Music and the Embodied Ear: Against Musical Purism
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This paper takes as its starting point a 2008 essay by Philip Alperson and Noel Carroll in which the authors push back against the tide of essentialism that pervades much analytic philosophy of music. This specific sort of essentialism, they point out, traces its roots back to the nineteenth century, during which “pure” or “absolute” music—instrumental music not bound to a text, program, or dramatic setting—became not only the most important form of art music in the Western tradition, but also the art form toward which all others were thought to aspire.¹ Aestheticians subsequently came to believe that analyzing pure music and our experiences of it would provide us with the necessary conditions by which to determine whether any artifact is a work of art and whether any experience is aesthetic. In other words, the essences of art and aesthetic experience were thought to be located in (the experience of) pure music.

One of the figures responsible for this essentialist attitude was German Bohemian music critic Eduard Hanslick. In his seminal 1854 work, On the Musically Beautiful, Hanslick advanced a number of ideas that still exert considerable influence on musical aesthetics. One is that pure music, because it lacks extramusical content, is an end in itself to be experienced for its own sake and, as such, is paradigmatically musical. “Of what [pure] instrumental music cannot do,” Hanslick claims, “it ought never be said that music cannot do it [...]”² One does not experience pure music in order to be moved emotionally or to gain insight into the composer’s mind or the human condition, but solely for the sake of contemplating a beautiful arrangement of tones, from which issues a feeling of disinterested pleasure.³ Since pure music is to be experienced solely for its own sake, it is wholly divorced from all of our other concerns and values—social, political, moral, historical, economic, pedagogical, etc.—and from the cultural practices and institutions in which they are embedded.⁴ According to Hanslick, then, a genuinely musical experience—an experience of music qua music—is, first, only obtainable by attending to pure music properly, and, second, radically disconnected from the rest of lived human experience.⁵

Nick Zangwill has recently defended this precise point. “Listening to music,” he concludes, “is an isolated and lonely encounter with another world, a disembodied world of beautiful sound, far from the world of human life”:

¹ Alperson and Carroll, “Mind, Music, and Morality,” 2.
² Hanslick, On the Musically Beautiful, 15.
³ Hanslick’s indebtedness to Kant’s conception of the contemplation of beauty should be obvious. Of course, unlike Hanslick, Kant placed music alongside topiary as only a tenuously fine art, as a mere “beautiful play of sensations.” See Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, §§ 51–53.
⁴ Alperson and Carroll, “Mind, Music, and Morality,” 2–3. This idea was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer, who believed that pure music stripped away everything contingent within our experience of the world to reveal the fundamental nature of reality: pure will. See Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, §52.
⁵ Since pure music was widely thought by many, including Hanslick, to be the truest and highest form of fine art, all fine art was similarly considered to be separate from mundane human existence, which is what primarily distinguishes it from folk or popular art. This view, known as aestheticism, coincided with the rise of museums and concert halls, special spaces removed from ordinary life in which fine art could be “properly” experienced and to which (nearly) all of aesthetic experience was relegated.
In my view—and it is also Hanslick’s—seeing music as a human product, as people playing instruments, achieving goals, and as historically and politically situated, is all a misunderstanding and devaluation of the awesome elevation that musical experience can be. [...] Only by receding away from the human world, from the Other, can we go beyond humanity, to a world of pure music. To humanize music is to desecrate it. Music is inhuman, and awesome because of it, like stars in the night sky.6

Zangwill presents himself in this passage as heir to Hanslick’s brand of musical purism. In what follows I resist this way of thinking about music and then sketch the beginnings of a fuller-bodied, or more humanistic, conception of our musical experiences.

Zangwill’s purism stems from the essentialist assumption that pure music fully exemplifies music’s essence. A weaker version of Zangwill’s view is widely accepted by analytic philosophers of music, namely, that pure music provides a clear and unhindered example through which to analyze music and musical experience. Unlike songs, which are mixed with poetry; pieces of program music, which are mixed with narrative fiction; or operas, musicals, and incidental music, which are mixed with drama; pure music is all and only music, unmixed with anything nonmusical. Yet Zangwill puts forward a stronger version: that listening (as if) to pure music is the only way to have a musical experience.7 That is, he believes the only genuinely musical experiences are “purely musical” ones.

Pure music is simply that: all and only music. As such, Zangwill believes that the senses other than hearing, one’s awareness of the performers and one’s fellow concertgoers, and the rest of one’s body below the neck, while certainly involved in our purely musical experiences—in that we cannot shut them off—contribute nothing worthwhile of themselves to them.8 While Zangwill believes that our other senses, social awareness, and overt bodily actions can figure integrally into the experience of sounds, that is, affect how and what we hear, he believes they have no such role within a genuine experience of music.9 In his view, music is not sound. Sounds are sensible properties of physical air vibrations, while music is comprised of the aesthetic properties of sounds.10 Following Kant, Zangwill takes aesthetic properties to be subjective: grounded upon pleasure, displeasure, or other felt response issuing from contemplation.11 12 The pleasure or displeasure we feel while contemplating the sounds we hear consequently musicalizes them—that is, transforms them into aesthetic objects.13 How they are precisely musicalized

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7 I include the parenthetical “as if” because Zangwill likely believes it possible to treat the music of, say, some operas or pieces of program music as autonomous, that is, as not integrally bound up with its nonmusical neighbors.
10 Zangwill shares this distinction with other major analytic philosophers of music, including Peter Kivy and Roger Scruton. See Kivy, Music Alone; and Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music, esp. chs. 1–2.
12 Although he is a subjectivist, Zangwill is also an aesthetic realist, and so believes that music has mind-independent aesthetic properties. See “Music, Essential Metaphor, and Private Language,” 1.
will vary from listener to listener based on their individual subjective responses. Zangwill argues that we cannot make our “exact determinate response[s]” to music known to our fellow listeners, however, because the linguistic resources available to us, be they bodily cues or verbal utterances, will only be able to give others a general sense of the individual(ized) aesthetic object we are each experiencing.\(^{14}\) As a result, in Zangwill’s view, our genuinely musical experiences are, apart from some superficially shared aspects, radically private.\(^{15}\)

Musical experiences of the sort just described would be most typically found in venues for music in the Western classical tradition. In symphony halls and opera houses, concertgoers typically sit shoulder to shoulder, facing the stage in row after row, stilly and silently listening with rapt attention to the sounds emanating from the stage, which they respond to overtly only after the performance has concluded.\(^{16}\) Zangwill argues that while these listeners may be together in the same social and physical space, each is having a private aesthetic experience if they are listening to the music properly. “[L]istening that has a social or political aspect,” or is in any way concerned with ordinary human affairs, he contends, “is not really musical listening at all, but another kind of a listening, or it is a mix of proper listening and something else.”\(^{17}\) To attend to music in any way that diverges from how concertgoers are expected to behave during a typical performance of, say, Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5, therefore, would be to have, by Zangwill’s lights, a musically deficient or “impure” experience, or perhaps even a wholly unmusical experience, of the music.

The norms regulating concertgoers’ behavior within the Western classical tradition require listeners, among other things, to refrain from distracting each other. However, concertgoers sometimes have occasion to correct other listeners (and even themselves) overtly should they transgress this norm. Someone having a coughing fit, for instance, will either be shushed or silently excuse themselves. Someone who is humming too loudly, or too vigorously tapping their toes, bobbing their heads, or “air conducting,” will be asked to restrain themselves or forced to leave. As David Byrne puts it, “Nowadays, if someone’s phone rings or a person so much as whispers to their neighbor during a classical concert, it could stop the whole show.”\(^{18}\) The classical concert hall, in other words, is an austere venue. It demands conformity to its norms so that listeners do not prevent themselves or others from having the sort of contemplative, profound, and transcendent experiences Zangwill believes they can engender.

\(^{14}\) Zangwill, “Listening to Music Together,” 385, 389. Most importantly to Zangwill’s argument in favor of this point is his observation that we describe our musical experiences using primarily metaphorical (or figurative) language, since literal language captures very little that is worthwhile in them. When we describe the music we experience in terms of, say, emotion, motion, or height, we are speaking metaphorically, since music cannot literally be happy, leaping, lofty, and so on. As such, Zangwill considers music and our musical experiences to be “literally ineffable,” which leads to his ultimate conclusion that they are private. See Zangwill, “Music, Essential Metaphor, and Private Language,” 1–2.


\(^{16}\) To be fair, the norms regulating the behavior of individuals attending jazz concerts in the bebop tradition are strongly similar to those governing Western classical music. This was partially the result of jazz musicians wanting to be taken as seriously as musicians as their classical counterparts.

\(^{17}\) Zangwill, “Listening to Music Together,” 382.

\(^{18}\) Byrne, How Music Works, 22.
Of course, this was not always how concertgoers were expected to behave. The pure mode of attending to music defended by Zangwill is historically grounded upon bourgeois norms regarding self-control and the attempt to maintain within the concert hall the class stratification that existed outside it. Prior to 1900, the rowdy audiences we now most commonly associate with roadhouses and honky-tonks would not have been all that out of place at a symphony hall or opera house—concertgoers would eat, drink, talk continually, shout, cheer, jeer, and so on. The change in social expectations that enabled the rise of purely musical listening was, as Byrne notes, likely a way “[to keep] the hoi polloi out of the new symphony halls and opera houses. [...] Music that in many instances used to be for all was now exclusively for the elite.”

Bourgeois aesthetes, in other words, came to determine that pure music was no longer fit for baser, less pure listeners. This attitude originated particularly in the German-speaking world during the second half of the nineteenth century thanks, in large part, to the influence of a number of prominent empirical scientists and music theorists. Among them was Hanslick, whose purism committed him to (among other things) the diminishment of the body’s role in aesthetic experience relative to the mind. Hanslick believed that being moved emotionally by pure music was wholly divorced from, and necessarily obstructive to, the disinterested pleasure one receives from contemplating its beautiful form. Being moved, in his view, resulted from an involuntary somatic response to auditory stimuli—from the impact of physical vibrations on the central nervous system. To limit one’s psychophysical response to the auditory stimulus, and thereby encourage a genuinely musical experience, required the cultivation of self-control. Only the uncultured, Hanslick believed, would allow themselves to be overtaken by the inner emotional movement engendered by the sounds of music, or to allow it to metastasize into outer bodily movement in the form of toe-tapping, dancing, humming, sobbing, and so on. “It is not to be denied,” he wrote, “that dance music brings about a twitching in the body, especially in the feet, of young people whose natural disposition is not entirely inhibited by the constraints of civilization.” Any such public, bodily response would certainly distract oneself and one’s fellow concertgoers from having a genuinely musical experience of the music. While the body may have been a necessary conduit for the contemplation of musical forms, in Hanslick’s view, it contributed nothing worthwhile of itself to our musical experiences. In short, one attends to music properly with one’s mind, not with one’s body.

As I have already shown, Zangwill reaches this same conclusion for similar reasons. Zangwill isolates the essence of musical experience in the way audiences within the Western classical tradition typically attend to pure music, from which he uncovers that,
at their core, genuinely musical experiences are necessarily private and potentially transcendent. Although he allows for a plurality of modes of musical attention, he nevertheless contends that attending to music in a more full-bodied way, due to its mixture of purely musical concerns with nonmusical ones, would necessarily result in an impure and, thus, deficient or unmusical experience of the music. The very attempt to publicize an experience that is by its very nature private—whether through conversation, dancing, humming along, toe-tapping, and so on—while the music is unfolding, according to Zangwill, is doomed. At the same time, it is a way of abusing the music, a way of nullifying its highest potential to transport us beyond the trappings of everyday human existence.

While Zangwill treats pure music as an end in itself, he treats musicians as mere means to that end. Musicians have the complex task of listening to themselves and each other play while keeping their place in the unfolding musical progression; they look at each other (and to the conductor) to coordinate their individual activities within their collective attempt to transport the audience in the way that Zangwill hopes to be transported. Listening, seeing, self- and other-awareness, and overt bodily action are all integrally bound up within the musician’s experience of the music they are producing. To play music, then, unlike Zangwill’s conception of listening to it purely, is to be a fully embodied, socially and physically situated being. Consequently, by Zangwill’s lights, the experience of playing music is “impure,” musically deficient when compared to the experience of listening to music purely, which strips away the particularities of one’s human existence.

The claim that a musician’s experience of the music they are playing is necessarily less musical than a properly acculturated listener’s experience of it is dubious on its face. Where Zangwill goes wrong is in assuming that, because pure music is the only genre that is all and only music, the experiences that pure music typically engenders—for listeners sufficiently acculturated to the norms of Western classical music—are the only genuinely musical ones to be had. It does not follow from the fact that so-called “impure” musical experiences contain more than what is essentially musical that they are less than fully musical. Perhaps in some cases this is correct, such as when, in *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly becomes so involved in the histrionics of his anachronistic guitar solo that the musical fabric of (what will be) Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode” unravels, making it so the high schoolers can no longer dance to it. However, lacking a principled argument to establish that holds for all cases of “impure” musical attendance, Zangwill cannot

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26 Other analytic philosophers of music share Zangwill’s essentialist attitude toward pure music without committing themselves to this purist conclusions. They recognize that the conclusions they draw from their investigations into pure music in the Western classical tradition will not necessarily generalize beyond that tradition or even beyond pure music. Jerrold Levinson and Peter Kivy, for instance, explicitly restrict the implications of their investigations into pure music to only pure music. (See Levinson, “What a Musical Work Is,” 6; and Kivy, *Music Alone*, x–xi.) Roger Scruton, conversely, makes the shift from essentialism to purism along with Zangwill: “Music is heard as though breathed into the ear of the listener from another and higher sphere: it is not the here and now, the world of mere contingency that speaks to us through music, but another world, whose order is only dimly reflected in the empirical realm. Music fulfils itself as an art by reaching into this realm of pure abstraction and reconstituting there the movements of the human soul. Only through a culture of [purely musical] listening can this transformation occur […].” Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 489.
reasonably assert that the wide variety of “impure” modes of attending to music necessarily produce “deficient” or “unmusical” experiences.

If I am correct that a plurality of modes of musical attention is indeed conducive to genuinely musical experiences, then Zangwill has misidentified privacy and transcendence as comprising the core of our genuinely musical experiences. An experience of music, even of pure music in the Western classical tradition, could be public or mundane and not be less musical as a result. Whether the various genuinely musical experiences available to us do indeed have a common essence remains an open question. I have my doubts. However, I will set them aside for the present to give myself space to sketch a better way to conceive of “the musical” than Zangwill’s purist conception does.

Zangwill’s purism blinds him to the fact that musical performances are dramatic in the sense that they involve actions on a stage in addition to sounds in our ears (or music in our minds). To attend to those actions visually need not result in a less than musical experience because those actions are themselves musical. To play music is to translate the salient musical features of a notated, recorded, or extemporaneously created musical work —such as melody, harmony, rhythm, melancholy, joy, and so on—into bodily action, resulting in the production of musical sounds or, by Zangwill’s lights, sounds musicalized by our felt responses to them. In the process the musicians’ bodies are similarly musicalized—that is, the musicians embody many of the aesthetic properties we hear in the sounds. As a result, many of a piece of music’s aesthetic properties can be received through vision as well as audition.

Chia-Jung Tsay’s has demonstrated that, when asked to judge which of a number of performers won a given music competition, “both expert and novice listeners privilege visuals above sound, the very information that is explicitly valued and reported as core to decision making in the domain of music.” Additionally, she reports, “Professional musicians and competition judges […] arrive at different winners depending on whether visual information is available or not.” Her experimental data suggest at the very least that our felt responses to, and corollary aesthetic judgments of, musical performances are much more centrally influenced by vision that Zangwill allows. Tsay’s results corroborates research commented upon by Vincent Bergeron and Dominic Lopes, especially with respect to the expressive properties we hear in music. Rather than necessarily degrading music, they conclude that the mixture of auditory and non-auditory modes of musical attention, in certain cases, could very well enhance our musical experiences. The norms governing classical music performance seem to substantiate this claim. Specifically, the conductor directs not only the performers on stage, but also the listeners to focus their attention upon certain aesthetic properties of the instrumental voice or voices being played. From watching the conductor alone one could get a sense of what is going on in the music.

If playing and conducting music are both ways of embodying some of its salient aesthetic properties, then so to is dancing to music. In a dance routine set to music, the

28 Hanslick himself recognizes that it is the performer, rather than “the work,” that is responsible for our emotional responses to music. See On the Musically Beautiful, 48–49.
dancer musicalizes her body. At some moments her movements and gestures reflect the music’s rhythm, melody, or expression; at others they may function as a counterpoint to them. To move away from Western high art, to attend to music in many folk traditions is to dance to it. With swing and house music, audiences are expected to dance vigorously; with soul and funk, they groove; with punk, they slam dance; and so on. Moreover, for some musical traditions, the mystical states Zangwill attributes exclusively to purely musical listening are instead achieved through ritualized dancing, which is full-bodied and inextricably social, issuing from overt, cooperative action rather than the immobile contemplation that Zangwill prescribes.

In the preceding discussion I have argued that musical purism, as exemplified by Zangwill, is based on unfounded assumptions regarding the natures of music and our musical experiences. In focusing predominantly on pure music in the Western classical tradition, musical purists and other essentialist philosophers of music implicitly privilege Western high art music, and the norms and conventions regulating how individuals should attend to it. Genuinely musical experiences, however, are numerous and diverse, engendered by various modes of attention and by music from every tradition, and, as such, may lack a common essence. The search for essences, therefore, may impede our progress toward understanding music’s significance, not to human life, but to human lives.

References


