

## REVIEW

# A Powerful Defence of Musical Formalism

Hanne Appelqvist: *Wittgenstein and the Conditions of Musical Communication*. Acta Philosophica Fennica Vol. 85, Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 2008. 152 pages. ISBN 978-951-9265-68-4

A typical problem with approaches to aesthetic questions which draw heavily on the views of a single philosopher is that those who are engaged in the debate over the philosophical problem to which his or her views are applied may often have trouble seeing the relevance of the proposed account. This is not the case with Hanne Appelqvist's work *Wittgenstein and the Conditions of Musical Communication*. She develops a highly persuasive variant of musical formalism based on a reading of remarks on the analogy between the understanding of music and the understanding of language found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later writings. With this sort of Wittgensteinian formalism she challenges an influential tradition in contemporary philosophy of music in which music's content is considered to consist of the expression of emotions and in which musical understanding is seen as the capacity to grasp the emotion a particular musical phrase or piece supposedly expresses. Simultaneously, Appelqvist manages to provide a rehabilitation of the musical formalism developed by Eduard Hanslick who contemporary analytic philosophers of music have, in her opinion, undeservedly looked down on.

The first two chapters of Appelqvist's work explore the relationship between the early and later parts of Wittgenstein's philosophical career. While it is well-known that Wittgenstein's thinking changed radically in certain respects between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, in Appelqvist's view, the concerns of the two works nevertheless overlap in that they both attempt "to give an account of the necessary conditions of meaning in language" (41). Wittgenstein's position on the question regarding the nature of those conditions changed radically. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein assumes that the conditions of meaning are based on a structural isomorphism between language and reality. In the *Investigations*, those conditions are in turn given by the shared, rule-governed practices of the various language games which make up a linguistic community.

The musical formalism Appelqvist develops in her work is based on the account of Wittgenstein's later work she offers. Appelqvist defends

a Kantian reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. That is, somewhat similar to Kant's effort to uncover the conditions of knowledge, in Appelqvist's opinion, Wittgenstein offers "a transcendental argument about what makes communication possible" (43). In this respect Appelqvist rejects recent readings of Wittgenstein's philosophy according to which its goals are primarily therapeutic in character, and which claim that Wittgenstein does not put forward any positive philosophical views.

The Kantian understanding of Wittgenstein's later philosophy points to the inherent normative character of understanding. That is, it is meaningful to talk about understanding only if there are criteria for separating cases of understanding from cases of misunderstanding. For Wittgenstein, these criteria are provided by the rules involved in the different language games of a particular linguistic community. Those rules have normative force in the sense that they determine which uses of language are correct and which are incorrect (50). Without these sorts of sharable rules, which provide the criteria for the correct application of linguistic items, it would not be meaningful to talk about understanding in the first place, for in that case there would be no possibility for determining whether a given linguistic item has been applied correctly or incorrectly. Precisely in this sense the rules of language serve as the conditions of understanding.

In Appelqvist's view, when Wittgenstein's remarks on music are combined with his later account of language there remains very little doubt that Wittgenstein held a formalistic view of music according to which musical understanding consists of the ability to follow the grammatical rules of music. Appelqvist also argues that that view overlaps in some significant ways with the musical formalism Eduard Hanslick developed some 150 years ago. However, Appelqvist's approach is not merely exegetical by nature, but she uses the formalistic view of music she draws from Wittgenstein's work to challenge some influential philosophical accounts of music in contemporary aesthetics. While she does discuss some earlier accounts in which the content of music is already tightly connected to human emotions, the edge of her criticism is directed towards more recent forms, primarily the emotive-content views of music developed by Stephen Davies, Jerrold Levinson, and Peter Kivy. What the views of these three philosophers share is an assumption that music's ability to express emotions is based on resemblances between musical configurations and the listener's responses to them on the one hand, and other configurations, such as human emotive behaviour, which are connected and associated with particular emotions on the other. One reason why the emotive-content view has been considered a persuasive

account of music is that people have been assumed to hear music as expressive of emotions and that it would be hard to explain some features related to music, such as its educational potential, without this kind of assumption. It is also assumed that there, in fact, exists wide-ranging agreement between competent listeners on which emotions particular musical passages and phrases express. For many emotive-content theorists, the fact that there is this sort of wide-ranging agreement is a sign that musical understanding should be equated with the capacity to recognize the emotive content of a particular musical phrase or piece (88).

Appelqvist's criticism of emotive-content theories is forceful not only because it convincingly denies the existence of the kind of consensus between different listeners' responses to musical works that emotive-content theories rely on, but because it argues that even if such a consensus between responses did exist that would still not help the emotive-content theorist formulate a persuasive account of musical understanding. This is because the features which are central to the emotive-content account cannot ultimately serve the kind of role the emotive-content theorist assigns them. That is, they cannot serve as the criteria of understanding. This is where the musical formalism Appelqvist develops on the basis of Wittgenstein's views becomes important for her criticism. According to that view, it is a condition of understanding that there must be sharable criteria for separating cases of understanding from cases of misunderstanding. In Appelqvist's opinion, emotive-content theories of music fail to provide a basis precisely for this kind of discrimination. The factors by which emotive-content accounts of music explain musical understanding are not ultimately able to achieve the kind of normative force for discriminating between cases of understanding and cases of misunderstanding. They cannot in other words provide a compelling account of why attributing a given emotional content to a musical phrase should be taken as a sign of its understanding rather than its misunderstanding.

To illuminate that this is indeed the case Appelqvist compares attributions of emotive content with the practice of wine tasting. She argues that while there are methods of checking whether a given wine has the taste a particular person attributes to it, as well as sharable criteria for determining whether a given wine has a particular quality or not, this, in Appelqvist's view, is not the case with emotive attributions of music. That is, unlike in the case of wine tasting, there are for example no books or other sources one can rely on for determining the emotive content of a particular musical phrase. Since the possibility of an independent method of checking and the existence of sharable criteria are what makes it sensible

to talk about understanding in the first place, musical included, attributions of emotional content cannot form a basis of musical understanding. Expression of emotions should not be taken to form the content of music. Instead, “musical themes and phrases say something by putting the rules of music in use”, and musical understanding consists of the capacity to know the various ways in which they may be put in use (147).

The argument Appelqvist presents against emotive-content theories of music in her work is exhaustively dense, but at the same time it is utterly compelling. However, it is a different question how articulate an account of musical understanding Appelqvist manages to formulate in its place. It seems that this issue depends on what one takes the general character of the musical formalism Appelqvist outlines in the work to be. That is, whether it should be taken as purely negative in character or whether it should be seen as an attempt to formulate something positive in place of the view it tries to undermine. Appelqvist for example writes that “musical formalism ... is a criticism by its nature” (66), the critical tone it involves being directed primarily towards the claim that music is expressive of emotions. Then again, it seems that she does not find her account of music purely negative, but that it ultimately presents a positive view of what musical understanding amounts to. However, the ultimate content of the positive side of that view could be formulated in a more articulated manner. That is, the emotive-content theories, despite their intuitive compelling quality, are perhaps nothing but “houses of cards” which get destroyed in the hands of the Wittgensteinian formalist. However, it would be a good thing for the Wittgensteinian to be more specific about what she intends to build on the ruins of the houses of cards she has successfully broken down. I shall outline two suggestions as to where the Wittgensteinian formalist could begin building the positive side of her theory.

First, Appelqvist notes that it is an inherent element of Wittgenstein’s notion of rule-following that “understanding comes in degrees” (16). This means that some people understand music better than others, which is to say that some examples of musical rule-following are a sign of more comprehensive and deeper understanding of music than other kinds of cases. One way of developing the positive contribution of formalism is to provide an account of how these different cases of musical rule-following relate to each other. It also seems that musical understanding does not come merely in degrees, but it also comes in kinds. For example, Jerrold Levinson has devoted a lot of attention to the connection between critical interpretation of music on the one hand and performative interpretation of music on the other. One consequence which may be drawn from

Levinson's views is that performing music exhibits a different kind of understanding of music than the ability to give a full-fledged analysis of, say, a given counter-point used by Bach. The formalist does not see an essential difference between these two activities, for she argues that performative, that is, "non-structural properties of music are equally subject to rules, i.e., shared conventions" (116), as are the different structural properties of music. But is this really the case? For example, Valery Gergiev conducts the orchestra with an armoury of gestures all of his own which bear very little resemblance to the gestures Finnish conductors schooled by Jorma Panula utilize while conducting. To be sure, Gergiev's style does owe something to the Russian school in that he tends to show the beat with a rotating gesture – a pattern his teacher, the eminent Ilja Musin, called the life buoy of a conductor – rather than with an up and down motion. But still, if you have seen Gergiev conduct, you know that that is about the only resemblance you will find to any convention of conducting. Nevertheless, somehow he manages to get the job done, i.e., to obtain the particular kind of sound from the orchestra he wishes.

This is to say that I see very little point in explaining Gergiev's musicianship in terms of rules and conventions. This example thus speaks against the idea that performative cases of music are rule-guided in a sense similar to the way structural properties of music are. The formalist of course does not claim that musical conventions and rules are rock-solid and neither does she deny the possibility of breaking the rules and conventions. However, it does not really seem accurate to describe Gergiev's style of conducting as either a case of breaking the rules or a case of inventing a new set of rules for future generations to follow. To my mind, this analysis of Gergiev's musicianship points out that in the case of performing music we seem to talk of understanding music in a more specific sense. Sometimes critics disapprove of a particular performance, because they think the performance shows that the performer does not understand the piece performed. For example, Norman Lebrecht, the fiercest music critic today, condemned Gergiev's cycle of Shostakovich's symphonies some years ago by saying that they were performed in too romantic a way. In these kinds of cases, understanding does not seem to concern mere musical phrases, but much larger musical items. Now, the formalist would surely reject that it is not meaningful to talk of properties of musical works beyond our musical practices. This is to say that it cannot be determined independently of these practices which properties a performance must exhibit to count as a successful one. The formalist would also surely deny that musical works possess some kind

of extra-musical content or representational features which a good performance must convey to the audience. For these reasons, there cannot be the kinds of grounds for evaluating musical performances as for example Lebrecht's review of Gergiev's performances of Shostakovich's symphonies presumes and the formalist could even conclude that talk of understanding of whole pieces of music is not really meaningful. But still, the world of music is filled with this kind of talk. So, if it is again just an example of houses of cards we can destroy without losing anything interesting, the formalist needs to show that this is really the case or at least try to locate a place for them she finds fitting.

It is worth noting that the formalism Appelqvist develops in the work is not as extreme as it might first appear, for it does not maintain that emotive terms should be removed from our musical vocabulary altogether. It just tries to outline a different place for emotive descriptions from the one the emotive-content theorist assigns them. That is, the use of emotive terms cannot be taken as a sign of musical understanding, but this does not mean that emotive terms could not be used for other legitimate purposes. Appelqvist for example claims that emotive descriptions of music "may sometimes help in the process of listening to music or performing it" (19). Appelqvist in fact argues that the kind of reconsideration of the status of emotional terms in descriptions of music she offers resolves a contradiction which many have accused Hanslick's formalism to be troubled by. Although Hanslick rejected the idea that music could be expressive of emotions, he nevertheless frequently used emotive and other kinds of extra-musical terms in his music criticism. Appelqvist thinks there is no contradiction between these sides of Hanslick's work, for they do not necessarily stand in the kind of mutually exclusive relationship with each other as the criticism assumes. However, since emotive descriptions are commonly used in describing music, and since the ultimate purpose of the formalist is not to remove them from our vocabulary, but just to locate a new status for them, it seems that one possibility for the formalist to develop the positive side of her account is to articulate their status in a more specific way. With regard to which purposes can emotive descriptions be helpful? And what does their helpfulness amount to if emotive descriptions do not bear any kind of necessary connection to musical understanding?

Appelqvist's work provides an impressive rehabilitation of musical formalism, and the account of music outlined in it has every possibility of making musical formalism a serious contender within philosophy of music after decades of regrettable neglect.

KALLE PUOLAKKA