

**Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania, eds.**

*The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music.*

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The handbook/companion genre has become a fixture of academic libraries. In the pursuit of marketing niches, enterprising acquisitions editors have commissioned anthologies devoted to an extraordinarily rich diversity of philosophical topics, historical eras, and key thinkers. Perhaps surprisingly, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music* is unique in its attempt to cover the entire expanse of how philosophers think about music. While the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Music Education* offers an oblique account somewhat related to the book reviewed here, and Cambridge has specialized collections devoted to topics such as music theory and analysis and has assembled over 200 *Companion* volumes devoted to more specialized music subjects (e.g., conducting, musical instruments, all the Western musical categories, and major composers ranging from Bach to the Beatles and Monteverdi to Cage), no other edited text attempts the overview presented by Gracyk and Kania.

Two kinds of readers are the most likely to profit from this text. The first group works in the area of philosophy and music and would inquire about how their respective interests are refracted by the contributing authors. I, however, count as a member of the second kind of reader, one who claims no expertise in general aesthetics, or in the specific domain covered by “philosophy and music”. A reader like me seeks an introduction that faithfully reviews the major topics, offers a critical perspective on the current controversies, provides resources for further study, and presents the material in clear language and at a level of sophistication appropriate to the discourse. In these respects, the editors have crafted an excellent collection. While I cannot adjudicate the controversies based on the original published materials, the essays by and large seem even-handed and current. Aside from some overlap in the essays on music and emotion, where key texts by Budd, Kivy, Nussbaum, Robinson, and Scruton are repeatedly discussed (albeit from somewhat different vantage points), the divisions have been honored and the assignments completed with a uniformity of style and exposition that readers will much appreciate.

Although the text is divided into six sections, the first two, “General Issues” and “Emotion” comprise the dominant concerns of contemporary philosophical writing on music. Here, in 22 short essays, a wide variety of central issues are discussed: the definition of music, its ontological status, the most prominent controversies about key musical elements (e.g., silence, rhythm, melody, notation, performance) and the various theories of the relationship of emotion to musical experience. Later chapters on musical composition, analysis, and music theory arguably should have been included in this first group of topics to form a more cohesive review of the central philosophical issues. And in the interests of cohesiveness, if the third section devoted to a review of philosophies of music in different Western historical periods (including the contrasting strategies of the analytic and continental traditions) and the following section that offers nine synoptic essays of key historical figures who wrote on music (e.g., Plato,

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hanslick, Adorno) comprised the remaining material, a more coherent text would have been accomplished. While current scholarship might find discussion of different kinds of music (e.g., rock, jazz, opera) interesting and the goulash of topics that include music and gender, music and politics, sociology and cultural studies important, these issues seemed peripheral to me. But then again, this is an anthology—something for everyone, or almost.

Given the breadth of topics covered in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, I was surprised that my main interest was not adequately addressed: the ineffable character of music, or, more specifically, the ineffability of musical experience, the limits of analysis, the borders of thought, and the boundaries of language to capture subjective states. Music is a paradigmatic case example of this host of issues, and while one might argue that the net would be cast too wide, I maintain that the basic framework for any discussion of music and philosophy must take account of the larger philosophical landscape. On my view, to ignore these matters already assumes a philosophical orientation that requires defense.

I am inclined to agree with Martin Mull, the comedian-actor, who quipped, “Talking about music is like dancing about architecture,” (This comment, made in 1979, follows the form of similar witticisms that date at least to 1918 (<http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/11/08/writing-about-music/>) and have been repeated by numerous folk philosophers, like Elvis Costello, who added, “— it's a really stupid thing to want to do.”) The genealogy of this (perhaps iconoclastic) rejection is easily traced back to the romantics and followed through Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. They, for different reasons and with different strategies, have been the most prominent of those ‘nihilists’ who hold that philosophy has little to offer (if anything) for understanding musical *experience* as an *object* of inquiry. That is not to say that we might not comment on why language is inadequate in this regard, but rather we must begin the inquiry by acknowledging the intractable limits of adequately describing the subjective experience. In what sense might it be shared and on what basis? Music occurs in public, but it is also radically private.

While Fred Everett Maus (“Music and Gender”) and James Currie (“Music and Politics”) do discuss subjectivity as a subordinate theme, their primary concerns follow a different path. Indeed, the basic orientation of this compendium, and apparently of the field as a whole, derives from regarding music as-object and not music-as-subjective-experience. The passing mention of “ineffable” (281, 470, and 542) or “ineffability” (156, 162, 468) is evidence that the editors have essentially skirted the matter. Yet, philosophy and music meet at the edge of intelligibility, and while we must attempt to discern the various elements of musical experience, philosophers must also place their studies within the larger philosophical context in which they are grounded. Putting aside the particulars of the respective ‘nihilist’ arguments or even the general outline of this orientation, the editorial decision (or oversight) not to include this critical divide between those who do philosophy of music analytically, in train with musicological categories, and those who categorically reject such a project as being philosophically misdirected, distorts the larger problematic of “philosophy and music.”

While essays on expression, arousal, and resemblance theories of emotion and music are presented, the larger philosophical issue of subjectivity is not. Of course, *what* is philosophically interesting is a large part of *doing* philosophy, and one, willy-nilly finds certain approaches

germane and others not. Given different visions of philosophy, this compendium largely follows the tracks laid down by musicologists and bypasses the debates swirling in philosophy of mind about consciousness, language, and most importantly, subjectivity. So when John Carvalho discusses the central role of music in Nietzsche's philosophy and quotes from *The Birth of Tragedy*, "It should have *sung*, this 'new soul'—and not spoken!" (20) he omits explaining what Nietzsche meant and *why*. An entire philosophy rests on this aphorism: For Nietzsche, private language, already a distorted metaphor drawn from conscious rationality, transcends public discourse, for logic inadequately captures reality and instead serves only as "a means and measure for us to *create* reality, the concept 'reality' for ourselves" (*Will to Power*). Zarathustra sings his anthem in defiance of scientism, rationality, analytics, and any philosophy construed in some objectifying format. For Nietzsche (indebted to Schopenhauer), words can only communicate abstract knowledge: we draw our knowledge of the world from a deeper intuition. Accordingly, life "needs art as a protection and a remedy" (*The Birth of Tragedy*). Wittgenstein would build on this foundation and later write, "Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has meaning" (*Culture and Value*), and Heidegger's Dasein would face the ineffable reality of Being beyond language and the predicate structure of knowing.

One need not adopt these specific orientations to appreciate that music is a form of thinking. But what does 'thinking' mean in the musical context? As Erkki Huovinen observes (124), one meaning refers to a passage of music as being understood only when it is somehow appropriately *represented* in the listener's mind, and according to this epistemic view, musical understanding requires explicit knowledge concerning music mediated through language. For example, when David Davies cites Timothy Day's description of Sibelius' Second Symphony (52–53), the discussion reads like a cookbook that parses the elements and presents the sequence for making a soufflé:

The third movement is a scurrying Scherzo which erupts in fiery outbursts. Its lyrical trio, *lent e suave*, in which an oboe sings remote, plainsong-like phrases, is reintroduced before the movement surges into the Finale. The slower sections of the last movement recapture the pastoral quality of the first, but the dominant mood of the Finale is heroic, and its big tune undeniably stirring.

Passages are further described as "eloquent", "powerful", "harsh", "forlorn", "sunny", etc., which can only serve as linguistic gestures to capture the music. No literary description can convey the *music*, nor the experience of that hearing. Such expositions, so characteristic of program notes written by musicologists, may suffice for reflections on the structure of the composition and the execution by the performers, but the adjectives are only approximate representations of what is ultimately inner mental states.

Of course, the psychology of how listeners perceive, remember, evaluate and distinguish between different musical sequences undoubtedly must inform philosophical discussion. However, the lines separating science and philosophy may be re-drawn along various interfaces and blurring of disciplinary boundaries readily occurs. When the theoretical framework takes mental representations of musical structures as its central principle, we see a parallel loss of distinctions that often occurs between cognitive science and philosophy of mind. We would do

well to recall that a technical understanding of how a car is built and what constitutes its functions requires an obscure and tortuous path back to the experience of driving, one that, in fact, we do not possess. And more to the point, the philosophy directed at music begins with what can be said about it and discerning what is captured analytically and what is not.

So the second meaning of understanding directly addresses the phenomenological dimension of musical experience and acknowledges the subjective sense of meaningfulness. The conceptual formulation draws from the deeper, prior level of aesthetic complexity that frames the reflective analytics. To ‘organize’ subjectivity *without* representation, one must posit that the emotional response to music bypasses cognitive structures associated with consciousness and logos, and following that conduit to the affects, other kinds of processing must occur. The theories attempting to characterize that process have failed to offer comprehensive accounts, and as Rafael de Clercq concludes, “neither common sense nor art-critical practice seem to offer enough guidance to decide the issue of how profundity in art is to be understood” (152). That is both an important admission and a directive.

In conclusion, music holds central interest as a cardinal example of the philosophical challenge to characterize subjectivity and to articulate the mode of first-person experience. If one wants a psychological explanation, rich resources are readily available (e.g., Oxford’s *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, 2010), and philosophers have complemented those studies by asking whether music arouses emotions in the listener or the music contains expressive properties which the listener naturally decodes without actually experiencing those emotions themselves. That is, when trying to explain the mechanism through which music comes to be expressive of emotions, one option is to say that music is expressive of emotions because it *arouses* those same emotions in the listener (a kind of mirroring effect). Another so-called *cognitive* orientation holds that the music contains expressive properties (for example via resemblances to human emotional behaviors—contours, rhythms, timbres), which the listener understands (or decodes) but does not feel. A third option is to say that the listener imagines that the decoded emotions are her own or those of an imaginary persona.

The ‘cognitive’ proponents seem to dominate the field, which derives from an underlying current that carries most of the adjoining essays, namely the problem of establishing an *epistemic* understanding of a performance or of a composition. To discern intentional meaning, as it were, drives their considerations, and although such concerns have a noteworthy place in contemporary arguments, to draw the conclusion that arousal of emotions is not a crucial, indeed, not the constitutive aspect of the listening experience is, at least for me, to miss the point of music altogether. But then again, I am not a philosopher of music.

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