

**Roger Scruton**

*Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation.*

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This book is divided into two parts, each a collection of Scruton's previously published essays. The first part recapitulates and develops Scruton's philosophy of music, as set out in his *Aesthetics of Music* (1997). The second part is devoted to critical studies of individual composers and compositions, plus an essay on Adorno on music. Scruton is a major figure in philosophy of music and it is useful to have collected in one convenient source his recent thoughts on the subject. His music criticism is insightful and provides useful illustrations of his philosophical views. Throughout the book, Scruton displays encyclopedic knowledge of music. Besides standard repertoire, the Algerian composer Az-Zélob, Bulgarian Christmas carols, Metallica, Broadway show tunes, contemporary minimalist composers and early music come under consideration. No one can read this book without being impressed by Scruton's deep appreciation and understanding of music.

Scruton begins by identifying the central debate in philosophy of music: 'the dispute...between those who affirm and those who deny that music has a meaning other than itself' (3). Scruton stands foursquare for the view that music does have extra-musical meaning and against formalism, the view that music is contentless, abstract form, appreciated as pure musical pattern. He sees 'Western classical music as part of an extended attempt to cast light on the human condition' (95). The trick, of course, is to prove that music has meaning. Even Peter Kivy, the principal defender of formalism, allows that music has expressive properties. He maintains, however, that the expressive properties of music provide us with no grounds for saying that music has meaning. According to Scruton, in contrast, '[t]he recognition of expression is the first stage of the process whereby we recreate in ourselves the first-person viewpoint of another' (41) and thus come to understand the meaning of a composition. The second step, establishing that music has content, is the difficult one.

Scruton does not have a full or fully convincing account of how the second step occurs. He does, however, give a sketch of an account. (His account has elements in common with the views of Jenefer Robinson, Noël Carroll, Jerrold Levinson and other opponents of formalism.) He focuses on our sympathetic response to music. We perceive music as movement through space and we imagine ourselves moving to the music. As we listen, 'we are being led through a series of gestures which we imagine as the gestures of the "other" with whom we move' (54). To understand music is to hear in it 'the life that moves in it' (7). Formalists will be unconvinced by such statements, at least when they are made about music without lyrics or a program. They will ask how we can know with

any specificity about the persona that we supposedly hear in music. We can, formalists admit, imagine a persona in music but it is nothing more than wool gathering, unsupported by content in the music.

Scruton's strategy, in responding to the formalist, seems to be to give sensitive analyses of individual composers and their compositions. He writes, for example, that 'it is impossible to hear either the quartets or operas [of Mozart] and not to hear in them the soul of Mozart, that versatile, meditative sympathizer with the human condition' (90). Similarly, Scruton tells us that Beethoven can instill a symphony with 'the noblest of human emotions' (108). Almost any sensitive listener will read Scruton's critical comments on music with sympathy. The formalist will, however, likely be unmoved. Despite all of the suggestive insight that we find in Scruton's writings on philosophy of music, we are owed a more detailed account of how we can find in music the content that many of us firmly believe is there.

The balance of Scruton's book is made up of a heterogeneous collection of critical essays. Two of them are devoted to Wagner. He begins by defending Wagner's music against charges of racism. Wagner was certainly an anti-Semite, but Scruton argues that racism is not manifested in his music. Rather, the Ring 'provides a commentary on modern life' (126). In Scruton's discussion of Wagner, we find evidence of his deep-seated conservatism. For example, he praises Wagner as a composer whose 'art is dedicated to human [class] distinction' (124).

Another pair of essays is devoted to contrasting twentieth-century composers who, Scruton believes, have written music in the great tradition of Western classical music, with the failed experiments of Schoenberg and other composers of atonal music. The first of these essays contrasts Janáček and his 'ability to catch from his native Moravian air the freshest tonal harmonies, and the palpitating fragments of original and life-enhancing melody' (164) with the sterile theorizing of Schoenberg. Another essay argues that Skryabin and Szymanowski are among the greatest of twentieth century composers. Janáček, Skryabin and Szymanowski were, Scruton argues, successful for the same reason: they were always guided by what 'sounds right' rather than by what is right according to some theory of musical composition. In the course of these essays, Scruton provides a compelling explanation of why atonal music has been unable to win a substantial audience of music lovers: 'music without melody lacks the most important dimension of musical significance' (181). Consequently, it cannot provide the insight into emotion and humanity that Scruton considers so important.

The final essay explores the question of what can be salvaged from Adorno's philosophy of music. Adorno is in many ways Scruton's polar opposite: a left wing thinker who championed the music of Schoenberg. In the end, what unites them is a suspicion of popular music (though, a little surprisingly, the conservative is able to find examples of popular music that are worthy of admiration). Adorno sees popular music as

fetish, in the Marxist sense of the word. Scruton suggests that the fetish is nothing other than kitsch. The problem with popular culture is that it is shallow and avoids the deep and important questions. In the end, Scruton believes that atonal music is kitsch in this same sense.

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