
Scruton on Understanding Music

• — JEANETTE BICKNELL

Roger Scruton is one of a handful of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers who has written extensively on the philosophy of music.¹ His ambitious and thought-provoking work *The Aesthetics of Music*² examines virtually all issues of current interest in the philosophy of music, as well as other less well-discussed topics. It is, and will likely remain, required reading for anyone with an interest in thinking seriously about music. Included in thinking seriously, of course, is thinking critically, as in the following.

In this paper I analyse Scruton's views on understanding music and related topics. In *The Aesthetics of Music* Scruton maintains and develops his earlier position that understanding music is crucially and fundamentally informed by metaphor.³ The difficulties with such an account are so grave that it seems unlikely that an account of musical experience that relies crucially upon anything like Scruton's conception of metaphor and aspect perception could be rescued; hence I will not discuss these aspects of his position.⁴ Instead I will concentrate on: (1) musical hearing and the nature of the musical object (including the possibility that music might be representational); (2) Scruton's account of involvement with music as a

1. For discussion and comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am very grateful to Evan Cameron, Joseph Gonda, Robert Hanna, and Ian Jarvie.

2. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Henceforth AM; further references will be given in brackets in the text.

3. This is articulated in *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1974).

4. For detailed criticism see, for example: Malcolm Budd, "Understanding Music", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement 59 (1985), 233–248; Naomi Cumming, "Metaphor in Roger Scruton's Aesthetics of Music", in Anthony Pople, ed., *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3–28; Laurence D. Kimmel, "The Sounds of Music: First Movement", *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26:3 (Fall 1992), 55–65; and R. A. Sharpe, "Hearing As", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 15 (Summer 1975), 224–225.

“dance of sympathy;” and (3) his analysis of meaning in art generally and how this meaning is grasped. I will argue that Scruton’s conception of understanding and involvement with music, and his account of aesthetic meaning, are overly austere. Indeed, his own discussions of particular artworks are richer than is strictly allowed by his theoretical stance.

*I. Musical Hearing
and the Musical Object*

Any account of understanding music will be shaped and constrained by what sort of thing music is taken to be. Scruton’s fundamental characterization of music is that of an abstract or disembodied entity. This passage, describing the result of the displacement of song and dance by instrumental music and silent listening, is characteristic:

Music is heard as though breathed into the ear of the listener from another and higher sphere: it is not the here and now, the world of mere contingency that speaks to us through music, but another world, whose order is only dimly reflected in the empirical realm. Music fulfils itself as an art by reaching into this realm of pure abstraction and reconstituting there the movements of the human soul (AM, 489).

One of the major themes of *The Aesthetics of Music* is that hearing sounds is necessary and sufficient for understanding music; the sounds do not have to be identified in terms of their causes. In listening to music, we hear sounds apart from the material world (AM, 221). Scruton proposes a thought experiment in which sounds are heard in an empty room. There are no physical vibrations in the room, and the sounds can be traced to no specific source. He contends that a person in this room who hears the sounds experiences everything necessary in order to understand them as music (AM, 3). Although in actuality sounds are of course always produced by something, the cause of a given sound is not the intentional object of hearing (AM, 11). Rather, tone is the intentional object of musical hearing (AM, 20). For example, in listening to a recording of Bach’s *Well Tempered Clavier*, the intentional object of my hearing is not the CD player or the piano whose sound it reproduces; the intentional object of my hearing is rather the series of musical tones (originally produced by a piano).

According to Scruton, the (intentional or phenomenological) world of what is heard is separated from the physical world by “an impassable metaphysical barrier”, such that relations between tones, although spatial and causal, have nothing

to do with physical space or causality. There is no *real* space of tones, but there is a phenomenal or “metaphorical” space (AM, 74–75). To hear music, we must be able to hear an order that contains no information about the physical world, stands apart from the ordinary workings of cause and effect, and is irreducible to any physical organization (AM, 39). Not surprisingly, then, the salient features of a musical work are those that contribute to its tonal organization (AM, 110). Harmony, melody and movement are said to belong to the “essence” of music, while instrumentation is accidental (AM, 453).

Yet Scruton does not characterize music as wholly other-worldly. In the presence of sound intentionally produced and intentionally organized, we find ourselves within another person’s ambit, and that feeling conditions our response to what we hear (AM, 18). Furthermore, works of music are intended objects, and a sense of the composer’s intention informs our musical perception (AM, 107–108). I will return to the question of to what extent recognition of such “human factors” informs Scruton’s account of musical understanding, and whether consideration of them can be made consistent with his characterization of music as an abstraction.

Scruton’s account of understanding music is grounded in an uncontroversial premise: Understanding music is first manifest in the apt organization of the musical *Gestalt* (AM, 229). Like many contemporary philosophers, Scruton rejects the possibility that a theory of musical understanding could be founded on an analogy between music and language (AM, 202).⁵ Although he allows that music has a quasi-syntactic structure, and a “kind of meaning”, its structure is not the “vehicle” of meaning (AM, 198). While descriptions of music in technical language are neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding (AM, 212), theoretical analysis can be a “scaffold” by which to rise to higher and more complete perception (AM, 427).⁶

An adequate account of understanding music must address to what extent (if indeed any) music can be representational, and what role (if any) this plays in listeners’ experience. Given his characterization of music as a pure abstraction, it is not surprising that Scruton rejects the possibility that music can be representa-

5. For a review of some relevant literature, see Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1–49.

6. For a complementary view, see Peter Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); for a contrasting view, see Michael Tanner, “Understanding Music”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement 59 (1985), 215–232.

tional. While he denies that music can properly be said to *represent* extra-musical phenomena, Scruton does allow that it may *suggest* them, as, for example, when a fanfare on the horns suggests the hunt (AM, 126). Extra-musical thoughts prompted by music have an “ostensive” character, as though the music were making a gesture towards something it cannot define (AM, 132). Yet far from being representational in any important way, music “inspires and consoles” us, partly just because it is “unencumbered by the debris that drifts through the world of life” (AM, 122).

Scruton’s main argument in *The Aesthetics of Music* for rejecting musical representation is that thoughts about the alleged subject of representation are never essential to the understanding of music.⁷ Nothing much, or at least nothing *musical*, he contends, would be lost by the listener who thought that Richard Strauss’s *Don Quixote* was about the life of a dog. It is possible to understand a piece of music “as music” without grasping its representational content (AM, 129–138).

There are several problems with Scruton’s remarks on musical representation, and they indicate deeper problems with his very conception of music. First, Scruton begs the question against representation by beginning with an account of musical understanding that does not require the recognition of any information about the physical world (AM, 39, cited above). With such a minimal criterion of understanding in place (hearing music “as music”), it comes as no surprise that grasp of possible representational content is not crucial for understanding. Clearly, hearing a set of pitches as a melodic and rhythmic *Gestalt* does not require awareness of representational elements; nor indeed would it seem to require any recognition of the music’s expressive properties. Yet Scruton’s criteria for understanding music are too minimal to make sense of what many people find most important about music; we will see later that they are also too minimal to support his account of aesthetic meaning and its perception. Furthermore, Scruton’s refusal to take seriously the possibility that representational elements might be significant in listeners’ experience is inconsistent with his recognition that know-

7. Scruton provided different arguments against the possibility of musical representation in “Representation in Music”, in *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (London: Methuen, 1983), 62–76. Criticisms of those earlier arguments include: Frances Berenson, “Representation and Music”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34:1 (January 1994), 60–68; Peter Kivy, *Sound and Semblance: Reflections on Musical Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 146–158; and Richard Kuhns, “Music as a Representational Art”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (Spring 1978), 120–125. I have chosen to focus on his position in *The Aesthetics of Music* because the argument there is based on the listener’s understanding – my main area of interest in this paper.

ing that a work is supposed to depict something can affect the way in which we listen to it (AM, 130).

Second, Scruton implies that the possibility of musical representation is to be taken seriously if and only if an awareness of representation is essential for understanding a work. This requirement seems too stringent, even if Scruton is correct that understanding the music as music is possible without awareness of representational elements. Arguably, we should pay attention to any and all information about a work that deepens our enjoyment and appreciation of the music as heard. Recognizing the representational content of a work and being alert to the composer's possible intentions to represent frequently does enhance one's listening experience. For example, awareness of a composer's intent to represent allows us to admire (or find wanting) her skill in choosing musical materials that are appropriate to the subject of representation. It allows us to compare the way in which two different composers have depicted the same subject. Attention to composers' intentions with regard to representation can also help us better appreciate a work's historical and cultural context, as both the choice of subject and the specific means of musical representation vary with time and place.

Finally, recall that for Scruton, harmony, melody, and movement are essential to music; you can hear music *as* music without knowing what, if anything, the music is about. His example was that it makes no difference to a listener if she believes that Strauss's *Don Quixote* is about the life of a dog – nothing musical is altered. Once again, these remarks fail to capture what many people would say they find most meaningful about music and most rewarding in their experience of it. No doubt, music can be approached as a formal sound structure with little or no attention to the circumstances of its production or the intentions of those who have produced it. Yet whatever else music is, it is at minimum a form of communication. Scruton implicitly recognizes this when he claims that in the presence of music, we find ourselves in another person's ambit (AM, 18, cited above). Treating music as a form of communication means paying attention to what those who produced it may have considered significant, including its representational elements.

Scruton may seem to have an answer to the points I have raised regarding musical representation: Expression, rather than representation, is relevant to musical understanding.⁸ Yet this answer will not do; one can hear music "as music" without knowing what, if anything, it expresses. Indeed one might be quite puz-

8. I discuss Scruton's account of musical expression in greater detail in the next section.

zled as to the expressive content of a work, yet still be able to recognize it as a rhythmic and melodic *Gestalt*. (I am thinking here of both culturally unfamiliar music and of emotionally ambiguous art music in the Western tradition.) Moreover, representation and expression can be quite difficult to disentangle in practice. If a work has a determinate representational content this will likely influence and constrict the scope of what may be expressed.

By way of illustrating and elaborating some of the aspects of music I have been considering, I will briefly discuss the example of Georgian folk singing and my own ongoing attempts the better to understand it.⁹ Georgia has a tradition of polyphonic choral singing. Most often, the singing is without instrumental accompaniment; different areas of the country display variations in vocal technique, etc. There are songs for virtually all aspects of traditional life, including religious and liturgical songs, festive songs, work songs and agricultural songs, drinking songs, laments, and historical songs.

Despite the fact that Georgian music does not adhere to western diatonic tonality, it did not take me long to satisfy Scruton's criteria for minimal understanding: Hearing a series of pitches as a rhythmic and melodic *Gestalt*. Most of the harmonies sounded strange at first – some strangely beautiful, and others merely odd. I liked some Georgian songs immediately and found them readily accessible. I later learned that these were mainly religious and liturgical songs. Work songs and drinking songs were soon readily recognizable as such, mainly due to their characteristic rhythms. Yet I frequently misjudged the emotional and gestural character of the music. I can remember hearing a hauntingly beautiful song during a concert, and being sure that it must have been a love song or lament. It turned out to be a cow-herding song.

How important is it to recognize representational and expressive characteristics of music? Does it *matter* that I sometimes misjudged what type of song I was listening to? At one level, Scruton seems to be correct; not knowing the cultural function of the Georgian songs I heard did not stop me from grasping them as music. I could still follow the melodic line and hear the various voices sounding together as harmonies. Yet, as I have claimed, there is arguably more to the ap-

9. Two available CDs of Georgian music are *Georgian Voices: The Rustavi Choir*, Elektra Nonesuch Explorer Series 9 79224-2 and *Georgian Polyphony [I]: Choral Music from Caucasia*, JVC World Series VICG-5003. Georgian choirs are strictly segregated – men and women never sing together. The second CD listed has the advantage of including some performances by a women's choir. The majority of recordings available seem to be of men's choirs only.

preciation of music than appreciation of sonic qualities, and in particular, we need to take seriously the view that music is a form of communication. If Scruton's minimal conception of music is questionable with regard to art music, it is all the more problematic when we consider folk music. Music and art more generally are not things set apart from a group's general culture. Indeed, music might be thought to reflect some of the most significant preoccupations of social groups. Thus coming better to understand an unfamiliar culture and coming better to understand its music are of a piece: Greater comprehension of one will foster greater comprehension of the other. Accordingly, we will profit by paying (non-exclusive) attention to those features of the music that are deemed culturally significant, including representational and expressive elements.

My difficulty discerning the representational and expressive character of Georgian songs served to block a richer appreciation of the music and of its role in the general culture. Until I have the ability to tell a love song, say, from a cow-herding song, I would not be in a position to compare two love songs to one another, or compare a Georgian cow herding song with similar songs from Armenia or Azerbaijan.¹⁰

II. Sympathy and Involvement with Music

With his discussion of expression in music, Scruton begins to move beyond the minimal criteria for understanding (hearing music *as* music) that he originally defended. By "expression" Scruton understands the aesthetic meaning, identified through metaphors, which works of art are said to have over and above any representational content (AM, 140). In the case of poetry and music, this expressiveness cannot be detached from its sensuous form (AM, 360). Although the meaning of music does not lie purely in its emotional content the expression of emotion is a paradigm case of musical significance (AM, 346), and it is the only one that Scruton discusses at length.

According to Scruton, in order to understand expression in music, we must first understand our response to it. His account of this response is thought-provoking and original (AM, 354-357), with roots in Plato. The response to expression is a sympathetic response, awakened by another life or subjectivity. What is a sympa-

10. I do not think that the problem would dissolve if I were to learn Georgian and be able to discriminate songs on the basis of lyrics. The difficulty would remain of why two songs about seemingly disparate subjects sounded similar.

thetic emotion? If two people are happy their feelings coincide; if one is happy, and the second observes this happiness and comes to share it, without being happy for herself, then her happiness is sympathetic. Sympathetic emotions are more fully released by fiction than by fact, as in real situations our interests tend to eclipse our sympathies. One of the reasons why art matters is that through this “free play of sympathy” in fiction our emotions can become educated – but also corrupted.

Our response to music is a sympathetic response to human life imagined in the sounds we hear. However, the life in music is abstract, indeterminate, and belongs to the music process. Since music does not have the capacity to represent, there is no precise object of sympathy. In addition to feelings, actions and gestures may also be sympathetic, and like sympathetic feelings, sympathetic gestures may arise in response to real or aesthetic contexts. Scruton understands dancing as potentially sympathetic in this way: “In dancing I respond to another’s gestures, move with him, or in harmony with him, without seeking to change his predicament or share his burden. [...Dancing] involves responding to movement for its own sake, dwelling in the appearance of another’s gesture, finding meaning in that appearance, and matching it with a gesture of my own” (AM, 355).

When we dance to music we move with it, and silent listening can be a kind of dancing too: “Our whole being is absorbed by the movement of the music, and moves with it, compelled by incipient gestures of imitation” (AM, 356). The object of imitation is the life imagined in the music. The response of the listener, then, is a kind of latent dancing; it is a sublimated desire to “move with” the music and so focus on its moving forms.

Scruton makes a connection between the social aspects of dancing and the gestures and movements of social life more generally. Manners are said to be a kind of generalized choreography. In the “dance” we perform as a response to music, we are led through a series of gestures that gain their significance from the “intimation of community”. It is this link between music and social life that prompts Scruton to call music a “character forming force” and lament the decline of taste in popular music (AM, 502). Plato’s conviction that dancing is a reflection of social character is “surely right”; the mores and habits of mind and character of those who listen and dance to Nirvana will be radically different from those who listen to a Renaissance gavotte (AM, 390–391).¹¹

11. For a critique of Scruton’s account of morality in music, see my “Music, Listeners, and Moral Awareness”, *Philosophy Today* 45 (Fall 2001), 266–274.

Like Scruton, I am convinced that understanding music requires some form of involvement with the music. His account of involvement as a sympathetic dance has much to recommend it. In particular, it takes account of and helps us to understand the role of the body in understanding music. It may be that some aspects of music's effect on us, and our reaction to music, will require an examination of music's natural, supra-cultural aspects.

However, the flaws in Scruton's account of understanding music are serious enough to recommend reconsideration. First, the account of dance that underlies Scruton's analysis is highly specific; while he does not state which form of dance he has in mind, his description corresponds to some forms of social dance (ballroom, gavottes) and perhaps a few others. There are many types of dance that cannot be made to fit his description, including ritual dances with a sequence of strictly prescribed movements, as well as dances in which a movement is meant to be imitated rather than responded to "for its own sake", and totally free-form or unstructured dances. The narrowness of his definition of dance raises the worry that the account of involvement with music based on this definition is similarly applicable only to a narrowly defined range of music.

Second, music and dance are so intimately related and their origins likely so intertwined, that it is not really helpful to explain one in terms of or prior to the other. Indeed such a strategy ultimately raises more questions than it can answer. Scruton's account of involvement with music pushes the problem of understanding music to another level – the problem of how we are involved with and understand dance. What is needed is a broader account that encompasses both music and dance and might help us make sense of the latter as well as the former.

III. *Meaning and Perception*

According to Scruton, in all cases of aesthetic meaning there is an irreducibly sensuous component, such that meaning can only be discovered through an encounter with the artwork. This meaning is not an "association" or a train of images; rather, it is the *intentional object* of perception (AM, 227). The meaning of a musical work is not given by convention, as is meaning in language, but by perception (AM, 210). For Scruton, the meaning of a musical work is what you understand when you understand it; no fact or interpretation that is irrelevant to musical understanding can be part of the meaning of music (AM, 344).¹² As men-

12. See also Roger Scruton, "Analytic Philosophy and the Meaning of Music", in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Schusterman (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1989), 85 and "Understanding Music", in *The Aesthetic Understanding*, 77–100.

tioned earlier, hearing sounds (as opposed to hearing the *causes* of sounds) is necessary and sufficient for hearing music, and Scruton rejects the idea that the meaning of music could depend on anything extra-musical. Yet Scruton's account of aesthetic meaning and understanding is not consistent with his claims about the power and social significance of art and music. To see this, we will need to consider Scruton's own discussion of specific works of art.

Scruton's contention that meaning is the object of perception is hard to reconcile with his discussion of meaning in a particular artwork:

When I see the dancers in Poussin's *Adoration of the Golden Calf*, I am not merely prompted by the painting to think of them, or to conjure them in my mind's eye. I see them *there*, in the painting. And when I turn my eyes away I cease to see them. If I retain an image of them it is also an image of the *painting*. The meaning of this painting lies *in* the experience of it, and is not obtainable independently. Nor is the meaning a simple matter of what is represented. I do not only see these dancing figures, and the scene in which they participate. I see their foolishness and frivolity; I sense the danger and the attraction of idolatry, which invites me to cancel all responsibility for my life and soul, and join in the collective dance. A moral idea begins to pervade the aspect of the painting. The figures come before me in a new light, not as happy innocents, but as embodiments of lawlessness, and assassins of the Father (AM, 227).

How does Scruton know that the figures in the painting are idolaters? Might they not be engaged in an approved religious rite? Even knowing the title of the painting does not tell us the moral and cultural significance of the activity depicted: There seems to be nothing wrong *per se* with adoring a golden calf. Two levels of understanding are implicit here: One may understand what the painting *depicts* without understanding the *meaning* of the painting. Recognizing what Scruton points to as the meaning of the painting requires a great deal of information, particularly of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, which is outside of the painting. I doubt very much that someone from a non-Christian tradition would have the same reaction to the painting as did Scruton, yet she could see the depicted scene equally clearly. Furthermore, someone who did not share Scruton's cultural and moral assumptions – imagine a young British neo-pagan – would reject his evaluations of the figures in the painting, perhaps seeing them precisely as “happy innocents”. The issue here is not that Scruton's analysis of the painting is necessarily incorrect; it might very well be correct. The problem is that he does not come to his understanding through perceptual experience alone.

Turning now specifically to music, recall Scruton's characterization of the

musical object as a pure abstraction, and his claims that knowing the cause of sound is not necessary for understanding and that instrumentation (and hence timbre) are accidental. Yet consider his highly perceptive and sensitive discussion of Bach's D minor Chaconne:

This is undeniably one of the most noble and profound utterances for solo violin in the history of music, and a remarkable study in implied harmony. Its effect of titanic strain, as of a giant Atlas, bearing the burden of the world's great sadness, is inseparable from the way in which the performer must stretch across the four strings of the instrument, to provide as many voices as can be produced by it, and to imply as many more. The performer's effort must be heard in the music, but heard too as *part* of the music. The brilliance of Bach's writing was precisely to achieve that effect: to make the difficulty of the piece into a quality of the music, rather than a matter of virtuosity. The music is intrinsically difficult, but not because it is showing off: rather, because difficulty is inseparable from its message (AM, 452).

Again, there are at least two levels of understanding implicit in Scruton's analysis of the piece. We must hear it as music, but understanding its "message" would seem also to require knowledge of instrumentation and performance practices. On Scruton's account, someone who knew little about the difficulties of producing separate voices on bowed string instruments would miss something important in the music. And without knowledge of the "solo" in the title of the piece, our uninformed listener might well get the impression that the piece was a duet played by two violinists! Far from being incidental to musical understanding, then, "extraneous" information such as a work's title and instrumentation may be crucial for rich appreciation of a work. Scruton implicitly acknowledges as much in his discussion of the Bach chaconne; yet his theoretical apparatus cannot support the rich discussion that he offers.

Scruton's discussion of the D minor Chaconne brings to mind another limitation of his analysis hinted at earlier: His underestimation of the role of the performer in heard music. Throughout *The Aesthetics of Music* Scruton gives primary attention to the roles of composer and audience; performers and performances are given comparatively little consideration. While Scruton tells us that a sense of the composer's intention inhabits our musical perception, he makes no similar claim for the performer's intentions. His contention that "the performer inevitably leaves a mark on what is heard" (AM, 440) strikes me as a gross understatement: In listening to music (as opposed to silent score reading) the performance *is just what* is heard. While it is the "brilliance" of Bach's writing that makes the difficulty of

the Chaconne part of the music (compare, for example, some of Paganini's virtuosic compositions) it is surely also due to the "brilliance" of the performer, and the aesthetic choices which he or she has made, that the difficulty of the music is not heard as mere showing off.

Scruton is thus caught in a bind: He is convinced that we can learn from art, yet he wants to resist the thought that artworks are a means to information. He believes that what we learn from art can be gained only through a direct encounter with the work, so he rejects the possibility that artworks refer to anything beyond themselves, or that understanding them requires any knowledge beyond what is given in immediate perception. Yet his own analyses of artworks (the Bach Chaconne and Poussin's painting) show that in order to understand art he sometimes has to import information beyond what is perceptually given in the artworks themselves.

IV. Concluding Remarks

I hinted earlier that a "broader" account of understanding music than the one Scruton offers is needed. What I have in mind is an account that integrates both the bodily and cognitive aspects of appreciating music, while remaining sensitive to the creation and production of music as historically and culturally informed. Furthermore, an adequate account would require an explicit awareness of levels of musical understanding. Although much of what Scruton writes seems to imply the existence of levels of understanding (hearing the music "as music" and hearing its meaning, which may require extra-musical knowledge), this hint is never developed.

I hope that the preceding remarks have conveyed a sense of the depth and clarity of thought that Scruton brings to his philosophical discussions of music.