

**Nick Zangwill.** *Music and Aesthetic Reality: Formalism and the Limits of Description*. Routledge 2015. 212 pp. \$145.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780415661027).

Nick Zangwill's new book, *Music and Aesthetic Reality*, offers an attempt to further defend the aesthetic realism that he is known for and to examine how a realist might explain how a listener seems to hear emotions in music. Defending Hanslick, Zangwill argues that it is not essential to the nature of music to possess, arouse, express, or represent emotion. Instead, we should understand descriptions of music that employ emotion language strictly as metaphors. Of course we are drawn to describing music in emotional terms. We cannot help it. It just *seems* right. Yet, against this Zangwill argues that this seeming rightness need not drive us toward a literal view of the relationship between music and emotions. Music is not literally sad, nor can it express sadness, nor must it arouse sadness. Zangwill defends an *aesthetic realist* account—whereby music possesses mind-independent aesthetic qualities—that cannot be literally described. It is for this reason that we are right to describe music as 'sad': because the metaphor aptly captures the aesthetic quality of the music, which evades literal description.

There is something broadly appealing about this account. As a skeptic of aesthetic realism, I began to be swayed toward Zangwill's view after reading his earlier book, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Cornell UP, 2001). *Music and Aesthetic Reality* helps to push the realist agenda further. The appeal of Zangwill's account is that it potentially offers a clear resolution to some important questions. For instance, Zangwill's account can offer a neat resolution to the 'paradox of negative emotions' (see Chapter 2, §9). Many philosophers have puzzled over why we seem to take pleasure in music that is associated with emotions that are typically painful—emotions like sadness, melancholy, or grief. But, this puzzle only arises if we think that these emotions must be actually experienced by the listener. On Zangwill's account, this is not what happens. Instead we experience some quality of the music with pleasure, which we metaphorically describe as sad or melancholic or mournful.

Additionally, Zangwill's account offers a way to respond to Susan McClary's influential and controversial claim that music is gendered (*Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). According to Zangwill (Chapter 6), it is correct of McClary to point out that traditional descriptions of music as being 'masculine' or 'feminine' are based on questionable political ideologies; but Zangwill insists that McClary is wrong to take these descriptions literally. Music is not literally gendered, but it can be described in gendered terms; and importantly, recognizing these descriptions as metaphors still allows us to reject them as tools of a patriarchal ideology.

However, despite the benefits of Zangwill's account, I still wonder if it sufficiently addresses the question: why *must* we use metaphors to describe our experience of music? If music really does possess mind-independent aesthetic qualities, then why can we not name them literally? Is it simply the contingent matter that our language for sound is so greatly impoverished when compared to our language for vision? Or is there some principled reason why we *cannot* describe the aesthetic qualities of music in anything other than metaphors? In chapter five, Zangwill seeks to address this issue and he defends what he calls the 'Essential Metaphor Thesis,' which holds that 'the aesthetic properties of music *cannot* be literally described; they *must* be described metaphorically' (95). This has an intuitive plausibility. Musical experience is richly complex, or as Zangwill puts it, '[m]ost reasonably sophisticated music has an inexhaustible or perhaps infinite aesthetic character' (100). While there is much that could be discussed here, I will focus on Zangwill's response to a criticism put

forth by Malcolm Budd, who objects to the strength of Zangwill's Essential Metaphor Thesis. Budd wonders why we cannot simply replace metaphorical descriptions for aesthetic properties with a new word. Zangwill makes two points in reply. First, Zangwill appeals to the inexhaustibility of the aesthetic character of music to suggest that the need to coin new words might go on indefinitely. Second, Zangwill worries that, even if an individual were able to coin a new word to pick out some aesthetic property by ostension, that individual would have no way of communicating that word to others and therefore to make its meaning public.

Both of these replies are disappointing. First, the inexhaustibility of the aesthetic does not halt Budd's objection, instead it gives away too much. If Zangwill is willing to concede that new words can be coined at all—indeed Zangwill says, '[f]or any particular aesthetic property of music that is metaphorically described, there could be a literal word that picked *it* out' (100)—then clearly metaphors are not essential. Second, it seems to me that there exist some cases where aesthetic properties are ostensively defined and can be communicated to others in just the way that Budd wants, *pace* Zangwill. For instance, audiophiles sometimes negatively describe certain recordings as sounding 'boxy,' which refers to recordings that overemphasize the mid-range frequencies and subsequently lack much definition in both the upper and lower frequencies. Such recordings sound as if the noise is coming from inside a box. The term 'boxy' almost certainly began as a metaphor, and yet it has entered common usage among sound engineers and aficionados to pick out a very specific quality. If this is correct, then Budd's objection seems to remain: however useful and convenient metaphorical descriptions may be, there is no in-principle reason why they must be essential.

This criticism aside, the book is very thought-provoking and any philosopher of music who wishes to develop a non-metaphorical or anti-realist account of music must contend with Zangwill. One final point of praise: one of the general difficulties in talking about the issues addressed here is that there are so many controversial and unresolved theoretical commitments in play. To argue successfully that emotional descriptions of music are metaphorical, we need an understanding of what emotions are, a plausible view of how metaphors work, and a basic understanding of music theory. Aesthetics is a challenging field because a good aesthetician needs to be broadly knowledgeable—as demonstrated here, the philosopher of music is required to have something of use to say about some of the central issues in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language—and fortunately Zangwill handles these challenges well.

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