

Article

## **A dialogue about music**

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# A dialogue about music<sup>1</sup>

Because of the current world situation, the important necessary relationship between the composer and the listener has suffered. This, is something we need to talk about.

Av Maria Mjaaland Sele



Foto: Tord F Paulsen.

**P:** If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

**N:** I thought this conversation was supposed to be about music, not contemplating old thought experiments?

**P:** How do you know that this is not about music?

**N:** I just assumed, but you're right, I can't assume before I know. So I'll participate with an open mind.

**P:** Good. Then I ask again, dear friend. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

**N:** Well, if we disregard the fact that this thought experiment is supposed

to underline the issue of whether or not we can actually know if there is a sound if no one is there to hear it, I do think that one can claim that there would still be a sound if a tree falls in the forest, although one would never be able to prove it.

**P:** At least we can agree that it would be possible that there would be a sound?

**N:** Yes.

**P:** But then what about this; If a composer composes a piece of music yet no one ever hears it, is it music?

**N:** If I use the same logic as before, then yes, it would be.

**P:** Does that mean that you consider music to be sound?

**N:** In its simplest form music is sound, yes.<sup>2</sup>

**P:** If music is sound, does that mean that all sounds are also music?

**N:** No, of course not.

**P:** So what separates musical sound from other kinds of sound?

**N:** Musical sounds are not random, they are specific, and with that I think I would like to rephrase my previous statement, music is not sound but rather music is tones.

**P:** And what are these tones if they are not sounds?

**N:** They are sounds, but they are specific sounds. They are measured and then put into a system.

**P:** What sort of system?

**N:** Music consists of tones, which are measurable sounds, which, together with harmony, melody and rhythm, are the key elements that constitute music.

**P:** So music is a system of sounds? I mean tones?

**N:** Yes.

**P:** But what if I'm somewhat of a musical halfwit, how would I know that I was hearing a tone instead of a sound? Because if I didn't know that this sound was a tone, would I be able to tell the difference between the tone A and a soundwave at 440 hertz?

**N:** Both yes and no. The difference would be in you knowing that one was music and thus you would hear it as a tone.

**P:** So, what you are saying is that what separates a tone from a sound is not just that it is specific, i.e., measured, but also that it has other intentional properties?

**N:** That depends on what you mean by intentional properties.

**P:** Intentional properties, in this case, would be properties that are experienced, or in other words, we hear it as having certain properties.<sup>3</sup> This would explain how the sound is the same in both cases, but that they would be experienced differently, with one being heard as a tone (in other words, as music), and the other one not. I suspect the same could be said for rhythm, melody, and harmony?

**N:** Yes, I think I would have to agree. One does encounter rhythm in nature, or outside of music, but it's not rhythm as such. A train, for example, makes a rhythmic sound, yet I don't think I would call that music.

**P:** So we are in agreement that what constitutes music is both physical and (maybe more importantly) comprises intentional properties? In other words, part of what makes music music is that the person listening is listening to it as being

music. Which we have agreed is tones, harmony, rhythm, and melody.

**N:** Yes.

**P:** So what you are suggesting is that when I listen to music, I am hearing music as having certain kind of properties that are not found in 'natural sounds'. In one sense, music is not actually sounds as such; rather, they are tones that are part of a system we call music. Thus, to be able to experience music, one would at least be able to understand that it is music, which, in its most primitive form, would require one to hear it as something more than sound?

**N:** Yes. You could almost say that we are hearing not only with our ears, but also with our mind. In much the same way as if we listen to someone speak a foreign language, we won't be able to hear it as meaning anything. But if we were then taught the language, the sounds would be exactly the same, yet you would have a very different experience, as you would now hear the sounds and their meaning.

**P:** So what do musical sounds mean?

**N:** I don't think I follow.

**P:** Let me rephrase. What is art? Or is that something which cannot be defined?

**N:** Art is hard to define, but I have always found R.G. Collingwood's<sup>4</sup> definition to capture the essence of art. He claims that art is expression.<sup>5</sup>

**P:** That is a definition I could agree to. Art can be considered as expression.<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, then there must be something that expresses and something that is expressed.<sup>7</sup> Do you agree?

**N:** Yes.

**P:** Is this a universal principle for all art? And if that is the case, how would one separate one art form from another?

**N:** Did you not just answer your own question? You separate one art form

from another by the form. Form, in this case, would be the material or, rather, what is akin to material in art, namely the medium. The painter uses paints and brushes, the poet words, and rhyme.

**P:** And the composer?

**N:** Tones, melody, harmony, and rhythm. Now I understand. The musical system we have talked about is the medium the composer works within.

**P:** Exactly. The composer uses this musical system; in other words, the composer works with tones, not specific tones, but all the tones. Do you understand why I said we had only addressed part of the initial question?

**N:** Yes. Thus far, we have only looked at what enables the composer to compose, not what they actually compose. But could this not merely be any type of<sup>8</sup> idea or concept? Did we not just claim that tones were a medium?

**P:** We are now in a position to ask what the composer expresses with this medium? What does music express?

**N:** Feelings?<sup>9</sup>

**P:** If we attribute specific feeling as what music is expressing, one will either consider music to be an instrument for the composer's feelings<sup>10</sup>, or an instrument for the listener's feelings<sup>11</sup>. In both cases, music becomes a mere means to an end, which would put the value outside the musical work itself.<sup>12</sup>

**N:** But could it not be general feeling?<sup>13</sup> Such as happy or sad?

**P:** It could. Does that mean that musical expression is of a certain kind rather than a certain thing?  
N: Well, what if I say yes?

**P:** Then I would get the same experience from listening to a symphony as I would having a bath, as long as I experienced the same general feeling?

**N:** I suppose.

**P:** Which would mean that I have no reason to value a piece of music more than said bath?

**N:** I see the problem. You are saying that whatever music is expressing is a certain thing, not a thing of a certain kind?<sup>14</sup>

**P:** Yes.

**N:** But all the composers use the same system, the same tones, the same rhythm, and so on, so how can this result in something that is a certain thing. Would music not be a thing of a certain kind?

**P:** Music is not just what expresses, namely the tones and the like, but it is also intimately connected with what is expressed. To better understand this, we need to look at the actual compositional activity. What is it that the composer does when they compose?

**N:** They make music, they express themselves.

**P:** Indeed. Expression can be thought of as an activity, an activity of making something that is unclear clear. In other words, the composer gets an idea that needs to be clarified. They then start the process of working it out in the correct medium. In this case, a musical idea would need to be worked out in music. To simplify this, we can think of the initial idea as a few tones, or a motif, which then gets elaborated, stripped down, harmonized, and modalized, all as a means of clarifying it. They use their musical knowledge to make the idea come to life, to be manifested.

**N:** So the composer doesn't even know what they are expressing before they go about the activity of trying to express it.

**P:** Exactly. This is one of the things that separates art from craft, because the artist doesn't have it all planned out. Their reason for wanting to engage in the artistic activity is because they want to understand it too. As Collingwood says, 'One paints a thing in order to see it',<sup>15</sup> and this is why

Hanslick says that 'Artwork is formed whereas the performance is experienced'.<sup>16</sup>

**N:** So what does it mean, that a piece of music has been formed?

**P:** Formed in this context would mean something akin to giving it a form that is understandable. In other words, the composer is clarifying the idea such that it becomes clear, and for it to be clear, it must be understandable.<sup>17</sup>

**N:** So, in a way, what the composer is doing is describing, guiding, and elaborating so it becomes something we can understand.<sup>18</sup>

**P:** Yes. And it is in this process of being formed that the tones become something commensurable, something with meaning, something we can understand.

**N:** But this means that the listener must hear music in a certain way to be able to understand the musical expression? As the listener cannot merely think of the tones as tones, but they must be heard as that which expresses?

**P:** Indeed.

**N:** So that means that not only are some of the properties that constitute music dependent on the listener hearing it as music, but what makes music particular, or for now let's call it musical expression, is also dependent on the listener hearing and engaging with music in a certain way.

**P:** Yes.

**N:** I was never aware that the listener had such power.

**P:** What this means is that not only does the listener need to actively engage and listen in a certain way, but the composer has to make something that is understandable.<sup>19</sup>

**N:** There is no such thing as senseless music?

**P:** Correct.

**N:** But answer me this, could the composer not be the listener too?

**P:** Surely in one sense, but how would

they know whether or not what they had expressed was understandable?

**N:** But if they understand it.

**P:** Have you ever had a thought that

**“If a composer composes a piece of music yet no one ever hears it, is it music? If I use the same logic as before, then yes, it would be**

sounds really smart and then when you say it out loud it really isn't?

**N:** Yes.

**P:** Have you ever had thoughts or ideas that are basically nonsense?

**N:** Yes.

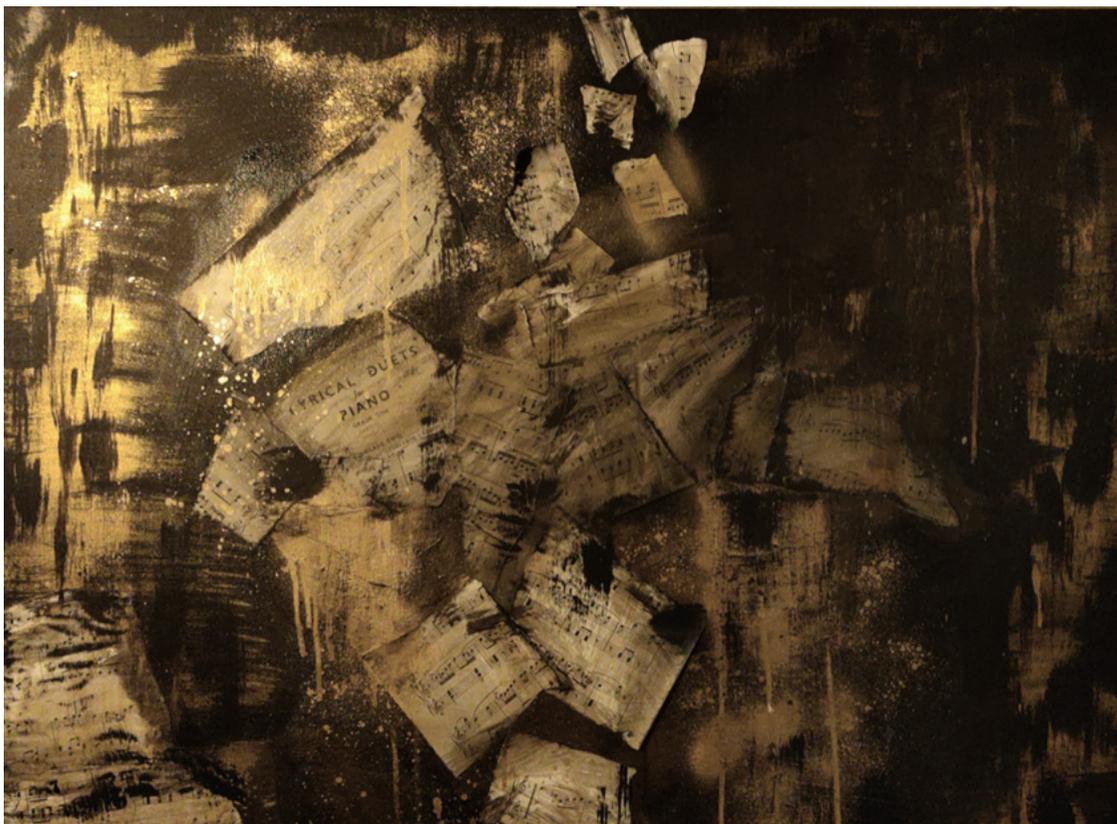
**P:** Then it would be perfectly plausible that a person could create something that is actual gibberish or just nonsense and think they have created music?

**N:** I suppose.

**P:** Which means that the artist needs the audience and that the audience also needs the artist.

**N:** The audience is actually invaluable then?

**P:** Yes, the audience is the only way the artist can know if they are speaking 'truth' or not. In other words, the fact that the audience is able to understand the artwork is the only measure the artist has for whether or not they actually clarified it. This is why Collingwood says that 'The aesthetic activity is the activity of speaking. Speech is speech only so far as it is both spoken and heard. A man may, no doubt, speak to himself and be his own hearer; but what he says to himself is in principle capable of being said to anyone sharing his language'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, for it to be an expression, it must be intelligible. So I ask again, if a composer composes a piece of music yet no one ever hears it, is it music?



Illustrasjon: Maria Mjaaland Sele.

**The listener is essential** to the composer, not only to provide a measure of truth, but also for the shared communication between the composer/artist and the listener. Art is about expression, which, in turn, is about being understood. The relationship is one of collaboration, sharing, and being able to experience the same things. Collingwood calls it 'art proper', Hanslick calls it 'the musical experience', and contemporary theorists have called it 'action and process'.<sup>21</sup> They are all talking about the same thing. The art of music cannot be discussed, investigated, or researched without considering the entirety of what constitutes music. This includes the mental aspects, the creative process, the actions and experiences that encompasses the production, the practical side, the process of creating, and the experi-

ences of listening. When we concern ourselves with artistic research, we are not merely considering the artwork as a standalone object, but rather we are concerned with the entire process. This is where philosophy of music really comes to its right, as philosophers such as Collingwood, Hanslick and Wittgenstein are all concerned about understanding and theorizing about art as a truth and value that is based on different foundations of knowledge than those of scientifically researched and evidence-based methods.

The artwork itself, in this case, the musical artwork, is not just the music played or the painting as an object; the artwork is intimately connected with the experience of it, as it is in the experience that we are able to see and understand what the

composer has developed or clarified. It is because of this tightly wound relationship that music may be, more so than any other art, vulnerable in situations where the arenas for this communication is thwarted. The global pandemic has put stress on every social situation, and thus also on artistic activity. Although the measures that were implemented worldwide were highly necessary, it is important to acknowledge and be aware of the impact they had and continue to have on the artistic community. It is not just the audience that misses the concerts and live music, it is the composer and artists as well. Therefore, it should be a shared responsibility to find new ways of continuing the collaboration of sharing musical and artistic experiences. Most importantly, we need to keep the musical dialogue going.

- 1 A philosophical dialogue is a method of stimulating critical thinking. It is a debate between individuals that is based on posing questions. The main goal is not to provide answers but to engage in conversation.
- 2 This should not be read as music consisting merely of sound; rather, sound is necessary for there to be music. Music is more than mere sound. There are several different ways to approach the question of what music is, for a good overview of the ontological questions concerning music, see Dodd (2007), or for more of a philosophical debate on the subject see Ridley (2012).
- 3 Hearing as is a suggestion made by several philosophers, the idea is based on Wittgenstein and his views on aspects seeing. To read about aspect seeing, see Wittgenstein (2009), especially from p. 111 onwards – this is where the famous duck-rabbit figure is discussed. For a musical version of hearing as, see Levinson (2006).
- 4 Collingwood (1958).
- 5 Collingwood (1958), pp. 105–124.
- 6 For a very good introduction and easily digestible book about Collingwood's theories of art and expression, I would suggest Ridley (1999).
- 7 This is inspired by a distinction made by Collingwood, where he suggests that this distinction is necessary in art, whereas the other suggested distinctions are only necessary in craft.
- 8 For the entire argument see Collingwood (1958), p. 17 onwards.
- 9 This suggestion, which is called 'the feeling theory' by Eduard Hanslick, is one of the main debates in philosophy of music. Hanslick is best known for his negative argument, which claims that feeling cannot be the content of music. This is based on a cognitive theory of emotion together with trying to argue for the intrinsic value of music. To read his entire argument see Hanslick (1986).
- 10 This theory is called expression theory. For a classical suggestion of this theory, see Tolstoy (1962). For a more contemporary suggestion, see Robinson (2005). For a good overview and explanation of his theory, I suggest reading the second section of Chapter Four, 'The expression theory' p. 170, in Davies (1994). His book offers good introduction to several areas of musical aesthetics and expression theory.
- 11 This is called arousal theory. An overview can be found in the same chapter in Stephen Davies' book (see above). For a different take on arousal theory, I suggest Ridley (1995).
- 12 Value is often categorized as intrinsic and instrumental when it comes to discussion of this kind. Instrumental value would be value that something has as an instrument to some further end, where the ultimate goal is not the instrument itself. Intrinsic value is value that something has within itself, where the end is that thing itself. For more information on value, see Budd (1985). To learn more about how it relates to musical experience, see Budd (1995).
- 13 For an enlightened account of this, see Budd (1985). This account is especially helpful for considering various objections and difficulties that an aesthetic theory that wants to connect music and emotion has to worry about. This is a helpful read, although Budd does not offer a clear counter account himself.
- 14 For more of the discussion between 'a certain thing and a thing of a certain kind', see Collingwood (1958), p. 114 onwards.
- 15 Collingwood (1958), p. 303.
- 16 Hanslick (1986), p. 49.
- 17 Form in this context would mean that 'form' should not be read in a strict formalism sense. For discussions on formalism in art, see Bell (1914) and Langer (1953).
- 18 I have borrowed the terminology mainly from Roger Scruton, who suggests that understanding music is understanding 'the intentional where the emphasis is on introducing the intentional object of a particular mental act' (Scruton, 1983, pp. 88–89).
- 19 Roger Scruton suggests that 'if music has a content, then this content must be understood' (1983, p. 88).
- 20 Collingwood (1958), p. 317.
- 21 For more on art as action, see Davies' (2004).

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