

# Reply to the discussion on form and content in music

10 November 1998

*This is a further comment on form and content in music, an ongoing discussion that began with a comment by the present letter writer on July 14. The other contributions are listed below.*

The most serious error in my original letter (14 July) was the idea that art music lacks content: as I then put it, a particular piece of music 'says absolutely nothing about anyone's biography, or physiognomy, or any ensemble of social relations which novels might narrate or paintings depict'.

The problem with music is that while poetry and fiction make creative use (in their own artistic ways) of the universal narrative medium of language, and the visual arts press against the boundaries of what is generally accepted as visual imagery, music seems to have no such semantic or depictive medium built into the conditions of its comprehensibility. (This is not just my problem, but appears, from a reading of the aesthetic literature, to be quite a general worry about music. See, for example, Stephen Davies' 1994 book *Musical Meaning and Expression*, one of the more worthwhile academic treatises to address the question in recent times.)

But of course to infer, as I did, from the fact that music does not have a content by virtue of semantic or depictive capacities (i.e., because it lacks these), that it must therefore have no content at all, is a simple logical blunder, because it leaves out the possibility that music has its content by virtue of some other capacity. The interesting, and theoretically challenging question remains, just what is the capacity (given that it is neither semantic nor depictive, except perhaps metaphorically so) in virtue of which music has its content? It is the elusiveness of this capacity--the difficulty of characterizing it--which has led so many of those who have thought about it into the wilderness, or rather the idealist dead end, of musical formalism.

Since writing my initial letter I have begun to absorb an outstanding theoretical contribution which bears on this discussion, namely, Voronsky's *Art as the Cognition of Life*. Voronsky led me back to Plekhanov, and I am currently immersed in Volume 5 of his *Selected Philosophical Writings*, which contains the texts from which Voronsky clearly drew his fundamental methodological principles of literary and art criticism. While neither Voronsky nor Plekhanov discuss music as such, except in passing, the obvious correctness of their critical principles clearly implies that the extension of these principles to music is a matter of theoretical urgency.

This bears on the present discussion in the following way, which I here put in the most brief and schematic fashion, fully aware that it needs to be fleshed out in far greater detail. I offer only the very beginning of a treatment of the subject.

Voronsky writes on page 98 of the book: 'Art is the cognition of life.... Both art and science have the same subject: life, reality. But science analyzes, art synthesizes; science is abstract, art is concrete; science turns to the mind of man, art to his sensual nature. Science cognizes life with the help of concepts, art with the aid of images in the form of living, sensual contemplation.'

The strength of this approach is that it subordinates the problems of form and content to a wider conception of artworks, that is, to the conception that they represent kinds of knowledge, and that truthfulness, realism, is the central term of criticism. None of the academic writers that I know of even begins to approach music in this way, because they hold music, and art generally, to be peripheral to knowledge; in their opinion it occupies a sphere of mental life quite incommensurable with science, and is more like a kind of decoration than it is a form of insight into life.

(Consult, for example, the writings of Peter Kivy, who is musically literate and philosophically inclined, and who has argued that music is not an art at all, or if it is, it is more akin to decorative craft.) Voronsky tells us correctly that such an approach is a misrepresentation of the actual nature of artworks, and he demonstrates that there is a far better way to go about it.

In Voronsky's writings we now have a body of critical theory which stands in that great tradition which began with Diderot and the revolutionary French materialists, which was developed by Hegel in an idealistically inverted form, which passed through the limited materialism of Feuerbach and his Russian follower Chernyshevsky, which was given its most brilliant formulation by Karl Marx, and which through the classical Marxist writings of Plekhanov provided the training of the greatest twentieth century materialist aesthetician, Voronsky. To write this is not just to accord Voronsky a cheer but is rather to assert, in opposition to the dominant twentieth century art-critical and musicological theories, that here is a method which corresponds to, and correctly represents, the real nature of artistic creation. We are recovering, at last, the real theoretical foundations of materialist aesthetics. Adorno is a disgraceful obscurantist who simply cannot survive comparison with Voronsky, and those so-called radicals who continue to defend his rantings are welcome to their self-deception.

Music, then, is a form of cognition of life. It discloses objective reality to us, not through concepts, but through the musical equivalents of images and narratives. It has, as a kind of genetic foundation, the universal human practices of song and dance, but in its evolution it has to some degree separated itself from these, and developed its own relatively autonomous forms of utterance, although song and dance remain archetypically at its heart. Its content is reality, including nature in all its forms as well as human experience, emotion and thought. Its truthfulness is to be sought in the adequacy of the invented musical form to that content, which historically has displayed a remarkable prodigality, and which in its finest examples illuminates the human condition profoundly.

I even venture to suggest that what enables music to do this is its mimetic relationship with human experience, feeling and thought. Music does not depict or narrate life: it is a microcosm of it. In this I follow an

idea originated by Aristotle in his 'Poetics'. But I reserve the validation and development of this conception to further research.

AF

Sydney

3/11/98

See Also:

On the gulf between 'high' and 'low' in music

[25 August 1998]

Another comment on form and content in music

[29 July 1998]

A reply to a letter 'On form and content in music'

[23 July 1998]

On form and content in music

[14 July 1998]



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