in time.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, although music can not convey meaning, it can be expressive of emotions. And emotions play an important role in the articulation of musical structures. This view, explicitly embraced by Kivy in contrast with Hanslick's strict formalism, is known as somebody calls 'enhanced formalism'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Some Antiformalistic Strategies in Philosophy of Music**

I think that not only 'enhanced formalism', but *formalism as such* is wrong and must be rejected, as it is maintained by some antiformalistic philosophers of music. Defenders of the content-approach, if this may be a proper way to refer to the 'foes' of musical formalism, argue "that music yields a variety of meanings, depending on the interests with which we approach to it".<sup>12</sup> Some of them criticise the notion of pure or absolute music. Somebody defends also the view that music is indeed a kind of language. In general, according to them, music can convey and *de facto* conveys semantic content, also if it is 'pure' music without words. Now, since my argument against musical formalism owes many theoretical suggestions to some antiformalistic thesis in philosophy of music, before discussing this argument, I will briefly present some of the principal criticisms against the formalistic approach to music.

*Various Meanings of 'Meaning' and of 'musical Meaning'*. In a certain way Stephen Davies's denial that music is a language is more radical than Kivy's. He defends the view that music is not a language because, *pace* Deryck Cooke, music has not a vocabulary, and *pace* Peter Kivy's and Leonard Meyer's views, music lacks syntax, because syntax implies semantic, and music has not.<sup>13</sup> But, though music is not a language, it can nonetheless possess meaning. At this respect, Davies distinguishes several senses of 'meaning'.

- A. Natural, Unintended Meaning: "Dark clouds mean rain".
- B. The Intentional use of Natural Significance: "If you ask me how I feel, I might, instead of telling you, intentionally adopt the expression of someone who feels sad".
- C. Systematized, Intentional Use of Natural Elements: "Natural relations might take on meaning in a way that depends on their intentional use within a conventional schema or system". For example, a third minor may mean 'tension', or 'release', depending on its context.
- D. Intentional, Arbitrary Stipulation of Stand-alone Meaning: "[...] a bell might be sounded to signify that supper is to be served".

- E. Arbitrary Meaning Generated within a Symbol System": "[...] a symbol or sign has meaning as an element or 'character' in an arbitrary symbol scheme that provides rules for the generation of meaning by the appropriate uses of these elements. Linguistic meaning is of meaning E."<sup>14</sup>

Davies observes that "music differs from language in not requiring a symbol system for the generation of its meaningful content" (that is Meaning E).<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, music can somehow possess meanings A, B, C, D. Anyway, in a more recent paper written together with C. Koopman Davies discusses some extra-linguistical notions of meaning, which *can* apply to music:

- a. *formal musical meaning*, that consists in the structural 'organic' coherence of the work;
- b. *experiential formal meaning*, which emerges in the patterns of tension and releases or in sequences of gestures; it can be manifested only in our experiences, because it is response dependent and is nonetheless an intersubjectively sharable property of the music;
- c. the *subjective* and *cultural* meanings music has for people: the idiosyncratic meaning we sometimes give to a piece of music can be thought as a very normal, proper and inevitable way to hear and understand music;<sup>16</sup> nonetheless in musical listening we find an artistic way to feel the empathy with the others, which is the basis of intersubjectivity.<sup>17</sup>

Davies' and Koopman's point seems to be that the formalistic denial of meaning in music is based upon the restriction of the notion of meaning to a linguistic model of meaning. But if there are other non-linguistic meanings, formalism is rejected. Nonetheless, I think that formalists may accept easily a. and b., without considering them as antiformalistic objections. Indeed Kivy, like Leonard Meyer, considers them as the sources of musical pleasure, although he denies: 1. that they are meanings; 2. that b. is response dependent. He considers the patterns of tension and release as musical perceptive properties, which does not touch the listener's experience. c. is refused by Kivy on the basis of the assumption that meaning is *always*, that is, *as such*, sharable, negotiable meaning, and the idiosyncratic phenomena of musical listening are to be ruled out from the understanding of music.

*The critic of the Argument from Disagreement.* Indeed the idea that idiosyncratic phenomena are not relevant for assignng meaning to music, as well as the "argument from disagreement", can be challenged.

On the one side, the formalistic refusal of idiosyncratic experiences from musical understanding can be criticised by the argument that "the experience of music is diminished when its many resonances with particularities of its listeners' lives are belittled or ignored", while the "openness to idiosyncrasy" "is a necessary by-product of being receptive to certain unusual (but potentially intersubjective) experiences in connection with music" and "is also an aspect of [...] an optimum way of relating to music – specifically, that of developing full personal relationships with music in a manner that resembles the development of personal relationships with other people".<sup>18</sup>

On the other side, the Argument from Disagreement, fails, because it would prove too much: "It suggests that mere disagreement about the facts of a matter (what color some object is, for example) means that there *is no fact of the matter*."<sup>19</sup> The fact that there is

no musical meaning, because people do not agree about which is precisely the meaning of a musical passage, it is not an evidence against the semantic dimension of music. On the contrary, it can be used against every value is assigned to music, included the aesthetic value formalists assign to musical structures.

*Musical formalist's 'automania'.* A more radical attack against musical formalism (or purism) is Aaron Ridley's refusal of the autonomic character of instrumental music. According to Ridley, the formalist is affected by a kind of cultural pathology, which he calls 'automania'.<sup>20</sup> This pathology consists in the fact that the formalist simply presupposes the autonomy of music as he presupposes that music has no meaning, is not a language, and is therefore 'pure'. He merely forgets that music has always had functions or meanings of some kind. He seems to think that instrumental music would be deprived of its value, if this connection with human life would be acknowledged. But this is obviously not the case. On the contrary, the acknowledgement of the link between music and human life is key-relation to understand the great significance music has for us. This 'automania' of the formalist, Ridley says, makes of music an extraterrestrial kind of thing, something coming from Mars, with no relationships with our reality. As I will explain later, on my opinion, Ridley is quite right about this. But first things first.

*Musical understanding through paraphrase.* As we saw, Davies' position about musical meaning can be resumed as follows:

Music might possess meaning in the sense that it presents a content that invites understanding. It might also be the case that, in one way or another, music draws attention to, and reflects on, extramusical phenomena, such as the world of human emotion. But its meaning is not stated.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, music can possess meaning, but it is not meaningful the way language is. This view is opposed by Ridley. Ridley refuses the idea that the difference between music and language depends on the fact that the meaning of the linguistic terms is fixed independently from their use and context. Davies's opinion to the extent that 'musical meaning is not stated' is opposed by Ridley, which observes that *also* linguistic meaning is not always stated, and consequently this is not sufficient to distinguish music from language. The formalistic denial of the meaning in music is indeed based upon the restriction of the notion of meaning to the linguistic model of meaning. If music can not possess Davies' Meaning E, says the formalist, than music has no meaning.

But some defender of the content-approach to music criticizes this restriction, because it depends upon the embracement of a reductionist account of linguistic meaning. In the opinion of its 'foes', formalism defends a 'semantic atomism', according to which the meaning of a phrase or sentence depends on the the meanings of its singular constitute words. But 'semantic atomism' is not apt to account for the fact that the meaning of the single terms depends upon the general meaning of the phrase, as well as the meaning of a phrase depends on its context (the text or the social and pragmatic circumstances of a speech). Therefore, according to antiformalist thinkers, such as Ridley, a holistic, coherence-theory of meaning fits better for our ordinary use of language as a way to understand each other. This view implies that, in order to explain the meaning of a term, you must provide a paraphrase of it in other terms. Paraphrase is the only tool you possess in order to explain the meaning of terms, sentences or sets of sentences.

In a certain way the paraphrase *presupposes itself*. Indeed, in order to capture the meaning of a word or of a sentence you must paraphrase the word or the sentence, and in

order to understand this paraphrase, to capture its meaning, and to share this understanding with other people (meaning must be sharable in a great degree) you need a further paraphrase and so on: "[...] paraphrase seems to presuppose itself; the capacity to understand something as a paraphrase seems to depend on the capacity of further paraphrases".<sup>22</sup> Now, as everybody knows, in the everyday experience of understanding other people or texts, there are elements which resist to translation and paraphrase. These elements, which can not be paraphrased, constitute the 'internal' meaning of a specific linguistic utterance. And these elements make a paraphrase different from other paraphrases, as they let an utterance differ from other utterances. Every utterance and every word has a semantic kernel, that gets lost, when you translates or paraphrases it. It is difficult (and often impossible) to grasp the semantic nuances of an utterance or of a word through different utterances and words. This becomes evident in poetry: you can certainly 'translate' a poem in a paraphrase (or in a different language), but the replacement of the poem with a paraphrase can not let you completely get the meaning of the poem.

Under this aspect, Ridley argues, our understanding of music (and of art in general) is akin to our understanding of language. The paraphrase of the sharable meaning and the resistance of the internal meaning to interpretation are elements of our understanding of linguistic statements, as well as of musical passages, paintings or human gestures. Hence, the claim that music has no meaning at all, because it has no sharable linguistic meaning, is not convincing. Like every linguistic utterance, musical expressions do have an external, paraphrasable meaning – which can be transformed into other words or expressions (for example when we hear an anthem *as* patriotic, patriotism is the content of the anthem) – and an internal specific meaning – which cannot be paraphrased or translated.<sup>23</sup> This account reduces the force of Kivy's following argument: music is not a language, since it can not be translated in other languages, and hence it is not meaningful. Of course the internal specific meaning of music can not be translated or paraphrased. But nothing rules out a priori the possibility to understand external, paraphrasable meaning of music. To sum up, according to the critics of musical formalism, the formalistic denial of the semantic dimension of music is based upon the restriction of the notion of meaning to a bad linguistic model of meaning, which fails to explain how language works as well as how we deal with music and other arts.

In my opinion, those antiformalistic strategies – and other ones, which I can not take into account here (for example, the theory of music as narration, which, *pace Kivy*, has still its advocates<sup>24</sup>) – share the general idea that formalism does not capture and does not explain the value music has for the listeners, because listeners use to understand the value of music in terms of the contents they hear in the music. If you could not hear the content of a certain ballad (for example if you could not hear the ballad as romantic), it would have less value for you. I myself think that if music would be without content and meaning, we simply would have less reasons for listening to music and having critical interest in it. Decorative arts are certainly important, but they do not 'touch' us the same way non-decorative arts do and we do not give them the same attention we give to non-decorative arts (or, at least *I* give non-decorative arts less attention than other arts form). Or, to put it in another way, even if decorative arts do have value for us, it is because they display some (maybe implicit or hidden) connection with human emotions (they can be expressive of sadness, cheerfulness, melancholy, etc.) or with some symbolic function (a design pattern can be culturally related with a weave of semantic contents). So, also

decorative arts are not so autonom as the formalist believes. Now, if I can show that the autonomy formalists assign to music and to decorative arts is wrong, I will success in grounding my claim that music, as product of human inventivity, can be conceived as content-bearer and that consequently formalism is false. This idea can be put in the form of a transcendental argument and this is what I will try to do in the remainder of the paper.

### **What Transcendental Arguments are**

Before discussing the transcendental argument against musical formalism, it is convenient to explain what is in general a transcendental argument. The expression 'Transcendental Argument' (= TA) goes back to an unfinished text that Charles Sanders Peirce wrote in 1902 (*Minute Logic*, now in his *Collected Papers*), and came into the philosophical debate after the publication of Austin's paper *Are There A priori Concepts* in 1939<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, it became the subject of a continuous and intense discussion only in the second half of the twentieth Century. There are several TA, but they all "share a particular strategy in attempting to overcome the skeptic". The goal is to show, that in certain occasions the skeptic contradict herself, because, in order to make her skeptical claim i.e. "in order for her challenge to be meaningful", she must presuppose what she denies. In other words, "what she doubts must in fact be true".<sup>26</sup>

A 'strong' version of TA can be put in the following form: "Y; but X is necessary condition of possibility of Y; then X".<sup>27</sup> This is the dominant way to understand transcendental arguments. It was employed by Kant (for example in the Refutation of Idealism of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*), Strawson, Davidson, Putnam, etc., to solve a very different range of problems (the existence of other minds, the problem of causality, the validity of reference, etc.). But several objections have been raised against it. The first is that it is difficult or even impossible to distinguish such an argument from a common *Modus ponens*: therefore, it is not clear why it should deserve separate treatment. The second and more important objection is due to Barry Stroud: in order to be effective against the sceptical challenge, this kind of TA needs "some version of the application of the verification principle"<sup>28</sup>. For the sceptic might contend that in order to grant the belief of Y it's enough to *believe* that X is true, i.e. X need not be true. This entails that it is necessary to establish the truth of Y with others empirical and non-transcendental means, in order to bridge the gap between what we believe to be true and what is really true.

Given these objections, as Robert Stern argued, the TA is left with a restricted function: to temper some forms of dogmatic and exaggerated scepticism<sup>29</sup>. Hence this modest version of TA shows that the *belief* the sceptic must presuppose suffices in order to show her selfcontradiction.

The goal of a "modest" transcendental argument is just to show the indispensability of some belief, concept, or conceptual framework. The conclusion such arguments hope to draw is not a refutation of some variety of epistemic skepticism via a demonstration of the alternative, but rather a demonstration of the unintelligibility of the skeptical position. The idea is that, by showing that it is impossible consistently to maintain a given position, one also shows that it is legitimate to ignore it. Arguments of this sort seek to show that believes about, say, an external world or other minds are indispensable to coherent experience or the use of language.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, this version of TA works showing that what the sceptical does, contradicts what she affirms. Briefly, the method of this kind of TA is a reflection that shows the "performative contradiction" of the sceptical challenge.

### **The Transcendental Argument Against Musical Formalism (TAAMF)**

A modest transcendental argument can be developed to challenge musical formalism. This transcendental argument against musical formalism (TAAMF) neither needs to show that music is a kind of language, nor does imply a theory of reference in music, nor does lean on some notion of musical representation. It simply aims at giving plausible reasons for rejecting the formalistic creed and accepting the possibility of the search of musical meanings.

As we have seen, a modest transcendental argument establishes the conditions of possibility of what is said, in the same act of saying what it says. In other words, it aims at avoiding the performative contradiction in which one falls when denies a certain thesis: for example the sceptic, who denies the existence of other minds or of the external world. Obviously, the formalist is not a sceptic. One thing is to deny the possibility to prove the existence of the external world, another completely different thing is to deny the semantic dimension of music. But if I succeed in showing that the technical and the emotive analysis of music depend on a semantic understanding of music, the formalist must accept the semantic character of music, considering that she does accept a technical and an emotive analysis of music (if she embraces enhanced formalism). Otherwise she performatively contradicts herself. Therefore, this is clearly a (modest) transcendental argument.

TAAMF proceeds as it follows: The formalist says that music has no meaning, nor content. But technical musical analysis cannot be detached from a comprehensive musical analysis, which should at least prospect the possibility of hearing contents and/or meanings in instrumental music. This kind of content analysis should be regarded as implicit in technical-structural as well as in emotive analysis. Hence, in denying that music has meaning and content, the formalist makes impossible also the analysis of music she indeed wants to practice and consequently she must give up her position.

The validity of TAAMF largely depends upon the acceptance of the second premise, which states that the object of a comprehensive musical analysis is the content or the meaning of the music. I will try to convince the reader that this is really the case. I explain what I mean. Three different kinds of musical analysis are practised. The technical analysis (1), the emotive analysis (2), and the analysis of meanings and contents of the musical piece (3). The strict formalist admits only (1) as justified: this analysis operates with musical terms in order to explain what happens musically, the same way a mathematician explains a theorem in mathematical terms. The enhanced formalist, like Kivy, allows also (2), which explains how emotions, as perceptive qualities of music, collaborate in the development of musical structures, although he denies that the patterns of tension and release are response-dependent. The defender of (3) practices an aesthetic-comprehensive-hermeneutical analysis, which tries to explain what do the musical structures and their emotive qualities mean, or better which meanings and/or contents they may suggest. We can affirm that accepting (1) you must admit Koopman's and Davies's meaning a., although, maybe, you do not call it 'meaning'; accepting (2) you must accept meaning's b., and, maybe you do not call it 'meaning' (Kivy for instance

does not call it a meaning); accepting (3), you must allow meaning c., and you *do* call it a meaning (a meaning 'discovered' through interpretation and understanding).

Now, it is quite obvious that we can practice (1) without taking (2) and/or (3) into consideration. Musicologists really act in this way, explaining for example the harmonical 'architecture' of a musical piece, the same way you can involve yourself in a technical analysis of a painting, (1p), considering the relationship between its spatial parts, the colors, the perspective, the light, etc. But, this kind of painting analysis is not an aim 'in itself': even if it is an abstract painting, the technical analysis is surely a fundamental step in the understanding of the painting, it does not exhaust the possible interpretations of the work. It does not rule out the possibility to search for the meaning and the content of the painting, which is maybe not a manifest, but a hidden one. Maybe nothing in the surface of the picture represents a manifest content, but it can anyway possess meanings of different kinds. Therefore the very aim of a technical analysis of a painting is to understand the painting, its aesthetic and artistic qualities, its position in art history, why the autor painted this painting, why *I* like it and *you* don't, why this critic judged the painting in this way and another critic told another story about it. To sum up: when we appreciate a painting we interrogate the painting, asking what it signifies. Otherwise, why shall we waste our time?

(1p) is therefore strictly connected (interdependent) with the study of the painting under an emotional point of view, that is with (2p), which, for example, tries to answer questions like the following ones:

- Which are the emotions it expresses?
- Why am *I* emotional moved in seeing the painting, whilst you are not, etc.?
- Which are the relations between those emotions and the appearance of the painting (for example, with its figures, if there are/we see figures in it)?

But (1p) and (2p) are also strictly connected (interdependent) with the interpretation of the meaning of what is painted, (3p), which is, for example, interested in these questions:

- *What* is painted?
- *Why* is it painted?
- *Why* is it *so* painted?
- *Why we* (or *I* or *you*) see those figures in it?
- *What does it mean* what is painted?

(1p) can be and *de facto* is practised as an autonomous activity. But on my opinion it would have less sense if (2p) and (3p) would not be possible. In fact this activity presupposes at least the possibility of (2p) and (3p), because its aim is to serve at answering the question of the meaning of the painting. And the scholar practicing (1p) should not only remember why and to what extent she likes paintings and consequently paraphrase her technical analysis in order to be understood, i.e. in order to intersubjectively share her analysis with other people interested in paintings: she must also

*give reasons* supporting her analysis. And those reasons have to do with contents and meanings. Indeed, not only the very same technical language she uses depends upon the meanings of the words of ordinary language, but the formal-structural-technical interpretation depends upon the interpretation of the content(s) of the work in question. For example, the understanding of certain structures of a painting, such as the relation foreground/background, depends to a great degree from the fact that we see in the painting a certain content and not another (a duck and not a rabbit, for instance...). And the understanding of the 'syntax' of a painting can depend upon the understanding of the emotions expressed by it. In the same way, the understanding of the emotions expressed can depend upon the understanding of the representational content or the intentional meaning of the painting.

This counts also in the case of music. Once you have analysed and dissected the musical piece from a technical perspective, the problems are: What for? And: can (1) succeed without taking into account, maybe in a not-explicit way, (2) and (3)? The answer to both questions is: no, because (1) presupposes (2) and (3)<sup>31</sup>. Not only (1) is practised in order to get (2) and (3), but its working procedure makes use of emotive and content analysis. The fact that I hear a certain anthem as patriotic and not, for instance, as a caricature of patriotism is important in order to appreciate and/or analyse the formal structures of the piece. If I hear a certain content in the piece (for example patriotism) instead of another one (say, the caricature of patriotism), I structurally analyse the piece in one way and not in another. And if I would do not hear contents at all, I would produce a completely different musical analysis, hearing different structures from the ones heard by you, who hear the piece as patriotic (say): but I would nonetheless ask me *why* I do not hear any kind of contents and you do that is, I would at least presuppose the possibility of musical content. Otherwise my analysis is, to say the less, uncomplete.

Furthermore, the lay people must give or be given a paraphrase of (1) in terms of (2) and (3), in order to understand (1). Of course we use technical terms (1) in order to *musically* explain a piece of music. But for their very *understanding*, those terms presupposes (2) and (3). You cannot understand a work if you do not take into account the simple fact that a lot of technical terms of music analysis – tension, release, development, scherzo, etc. – are parasitic on their ordinary, non-technical use. And this shows that and how much music *as* music has content and meaning.

Moreover, I think that it is indeed quite easy to show the semantic dimension of instrumental music, if you – like the defender of enhanced formalism – admit that emotions are important elements in the structural development of music. The enhancement of formalism by means of a theory of emotions in music is a Trojan horse to music formalism. Even if we should accept Kivy's theory of emotions as perceptive properties of music, to recognize the emotional character of music amounts to admit them as contents of music. Indeed, if you hear an emotion in the music, as perceptive property of the music, you have to acknowledge how much the music is a product of emotive human beings.<sup>32</sup> Emotions constitute a 'bridge' between the 'pure' musical structure and the 'real' world. In fact, emotions are part of human life, they are connected with human affairs. Hence, music which is expressive of emotions makes us thinking, although often in an implicit way, about the events that cause or are somehow linked with emotions. Although the link between the emotions expressed and the events of human life that arouse emotions in human beings is often not stated or not explicit in music, musical emotions allude to human facts and stories which generate emotional attitudes and

responses. Therefore, the listener have to reconstruct the meaning of the musical piece, to discover its content, in order to understand the succession of the emotional tones she hears in the music. Otherwise, the claim that emotions are part of musical structures is a nonstater.

In sum, certainly music tells no stories like novels do and explains no philosophy like philosophers do. But if the listener hear movements, tension, release and cheerfulness, fear, sadness, *funeral melancholy* (like even Kivy does), or patriotism, she is connecting music through perception and understanding with the experience of human life. She is asking herself, why music sounds in this way. She is developing an interpretation or a narrative story. I can not see any other better way to explain what the listener is doing, but maintaining that she is looking for the meanings and the contents of music: she is giving an interpretative explanation of the meanings and the contents of its forms.

It is time to sum up the argument. The explanation of the formal structures and the emotive qualities of the music, (1) and (2), implies to interpret its meanings and/or contents (3). If you give an explanation only in term of (1) and (2), without considering or even denying (3), you will not understand the music as the experience of listening. And music, after all, is composed to be played and played to be listened to. In other words: in order to accept Koopman's and Davies' meanings a. and b. (even if you do not call them 'meanings'), you *must* accept the possibility of meaning c. In other terms, the technical analysis of a musical piece and the perception of emotional qualities in music are connected with the attribution of meanings and contents to music. Certainly, this connection is not rigid or 'mechanical', and depends not only upon the intention of the composer or of the performer, which can be known or not, but also upon the personal associations of the listener, which are dependent upon her subjectiv experiences. Nonetheless those associations and experiences are intersubjectively sharable and can be discussed in public. In this sense, I think, music does not differ from other arts. In the remaining part of the paper I will try to support this thesis.

### **The Validity Conditions of the Anti-Formalistic Transcendental Argument**

On my opinion, even Kivy's view that the analogy between music and design must be preferred to the analogy between music and narration is not a crucial argument in favour of musical formalism. I think that, in order to judge a visual design patterns (say: an abstract painting) as artwork, it does not suffice to describe its formal and structural perceived properties. This description does not suffice, because it misses the understanding of the 'human content' of the design you are seeing. When we judge a visual design as an artwork, we try to understand the single marks through their relationship with the whole composition and in doing so we interpret the succession of the patterns as a narration of or at least as an allusion to human events; we establish connections and associations with human emotions and events, and we try to interpret the meaning of all this. In other terms: *If* the patterns are not the casual products of some natural event, and they are the product of human work, *then* the structural analysis aims at understanding their meaning.<sup>33</sup> Hence, TAAMF works also if the analogy between music and sonic design is considered as more suitable than that one between music and narration. Anyway the validity of TAAMF needs the acceptance of some previous conditions, regarding 1. the 'meaning of meaning' and 2. the art status of music.

Concerning the first issue, I follow Wittgenstein's recursive (transcendental?) meaning-'definition': "*Meaning is what explanation of meaning explains*"<sup>34</sup>. At this respect,

Graham McFee wrote: "Such a slogan achieves three results in the appropriate direction (i) it treats meaning in terms of understanding; (ii) it makes explicit the connection with explanation; (iii) it does not treat meaning in terms of reference or truth-conditions."<sup>35</sup> If we apply this meaning of meaning to music-understanding, we get this:

"A sufficient condition for someone's having understood the musical work will be satisfied when he or she could explicitly offer *us* a way of understanding it – i.e. offer a critical account of the work, drawing on its features, and bringing out its sensuous impact. At least, we will recognise the work as a candidate for understanding when that person can do so." "[...] Meaning of the musical work is what is explained in an explanation of its meaning. And if it is meaning-bearing, it is a (candidate) artwork".<sup>36</sup>

But to consider TAAMF a valid argument, another premise is required: the acceptance of the art-status of music. Indeed, in order to understand our critical activity as meaning-understanding, we must consider music as an art, as a fine art – i.e. as a human enterprise, which has great value for our life, because it alludes to human emotions and events and let us aesthetically explore human affairs –<sup>37</sup> and think that perception and understanding co-operate in our appreciation of artworks.<sup>38</sup>

Now, Kivy – as other formalists – can not accept this argument, because he argues that music is a decorative art, whose pleasure seems the one we get through the sensual-aesthetic perception of colors, or an elegant mathematical proof or a beautiful chess game. And musical compositions have no meanings because music is like mathematics: like mathematical relations, music compositions are eternal structures which inhabit the platonic world of ideas. Music is autonomus, because it bears no relation with the human world. Indeed, according to Kivy, musical compositions are not the product of human artistic intelligence: they are only *discovered* by human beings.<sup>39</sup> Hence, if musical works are not the product of human activity, but hiperuranian 'things', they have in origin no relation with human meanings-intentions and meanings-interpretations. So, in a certain way, Kivy *really* considers music as 'coming from Mars', as Ridley observed. Now, I think that this 'puristic' view is wrong. Musical works are not a kind of platonic ideas, but the products of human intelligence and inventivity<sup>40</sup>. They are historical human products, that have appreciable and valuable meanings: they are about what we understand as their meanings.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, the very concept of 'absolute' or 'pure' is questionable. Carl Dahlhaus calls absolute music the romantic music: music, through which romantic composers wanted to express the unspeakable sublime.<sup>42</sup> Hence, through such instrumental, contentless music, romantic composers intended to express what human words cannot explain. Absolute music is a poetic, an aesthetic programm: in this sense, the (or better: a) meaning of this music "*is its meaningfulness*", and the question the critic should try to answer is: "What is about *us* and about our world that has made us esteem instrumental music as an art of pure, contentless design? What is about *us* and about our world that leads to the appreciation of instrumental music as abstract art?"<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, Kivy himself defines instrumental music as the 'art of liberation'. This is not to deny the semantic dimension of instrumental music. On the contrary, this means to recognize a possible meaning of music: understanding music power to free human beings has several aesthetic, ethic and metaphysic semantic implications. To say the contrary is to quibble with the meaning of meaning.

Hence, as we showed before, the classical formalistic objection that music has no meaning, because there is no agreement about what is the meaning of the works, fails. Indeed, "[...] finding a *specific* meaning-attribution inappropriate would not, in and of

itself, show that meaning-attribution as such was inappropriate – hence, it could not show that the musical work failed to be meaning-bearing.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, needless to say, not every interpretation can or should be accepted. We have to apply to music understanding a caution-principle, according to which, the interpretation is persuasive only if some evidence is given. Therefore the interpretation of musical meanings must satisfy certain criteria. It must regard the authorial intention as relevant, although not essential to understand the meaning of music. It must consider the appropriatedness of an interpretation with the historical period of the musical work. It must consider the musical and more generally the cultural tradition to which a musical piece belongs. Obviously, interpretations that are too vague, superficial, whacky, or bizarre must be dismissed. Anyway, the understanding of every art encounters similar difficulties, and I do not think we should choose some special interpretational criteria for music, which would apply only to music and not to the other arts.

Therefore, the key of the argument I proposed against musical formalism is that music is a human activity, an art that has meanings and contents. Art has evaluable meanings and music, being an art, has evaluable meanings too, that we capture in our listening experiences and we judge in our musical criticism. I guess that a possible objection to this point would be that this account of art takes art as something that can be defined only in an evaluative, but not in a classificatory way. I would accept this criticism, which fits well into my general conception of art. If I am right or wrong is another question that I left for further occasions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hanslick, Eduard. *The Beautiful in Music* (1854). New York: Da Capo Press, 1974. See Kivy, Peter. *The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. Kivy, Peter. *Sound and Semblance: Reflection on Musical Representation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984 (1991<sup>2</sup>). Kivy, Peter. *Sound Sentiment: An Essay on the Musical Emotions*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989. Kivy, Peter, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990. Kivy, Peter. *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Kivy, Peter. *Philosophies of Arts: A Study in Differences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Kivy, Peter. *New Essays on Musical Understanding*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001. Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 (I will take my stand especially on this book).

<sup>2</sup> R. Scruton and S. Davies, for example, category deny that music is representational. Cf. Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 135. Davies, Stephen. *Musical Meaning and Expression*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994. 51-121.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore, according to Kivy, it is for example quite absurd to argue that Haydn's famous Symphony op. 83 expresses the concept of tolerance, as it is defended by David P. Schroeder in his book *Haydn and the Enlightenment. The Late Symphonies and their Audience* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1990). Kivy's argument against Schroeder and the content-approach to instrumental music alone goes like this. You can defend philosophical thesis and tell stories of any kind only through language. But music is not a language. Therefore music can neither defend philosophical thesis nor tell stories. See for example Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 147-154.

<sup>4</sup> Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Somebody, such as Roger Scruton and Stephen Davies, denies radically that you can properly speak about musical syntax, because syntax is necessarily accompanied by semantic.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bailey, Andrew M. *Formalism and its Foes: A Defense of Moderate Representationalism*. <http://www.andrewmbailey.com/PhilofMusic.pdf>. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. *The Fine Art of Repetition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 357.

<sup>10</sup> See Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 67-87.

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- <sup>11</sup> Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 88-109.
- <sup>12</sup> Herzog, Patricia. "Musical Criticism and Musical Meaning", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 53, N. 3, 1995. 299-312. Here 300. An hermeneutical account of the meaning of music, which sounds out various (psychanalitical, social, historical, etc.) way to discover meaning in music, is offered by Lawrence Kramer. *Musical Meaning. Toward a Critical History*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2002.
- <sup>13</sup> Cooke, Deryck. *The language of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959. Meyer, Leonard, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956-57.
- <sup>14</sup> Davies, Stephen. *Musical Meaning and Expression*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994. 29-34.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibidem. 39.
- <sup>16</sup> As it is argued by K.M. Higgins. See below.
- <sup>17</sup> See Koopman, Constantijn and Davies, Stephen. "Musical Meaning in a Broader Perspective", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59 (2001). 261-271.
- <sup>18</sup> Higgins, Kathleen Marie. "Musical Idiosyncrasy and Perspectival Listening", in Robinson, Jenefer (ed.). *Musical Meaning*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. 83-102. Here 84 and 102. Kendall Walton's theory of musical meaning could be placed under this §. Walton defends that music let us imaginatively perceive things and events, because musical passages are props in a game of make-believe. See Walton, Kendall. "What is Abstract About the Art of Music?", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46 (1988). 351-364. Walton, Kendall. "Listening with Imagination: is Music Representational?", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52 (1994). 47-61 (also in Robinson, Jenefer (ed.). *Musical Meaning*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. 57-82.
- <sup>19</sup> Bailey, Andrew M. *Formalism and its Foes: A Defense of Moderate Representationalism*. <http://www.andrewmbailey.com/PhilofMusic.pdf>. 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Ridley, Aaron. *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. 1-16.
- <sup>21</sup> Davies, Stephen. *Musical Meaning and Expression*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994. 24.
- <sup>22</sup> Ridley, Aaron. *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. 29-30.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Ridley, Aaron. *The Philosophy of Music*. 22-41. Also L. Kramer (2002) employs the notion of 'paraphrase' to deal with the meaning in music.
- <sup>24</sup> See Levinson, Jerrold. "Music as Narrative and Music as Drama", *Mind & Language*, Vol. 19 No. 4 (2004). 428-441.
- <sup>25</sup> Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1931-58. Austin, John. "Are there A Priori Concepts?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 18 (1939). 82-105; repr. in his *Philosophical papers*. Oxford, Oxford University press, 1961. 1-22.
- <sup>26</sup> Skidmore, James. "Skepticism About Practical Reason: Transcendental Arguments And Their Limits", *Philosophical Studies* 109 (2002), 121-141. Here 121.
- <sup>27</sup> See the *Introduction* to the book *Transcendental Arguments* by R. Stern, p. 3: "one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that [...] the latter cannot obtain without the former".
- <sup>28</sup> See Stroud, Barry. "Transcendental Arguments", *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968), pp. 241-56; repr. in Walker, Ralph C.S. (ed.). *Kant on Pure Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 117-131. This paper was a reply to the transcendental argumentary strategy developed by Strawson in his book, *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London: Methuen, 1959.
- <sup>29</sup> See Stern, Robert. *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism. Answering the Question of Justification*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
- <sup>30</sup> Bardon, Adrian. "Transcendental Arguments". In *The Internet Enciclopedia of Philosophy*. URL: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/t/trans-ar.htm>.
- <sup>31</sup> Cf. Maus, Everett. "Music as Drama", in Robinson, Jenefer (ed.). *Musical Meaning*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. 56-73. Maus criticises thinkers, who pretend to strictly distinguish between the analysis of musical structure and the analysis of musical affects and musical meaning as complete different ways to describe music. He shows, that technical analysis of musical structures is parasitic upon the interpretations of meanings (nonetheless, he then propose a theory of music as 'plot of actions' – similar to Jerrold Levinson's theory of musical *persona*, which I find problematic, to say the less. See Levinson,

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Jerrold. *Music in the Moment*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. Levinson, Jerrold. *The Pleasures of Aesthetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> I do not discuss here the problem of the relation between music or emotion and the criticism from a formalistic point of view against the dispositional and arousal theories of musical emotions. My point is that also a cognitive theory of emotions cannot work in a pure formalistic frame.

<sup>33</sup> However, often *even if we know that the visual design patterns are the products of some natural event*, we analogised them with human works: we give the patterns a meaning, *as if* they would be the product of human intentions. In other terms, we have an 'innate' tendency to interpret the world as meaning-bearer. The Kantian source of this argument could be easily showed.

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1964. 59, 69. I only observe that this conception of meaning is a kind of transcendental argument, arguing the performativ selfcontradiction in which fall who denies the co-implication between meaning and understanding (or explanation).

<sup>35</sup> McFee, Graham. "Meaning and the Art Status of Music Alone", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37 (1997). 32-46. Here 36.

<sup>36</sup> In fact, when we interpret an artwork, "[...] we are not simply describing the *mechanism*, or *causal story*, as we might in explaining how a clock worked by describing its internal structure. Rather, our explanation points to internal connections between the music and what is understood. And it is in this case that calling the explanation offered of the work an *explanation of meaning* seems most appropriate: it gives us the *content* of the work in a fairly uncontentious sense of the term 'content'. What is needed, *then*, is an account of the work itself, which bears on concerns of human life, but without representing them." McFee, Graham. "Meaning and the Art Status of Music Alone", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37 (1997). 32-46. Here 37.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed "[...] at issue in the whole debate is the nature of our relation to artworks (and artfoms). In so far as that relation is cognitive, in so far artworks are amenable to understanding, meaning is appropriately attributed to them. To deny this inference is merely to quibble about the word 'meaning'. So then denying that artworks are meaning-bearing is urging that our relation to the arts is not cognitive – but, if so, any importance for art will be hard [I would better say: impossible] to account for". McFee, Graham. "Meaning and the Art Status of Music Alone", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37 (1997). 32-46. Here 33-34.

<sup>38</sup> McFee, Graham. "Meaning and the Art Status of Music Alone", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37 (1997). 32-46. Here 33. If music is an art, it "[...] should be heard under an appropriate battery of concepts if it is to be heard (and appreciated) as music."

<sup>39</sup> See Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 202-223. See also Kivy, Peter. "Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defence". *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 19 (1983). 109-29, in Lamarque, Peter and Olsen, Stein Haugom. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. Kivy, Peter. "Platonism in Music": Another Kind of Defence". *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987). 245-52. Both article are now reprinted in Kivy, Peter. *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 36-74.

<sup>40</sup> An antiplatonistic account of musical works is given by Predelli, Stefano. "Musical Ontology and the Argument From Creation", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (2001). 279-292. Predelli, Stefano. "The Sound of the Concerto. Against The Invariantist Approach to Musical Ontology", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006). 144-162. .

<sup>41</sup> J. Bicknell shows that music has a kind of informal aboutness, which we can understand in the terms of Kantian "aesthetic ideas". See Bicknell, Jeanette. "Can Music Convey Semantic Content? A Kantian Approach", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60 (2002). 253-261.

<sup>42</sup> Dahlhaus, Carl. *Die Idee der absoluten Musik*. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> Herzog, Patricia. "Musical Criticism and Musical Meaning", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 53, N. 3, 1995. 299-312. Here 310.

<sup>44</sup> McFee, Graham. "Meaning and the Art Status of Music Alone", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37 (1997). 32-46. Here 40.