What it is? A question on the derivation of musical meaning

Michael Laurence Woods*
Department of Philosophy, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract
The article begins by looking at the general context in which the concept of meaning has been presented as residing traditionally within the notions of reference, symbol and representation and specifically whether such implicitly ontological distinctions apply to music. The Viennese revolt against this as expressed in the writings and compositions of Schoenberg, as well as the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein, indicate a possible derivation of musical meaning. Schoenberg replies to Kolisch’s analysis of the Third String Quartet by suggesting that musicological analysis may help with technical indications but cannot help people see what the composition is. The question is: how does music have the effect which it has on us? The author suggests that a mere empirical analysis, musicological or scientific, will result in failure as it considers the composition merely as an object with properties. Music is, rather, an active meaning-giving operation in which temporality, as a result of the imagination, brings the composition into a unity. The imagination, the “I-Thinking art concealed in the depths of the human soul" infuses apprehension such that the “I" adopts an affective disposition to the world in terms of mood and intransitive feeling. Schoenberg’s Third String Quartet expresses this precisely.

Keywords: philosophy of music; Schoenberg; Wittgenstein; time consciousness

I

The contemporary disease is a moral one, Schoenberg may be said to imply in both his cultural critiques and if you read into them, his musical compositions. His essential argument is that hearing is not listening so that when he is asking what music is, he is posing the question whether it is passive sonic acceptance or radical tonal challenge. Is it a lazy submission to noise or an essential responsiveness to constructed sound? Music, in whatever form, is so pervasive in contemporary life that we are faced with the dichotomy of it as being either sheer inert entertainment or a sensually demanding intrigue which calls our very existence into question. Is it

*Correspondence to: Michael Laurence Woods, Department of Philosophy, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Email: mldwoods@yahoo.co.uk

©2010 Michael Laurence Woods. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 2, 2010 DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.4638
the phenomenon of background soundtrack or the object of serious meaning?

The question of meaning has been with us since at least Plato, that is to say for at least 3,000 years. Briefly, its essence is how *relata*, the human possibilities of language, perception and creation, derive their signification from, crudely put, something which is not themselves, “namely” the world. Plato argued, for example, that there was a “World of Forms”, a universe of conceptual perfection which bestowed, in its perfection, a minimal intelligibility to human beings in their shadowy misapprehensions. For him, perfection resided in a transcendental *stasis*, in the unchallengeable world of mathematics, for example, or what he called The Good, the source of all truth. Our world, the abode of humans, is a world of change, decay and disintegration where the best that is allowed us is just a glimmer of the perfection towards which the soul can merely strive.

My point here is not to recount something that has been commented on countless times, but to suggest that we have the beginning of a theory of meaning which essentially consists in the notion of a relationship, an ontological difference between two different kinds of phenomena from which one of them (perception, for example) derives and crucially depends on the other for significance. And Plato was probably the first to recognise the difficulty in this characterisation when he accepted, in *The Parmenides*, that there was a logical error central to his Theory of Forms. Accepting that if we apply a common characteristic from the World of Forms to an apparently disparate group of objects to make conceptual sense of them, and thus categorise them as being what they are (i.e. to say apply a unifying principle or, if you like, gather them together into a singularity), this principle of categorisation must be included in that group of things which it in itself is intended to explain.

Meaning as something which springs from a relationship between ontologically distinct phenomena began to falter in its coherence as an explanation. Aristotle famously entered the debate, using what is called the Third Man Argument as the basis for rejecting Plato’s Theory of Forms, which he eventually regarded as being untenable. But in spite of the apparent logical regression implicit in the argument the hold on the notion of ontological difference and hence the concept of “relationship” between different “things” as the source of meaning, seemed to codify itself, philosophically and intellectually in general, as being the only way out of a patent impasse. The question was now, of course, how to resolve it logically because the rhapsodic days of the declamatory poetic theodicy of the very ancient Greeks had long gone. Rational explanation of the relationships between phenomena was the navigational course upon which the human mind and disposition was bent.

So for something to mean something it had to refer to something else: human life in the Middle Ages, and subsequently, had meaning only in reference to God’s creation and consisted in its deficiency, evanescence and striving after fulfilment, For example, just in the same way that the shadows on the wall of Plato’s Cave were cast by figurines passing back and forth in front of a fire, itself, in turn, a meagre imitation of the brilliant and perfect light of the Sun, a metaphor for the ultimate source of Truth and now, for most religions, Salvation.

Contemporary human meaning may often reside in the glib sophistication of technological invention and its (necessarily) practical application in which it may be supposed that the consequence is the emptying of all human experience and even, according to some, self-obliteration.

Our essential imperfection, and hence that of our experience has historically, philosophically speaking, been the source of a craving for a transcendence which is realisable only outside of ourselves. Our meaning, assuming we have any, derives from the outside, from that which we are not and cannot be. D.H. Lawrence (for example, see his poem “Mountain Lion”) was of the conviction that perfection, specifically animal perfection, resided in the absence of self-consciousness. Human beings exhibit, in their very nature, a self-consciousness which is fundamentally destructive not merely to natural life in general but to each other: the Ego, and this may be traced back to Descartes, is the ultimate source of obliteration and hence of meaning. Animals don’t make ontological connections between things to establish meaning. There is obviously a communication of sorts but not signification which demands a determination of ontological relationships: for some thing to make sense, in the human world, it must refer to another kind of thing. Sense comes from reference.
But my intentions here are not to extend beyond the reach of musical meaning: simply to give my argument a more general context in which I am drawing into question whether that musical meaning is derivative and whether the notions of reference, symbol and representation can still apply much as they may be said to apply to human life in general. Are such notions, stemming from an ancient ontology of relational difference, still the *sine qua non* of musical significance as philosophers such as Cooke and Langer argue, or is there something else taking place?

The question I am asking is this: is what they, and many others, are saying adequate to the musical experience of the lived human life? I appreciate that there is a variety of musical forms many of which have their own import and disclosures which demand, in their uniqueness, quite specific interpretations. But I wish to restate my case in the following way: Schoenberg asked the question of music: what is *it*? Perhaps we should ask what he meant by asking that question for, after all, we already know what music is. So what is the precise existential or moral dimension that his question seems to imply?

Ludwig Wittgenstein, himself a contemporary of Schoenberg and a fellow-Viennese, could be described as a master of voluble philosophical silence: his initial (and in his lifetime, sole) publication began with the strange assertion “The world is all that there is” and concluded with the even stranger assertion “Whereof we cannot speak thereof we must be silent”.

He was from an intensely musical family and his brother, Paul, was an internationally renowned pianist who lost his right arm in the trenches of the First World War. He, having survived the experience, Maurice Ravel (among others) wrote a concerto, in a dedication to him, for the left-hand. Listening to surviving recordings of his performances of it leave an impression of astonishing musical vision and virtuosity.

Brahms and Mahler were regular visitors to the Wittgenstein’s lavish house in Vienna. Notwithstanding the wealth of the family, which is well-documented, and the suicide of three of his brothers, he decided on a life of a relinquishment of wealth and ease (which may have been castigated by him and others as dis-ease). He embarked on an asceticism whereupon he chose, eventually, philosophy as an escape from the moral vacuum that the crumbling Hapsburg Empire had become, saturated with corruption and greed which Karl Kraus diagnosed in such a devastating way in his writings.

Much as Yeats had deplored the “greasy fingers in greasy tills” of the Irish after separation from the British Empire and the disingenuous ignominy that was its expression, Kraus remorselessly exposed the duplicity of Viennese cultural life with its pretentiousness and superficiality: style had become a way of life, empty in its pointless cacophony, vacuous in the distorted self-presentation of its worth. He was convinced that art, which had become the hollow embellishment of what was essentially a spiritual evacuation in an imperial twilight, had to be revivified as a moral fortress of both challenge and dignity. Its strength and meaning had to come from within itself, not from an empty posturing to a crumbling, increasingly demented world which lay outside. It could not reside in a false world of ornamental beauty where there was chaos and human killing on a mass scale. The strength of music and art in general had to lie in reference to its own structure.

The inventive, almost inexplicable strangeness, of his *Logico-Tractactatus Philosophicus* showed, rather than said, that what cannot be propositionally demonstrated must be passed over in silence. By that he meant that there is a specific logical relationship (which he called “picturing”) between language and the world which is demonstrable, in empirical certitude, for example. Propositions mirror facts and hence obtain their meaning. Publicly expressed they become verifiable statements.

But there is much more to it than that. The music of Vienna in which he was immersed was not a world of propositional verifiability any more than was the existence of God or judgements about the nature of human barbarity. The sense of such discourse, even though it perfors has a reference to a supposed or imagined, or actual state of affairs, derived from within itself. Musical expression did not picture facts: its discourse was its own mirror.

Schoenberg was suffused in this cultural maelstrom and was determined to create a musical space in its midst, but one which could not continue the tradition of German Romanticism (although his earlier *Verklärte Nachte*, for example, is clearly Wagnerian in style) and his furious
arguments with Mahler testified not so much to a compositional rift, but to a volcanic change in what music now meant. This is not far removed from Wittgenstein’s radical departure from traditional philosophy as it was being practiced. A major shift was taking place: philosophy and music were to have a new moral meaning, a meaning that was to be rooted from within.

Common to both was the necessity to appeal to the logic of composition and creation and their common conviction was, at least initially, that rational structure was the vehicle of creative liberation. This is the great paradox of both: that convention and tradition are ultimately the sources of new revolutionary truths which in themselves will become conventional or even trivialised. Whatever the case, ancient, trodden paths cannot be worn time and again. Old values have become valueless vacuities.

Such was the case with music, certainly in the Vienna of Schoenberg’s time. The vivacity of any cultural phenomenon becomes stylised and eventually derelict: the sterilisation of style emulating itself as empty mannerism compels, among some individuals, a resolution to overthrow what has become morally useless such that meaning has to be located elsewhere. What was once the energy of human compulsion has become so dissipated that rejection or even wrath of one form or another, political or aesthetic, will fill the swirling, pointless void. In this particular account, aesthetics becomes its own non-aesthetics and in the case of music, was being torn apart.

How was this possible and how could an aesthetical musical logic or an apparent calculative endeavour on the part of seemingly obsessive composers supplant a musical culture that was almost by definition rapturous, elegant and refined? Musical appreciation and pleasure began to be dilapidated and the shine of outward social reference, traditionally associated with musical composition and joyous events, was being replaced by an incomprehensible moral chamber-music asceticism.

Musical meaning was in a state of disorder: logical structure and morality—in the midst of Hapsburg moral and imperial dissolution—were beginning to take over. Schoenberg, and his students Webern and Berg, began to reinvent the meaning of musical meaning, itself an event of public revulsion and repudiation: and the meaning that his (and their) music consisted of in its performance, if it consisted of anything at all, had nothing to do with anything outside of itself, even caused public riots.

The old Western ontological separation of signifier and what is signified and the indignity or fury that people suffer at concerts or cinemas or other public events, continues to haunt us. It might be thought that music is just music and if you don’t like it just leave it alone and go home.

But it’s not like that: it has meaning. The question is: What is the meaning of its meaning and why, like the Irish theatre of Synge and Yeats, or more recently Samuel Beckett, for example, does an apparently harmless event cause such uproar? What had been once the stage of light entertainment for the elegant petit-bourgeoisie had become the accusatory theatre of moral vacuity, not to mention hypocrisy: the charm of the Viennese waltz was the Devil’s. The Blue Danube, that great glorification of grace and polish, was written weeks after a catastrophic military defeat of Austria–Hungary by Prussia at Sadowa. An observer noted that the phenomenon of the waltz described its “sweet trance” and attendant champagne glasses as a godless beckoning us to lust and inhibition.\(^1\)

Such festivities were regarded by Schoenberg and Wittgenstein as miserable and empty delusions.

Because in the music, and the challenge of art in general, there is an implicit accusation of corruption to its audience and an insult to the tawdry ease of social acceptance which had become the staple of bourgeois laziness and dissipation, certainly in the Vienna of Schoenberg’s and Wittgenstein’s time. Their throwing down the gauntlet to complacency was unequivocal. As Schoenberg wrote in the preface to his Theory of Harmony: “It’s easy to have a ‘world view’ if you only view what is pleasant and you don’t deign to glance at the rest.”\(^2\)

It’s all very well to give (admittedly) rigorous musicological analyses but do they ever get to the point? What is it that is being analysed? And the implicit accusation is: this analysis (of this piece) is precisely what it is not it pretends to be. Schoenberg was a composer (as well as being an accomplished painter) and not an architect of sound. His expressive life was specifically his own and nothing outside of itself.
How is this to be construed in terms of musical meaning? The argument reverts back to Plato and Aristotle, as mentioned above, St. Augustine’s distinction of designative and non-designative meaning up to and beyond Frege’s distinction between sense and reference. And the question is whether the meaning of music, if it can be spoken of as such, has a palpable experiential effect, which it clearly does, is whether that effect derives from something outside of itself in order to have that effect.

What is music, then, and where does it derive its meaning from?

II

The effect music may have on us and the reason for this may be summed up by a letter which Arnold Schoenberg wrote to Rudolf Kolisch who had himself written an exhaustive analysis of set structure in the Third String Quartet. He said this:

You have gone to a great deal of trouble, and I don’t think I’d have had the patience to do it. But do you think anyone is better off for knowing it? I can’t quite see it that way. My firm belief is that for a composer who doesn’t yet quite know his way about with the use of series it may give him some idea of how to set about it—a purely technical indication of the possibilities of getting something out of the series. But this isn’t where the aesthetics reveal themselves, or if so, only incidentally. I can’t utter too many warnings against overrating these analyses, since after all they only lead to what I have always been dead against: seeing how it is done: whereas I have always helped people to see: what it is!3

What is it then, it may be asked?

The labours of musicologists, musicians, scientists and practitioners of every persuasion to explain “what it is” has invariably been fraught, contentious and often bitter: after Hanslick’s (and Nietzsche’s) famous turn from Wagner both for different reasons but expressing their contempt for the composer’s espousal of what was considered to be a non-music in its supposed dependence on extra-musical elements. He was criticised for this (Veit Hanslick) as being a foolish poet in Wagner’s Die Meistersinger. Hanslick’s Leipzig formalism in musical analysis and his insistence on the purity of musical form sat uneasily with those who claimed that musical meaning derived, in the main, from elements outside of itself, the so-called “referentialist” theory of the nature of musical significance, as opposed to the austerity of formalist theories which sometimes seemed to verge on mathematical abstractions in their rarified expositions. Perhaps we might remember Pythagoras as perhaps the first precursor of these theorists of the synonymity of music and harmonious arithmetical relationships.

The problem of music’s emotional effect, however, never seemed to go away. So between formalism and referentialism there are those who have incorporated many variegated further areas into their investigations, such as psychological, anthropological, expressionist and symbolist ideas to present what might be thought to be a fuller explanation of the power of the musical effect. And that is what Schoenberg in his letter to Kolisch was insistent on. It is all very well and painstakingly laborious to explain how precisely the effect is achieved for the musicologist. But for the composer, much more crucial is the question: what is it I have done, and for the listener, what is my subjective contribution to the construction and interpretation of a musical composition, already “articulated” by the composer?

Schoenberg, although clearly appreciative of Kolisch’s musicological labours, rejects any presumption such analyses may have about its capacity to unfold musical meaning and to reach to the essence of “What it Is”.

(a) What can be the starting point for an investigation of musical significance, it may be asked, other than the score of the composition and its performance? In it is demarcated the beginning and end of the composition, a codification of tones and their intervallic silences along with rhythm and pitch in a complex code of dots, lines, bars and spaces brought to life in its interpretation. Perhaps, also, the intentions of the composer are indicated, expressed in or otherwise inferred from the score by the musicologist or performer. But before analytic reflection can begin on the apparent significance of such an investigation into the composition’s prior
aesthetic organisation and its execution in a performance it might serve us better to start with the subjective experience of the music itself, an experience of which expertise is not a condition. The question I would like to ask is: what is already there before reflection begins and constitutes a presupposition of such reflection? This in turn, I suggest, might lead us to a better approach to the effect of music and an understanding of Schoenberg’s question: What is It?

This approach could lead us to achieving a direct and primitive contact with music as it is “lived”: a direct description of the musical experience as it is, without appealing to the musicological origins of the composition and the empirical analyses which the musicologist may be able to provide.

At the outset I would like to suggest that my experience of music is not the outcome of numerous causal agencies which determine my emotional or psychological response to a piece of music, an “object” considered to be susceptible to, and giving itself to, rigorous analysis. We must begin with the reawakening of the basic musical experience of which musicology is the second-order expression.

This requires us to suspend our presupposition that the piece of music is foremost an object with properties, which is to say that we cannot take for granted the act of consciousness through which music constitutes itself and begins to exist for me. In this sense a composition is not an object which is contingently “out there” and present for my perusal and examination. I wish to use the expression “composition” in a stronger sense as meaning that it is fundamentally though not solely my composition which arises out of an act of my consciousness.

Every schematisation of a musical composition is abstract and derivative, and while the score may seem to be a symbolic or codified map of the musical terrain, what is primary is the experience of the terrain itself which is then represented in symbolic form. In other words the apprehension of the composition is an active meaning-giving operation which may be said to hold a sequence of disparate tones into an indivisible unity of meaning a priori, i.e. in advance of its concrete representation in a score or performance. And since, in the apprehension of a musical composition, our thoughts on it, ultimately expressed as judgements, are carried out in a temporality which is in flux and in which we are trying to seize in its unitary character. This is to apprehend the meaning of a composition: to impose a definitive unity on its essentially elusive nature. In this way, the experience of music is to grasp what it is for us, before any musicological schematisation of its properties in relation to each other in which the music is reduced to being the mere correlative of knowledge “about” it. It is what I live, not what I think.

The experience of the composition does not merely hold it as an object for aesthetic apprehension and appreciation but is that which consists of producing, in an act of spontaneous unification, a pre-conscious determination which is entirely ante-predicative. This cannot be clarified by musicological analysis.

In this way, musical comprehension must be distinguished from an intellectual traveller’s guide to the tonal landmarks of a composition. It does not consist of the enumeration of its inter-related properties. Rather, it is a unique disposition towards its development in time which is to say that its unity, and therefore its meaning, is the result of a synthetic act of consciousness.

So far as the effect music may be said to have on us, this manner of disposition towards its unfolding in time requires us to apprehend it in a certain way. For example, our reaction towards a piece of music may be expressed in excitement, boredom or exasperation, emotive states which are not contingently related to a musical object and susceptible of a causal explanation. Such states express a significance, the adoption of an unpremeditated position which is already being filled out in affective apprehension, i.e. a specific manner in which the musical composition is apprehended, the conjunction of listener and composition in an indissoluble synthesis. I shall return to the affective nature of apprehension later.

(b) The composition is that which is not only composed in artistic creation but in its a priori construction by the listener who is thus a necessary condition for its significant realisation. It is the listener who brings its meaning into being in an act of disclosure. The
composition, therefore, has a twofold source of origin: the piece itself as well as the act of its temporal unfolding by the listener. Both are the mutually necessary conditions of understanding “What it Is”.

The power of music must be construed as being more than a concatenation of aural physical elements, themselves essential but accidentally related, but which cannot be uniquely transformative as a composition which affects us in the way that it does. When Schoenberg referred to what it is, he was talking of something other than that which is materially there and transcends that necessary materiality in its fundamentally essential physical construction, however sophisticated the interpretation by musicologists and others may be. What is that which is above and beyond the physically evident? What are we doing when we seek to express it?

It is because we are aware that there is something more, that the representation of a physically connected sound series makes a transcendent comporting experience possible. How does this take place? Given the finite nature of musical materials, that is to say of sonorous matter and its necessary recurrence and repetition either in the factual (but retained) past of the musical event at once evanescent yet at the same time held fast to what happens is this: in the elusively compelling “now” of the discreet apprehension of disparityness or in the anticipative possible nature of its resolution, time unfolds in the experience and makes the experience possible, being its necessary and indispensable condition. Time and its affective representation is the key to the mystery of the musical experience. But I shall come to that presently.

(c) As, well as, the musicological interpretation of what is going on in a piece of music there is also its scientific-empirical description and that “What it Is” can be discovered by an analysis of, for example, its audio/physical components. Fundamentally it has been said that sound, the stuff of music, is as calculably measurable as any Cartesian substance, “out there”, occupying a spatio-temporal nexus and physically apart from us as thinking things. The composition of a piece of music concerns the (presumably intelligent, which is to say goal-directed) organisation of the stuff itself, its weight, amplification, pitch, frequency and duration. This can be scientifically analysed into electrical impulses, oscillation and further vibrational and acoustic quantification. The full implementation of electronic apparatus will, presumably, be brought to bear in its registration on electronically produced data and the digitally faithful reproduction of the entire sonic event which in turn impinges on the nervous system.

This is then said to initiate an affective response or an emotion which is additional to and outside our apprehension of the music itself: it is a new experience in relation to the phenomena of immediacy, memory and anticipation. The question is not how emotional responsiveness is possible but that it is simply an isolated fact which is the end result of a causal nexus and which begins in the sonic event.4

But this pathological series of connections, as yet, and taken in their scientific and technological bearing, still has no musical meaning. These occurrences have all taken place in time but they are not yet temporal, an event of understanding without which there can be no apprehension of what the occasion is about. It is therefore evident that the listener, which is to say the attentive, musically intelligent human being, implicitly accepts that the sonic patterns of pitches, whatever their acoustic organisation are necessarily but not crucially determinable for the musical experience and it is precisely this experience that the listener (presumably) is there to attend to and, further, to derive pleasure from.

So there are two principles of musical identity running together here, as it were: firstly, the acoustic presentation of sets of sounds which are always susceptible to technically quantifiable assessment. These will nonetheless be variable (and this is where evaluative judgement comes into play, peripherally or even essentially) in relation to discernible and necessary transformations which will need to take place. That is to say acoustics will be drawn, interpretively, into music: the technician fills out the tonal field for the listener in all his capacity. The listener may be aware of sheer pleasure, discomfort or surprise and may hear an inestimable number, possibly, of tonic distortions which may also lead, in extremis, to annoyance and even outrage.
Secondly, the musicologist may accept the validity of this psycho-physical or technical-acoustical examination or at least not be unduly disturbed by it insofar as it has no specific relevance to his own empirical investigative concern. He will accept sounds as tones and analyse their accidental if goal-directed interconnectedness while presupposing such unreflective concepts as unity, succession and affective response.

It must be said, however, that the exact interpretation of acoustical impressions belongs to musical cognition, reveling, perhaps, in the beauty of its spontaneous acceptance and the universal capacity of the aesthetic imagination to be at once essentially critical and affective. That is, rather than being a passive receptor or a disinterested collector of detail, the listener instead senses and "composes" the exuberance of what is given in sound, time and space. And this will demand musical intelligence, the presumed disposition of a human being for whom temporality particularly is of the utmost and obvious significance.

But what is it that comes into play regarding temporal musical intelligence? Is it a receptive passivity to a causal sonic event or do we have to know the score to be able to listen to its interpretation in performance? What is the pre-reflective contribution to the imaginative act to which neither the scientist nor the musicologist, although taking it for granted, cannot raise as a fundamental thematic question?

III

Time can be understood in a number of ways in relation to the musical composition:

(1) The score of a composition, or its material sign, is in world time and as such is subject to ageing, disintegration and destruction. This score can be the original of many copies of it as well as any tapes or recordings of the composition.

(2) The performance of a composition takes time: this can be understood in the following, relatively trivial, way: we can measure, objectively, the time it has taken for a composition to be performed. For example, there is a considerable difference in the length of time it took Toscanini to conduct Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony compared to, say, Von Karajan.

(3) As well as taking time, a composition presents time: this can be understood in two ways: firstly, it can be understood designatively or programmatically in which, for example, Mahler’s Second Symphony has as its programme the passing on from the time of human history and its events to death, judgement and resurrection; secondly, it can be understood as immediately presentative in which such phenomena as beginning and end, continuity and interruption, simultaneity and succession are evoked.

I just mention these aspects of time en passant for they have no particular relevance to my purpose which is to examine a composition in its chronological unfolding, as being temporally synthesised in the listener’s pre-reflective inner sense in such a way that such an unfolding is an act involving perception, retention and anticipation. This results in the affective holding together in consciousness of the composition as a unity. In effect, the composition presents itself as a wordless argument which weaves its way through and is constituted by time, the sine qua non of its possibility as a unity.

I shall outline the experience of a musical composition in two distinct, but related ways: its temporal constitution by and in the pre-reflective synthesising act of the listener; and the evocation of time in the composition itself. These are at once the subjective and objective aspects of the same phenomenon: a succession of tones is taken up in a subjective synthesis in such a way that it is constituted as an affective unity. This unity objectively exhibits or evokes time in having the necessary characteristics of beginning and end, for example, or continuity and interruption. The object and the experience are therefore two distinguishable aspects of one, unitary phenomenon.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant demonstrated that time is not merely the pure form of inner sense, by means of which inchoate impressions are taken up into intelligible or potentially intelligible order by submitting to a successive-ness, but that, being brought to bear upon experience through the productive imagination, objectivity as such is possible. For Kant, therefore, time is not merely a measurable flux which is “out there” but is the indispensable and fundamental condition by means of which “out there”
and hence, correlatively, subjectivity and ultimately objectivity, are possible at all. Adapting this general account to the experience of music we can see that, once it is accepted, it will follow that time is not merely something which music is “in”, in the sense that music takes time, but that music is temporally constituted.

All our musical experience, and experience in general, arranges itself in terms of before and after because temporality, in Kantian terms, is the form taken by inner sense or “inner necessity”. The musical composition in its existence can have no external or contingent attribute without its being apprehended in its entirety so that an analysis in terms of its external features can at best allude to the temporal nature of apprehension itself.

Musical “before” and “after” constitutes a predisposition in which the listener spontaneously takes up and hears either a tonal succession or chordal simultaneity. This act is the basis of the unity of the composition and hence its individuality. The progression of a piece of music cannot be a procession of tones which disappears into the past and inexorably waits for an indeterminate future. Its unfolding expresses, for example, a melody which is a unitary and structured phenomenon which arises from the listener’s relation to it. So that, what is past and future in this tonal succession is already in a melodic and affectively coherent present.

The question is: how is the experience of a present musical event possible? There are three “moments” in this:

(1) The perception of an immediately given particular, for example a melody. The opening measures of Brahms’ Romance op. 118 No. 5 the upper voice of which, on the face of it, looks like a descending F-Major scale. But what we are hearing is not the note F, then the note E, then the note D, and so on (however, these might be physically/acoustically represented) but rather, what we are hearing is the opening melody to the Romance. If we were listening to a succession of discreet tones which constitute an abstraction called the descending scale of F the Romance as a composition, and in particular its opening melody, would be identifiable neither as composition nor melody.

The phenomenal present must be distinguished from what is factually present: empirically speaking, a pitch of a particular frequency and intensity is struck in a given time to be succeeded by another pitch struck at a subsequent time. But such an interpretation cannot account for our experience of music which consists, at least in part, of our associative capacity to perceive a melody unfolding of which this tone, sounding now, is a constituent part. In other words it is the melody, not the tone, which has a logical and experiential priority.

(2) “When a temporal Object has expired”, according to Husserl, “when its actual duration is over, the consciousness of the Object, now past, by no means fades away, although it no longer functions as perceptual consciousness, or better, perhaps as impressional consciousness. To the ‘impression’, ‘primary remembrance’ or as is said, retention is joined”.6

What this means is that the retended object, the just sounded tone, is modified by the actually present sensations of the object. Retention is a form of memory and is responsible for the relationships we make within a composition which confer upon it its identity: in this way one discreet tonal event is synthesised with those linked with it so that I am conscious of the melody and the unified totality of the composition itself.

(3) The third aspect of synthesis is what something like what I have been calling (with Kant) “anticipation”. Unlike retention it is fundamentally indeterminate so that, except in the case of certainty in repetition, that which is to come cannot be ascertained from what is now given. And yet we cannot help actively anticipating what is to come even though we may not be fully conscious of this. On the basis of what has gone before, for example, from a familiarity with the style of the composition, through familiar resolution of given tensions, through rhythmic consistency, and so on, we limit the possibilities and thus fill out the future by means of anticipation.

Musical apprehension, then, requires not just the presence of the present, but a presence of the past and of the future. Otherwise music can appear as
so many instances of "now" tones which have no temporal character and could not occur in sequence. The very notion of musical progression implies a past and a future. It does not consist of a psychic recall of what has been but is a retention which leads to a compelling reinterpretation of the present experience and therefore persists in the present.

The future or the progression of a musical piece towards its telos occurs in the same way that the musical retention surges into present apprehension and in so doing reconstitutes it. The future is the openness of possible resolutions so that the musical apprehension is at once an absorption of the past and an anticipation of its possible direction which reforms and restructures the immediacy of perception. The temporal apprehension of the musical composition is its deployment in consciousness and is immanent to it even though past (retention), present (apprehension) and future (anticipation) cannot have their being in the same sense. Musical apprehension does not posit a setting-apart of me, the listener, and the composition as object in musicological analysis but is inherent to the unfolding of the music itself in a synthetic act.

This is what Kant called the art of imagination. Considered in terms of musical style it traces in advance a schema of what is to come so that the future emerges into the present and re-forms itself into a past which re-constructs apprehension either confirming or frustrating our anticipated resolution. This again becomes a new set of possible resolutions the infinitude of which is limited by style (even in atonal music or jazz improvisation).

In this way, musical time, in our a priori experience of it, is not a sequence of objective positions through which we pass (... and then, and then, and then . . .), but a mutable presence which both moves away from us and emerges towards us. In this I am not an observer but a constitutive listener. I am a composer in the act of apprehending the composition.

Yeats asked,

\[ \text{O body swayed to music,} \]
\[ \text{O brightening glance,} \]
\[ \text{How can we know the dancer from the dance?} \]

We may follow this by asking how we can tell the listener from the music and we can say that musical time is the listener and the listener is musical time. Music and our being conscious of it are one and same. The very apprehension of music is a synthesis constantly in the process of "composition" so that to understand a composition is always to construct it and to constitute it and bring about its immediacy in a synthesis, the meaning-giving act. Its meaning is its affective constitution in temporal consciousness, a unique structure without which there can be no composition.

IV

Is it possible to find a place for feelings and therefore value judgements within this account of temporal consciousness?

Leonard Myer bases an evaluative theory of music on an aspect of temporal synthesis which I have been calling (with Kant) "anticipation". He puts forward the proposition that the more probable an element in a piece of music, the less information it carries and the less valuable it is. I would like to explain this briefly.8

Speaking of "designative" and "embodied" meanings he broadly alludes to a distinction made by St. Augustine but in a way in which neither distinction is originally made or assumes predominance. Both appear to be symbiotic insofar as the designative functions (but not exclusively) gesture towards apparently extraneous (potential) experiences whilst the embodied meanings fall back in upon their own immanence. Both, therefore, appear to operate in a round-dance of mutual signification where the meaning of a musically successive trajectory is created by the thwarting of tonal development. Hence the greater the surprise in the growth of the musical idea, the more intense and therefore the more valuable the experience is. It is this which is constitutive of the musical meaning itself.

The implication of this is of course that the more obvious the trajectory of the composition the less information and therefore meaning it carries. Complexity of development and the ensuing frustration of expectations leads through, initially, an apparent auditory labyrinth. Given sufficient information and presumably the musical capacity to make it intelligible the composition is eventually understood, the exit from the maze having
been reached. This has presumably been appreciated and the experience enjoyed although what should happen on multiple hearings (does the music become tiresome because the originally fresh musical jumps and traps have become banal?) is a complex question. To a certain extent an apparently sonic manifold but with a clearly implicit auditory telos has to make sense. And if it doesn’t it may simply reflect on our musical intelligence, our incapacity to apprehend aesthetic value delivered through information theory or an unawareness of what we are supposed to be doing when we listen to music. There is, in the avoidance of such problems as these, a universe of discourse of musical style with which we are expected to be familiar so that a multitude of surprises doesn’t amount to complete incoherence. That way out, however, is nothing more than question-begging.

In sum, then: given the pattern of expectation which a musical composition creates with its inherent tensions, the more obvious the resolution of these tensions, the more immediate the satisfaction which the music yields and the poorer its value. But in order to ameliorate the possibility of the inevitable frustration of one’s expectations, we must, for Myer, become acquainted with style which constitutes the universe of discourse within which musical meanings arise. In this way we are relieved of spontaneous apprehension: we are supposed to check style (spontaneously, I would imagine) and then project a structure through a foreclosure of certain possibilities. In this way, music connotes, or even embodies, objectless feelings and again we are confronted by the compartmentalisation of a human being whose specific areas of being are dissipated in unique areas of interest. Such a procedure of “matching” response-theory cannot adequately account for complex music, such as serial music, nor can it explain the persistence of simple melodies. Moreover, based on a naïve psychological interpretation of musical expectation, the theory gives insufficient weight to musical context and ignores not merely the role of perception and retention in the musical experience but its affective dimension.

I have described musical apprehension as a synthesis which does not consist of the enumeration of its inter-related properties, but as reflecting a manner of disposition towards the unfolding of a composition in time. Our reaction towards the music may be expressed in various affective states which are not contingently related to a musical object and susceptible of a causal explanation. Rather, they express a significance which is the spontaneous adoption of a “regard”; an unpremeditated attentiveness which is already being filled out in apprehension. Emotion is not merely the consciousness of physiological disturbance, if at all. For Husserl consciousness is both being aware of an object and awareness of a mind perceiving that object, which is to say it is both intentional and reflective: this is Kant’s “I-Thinking”.

In general, emotions are directed towards an object and an emotional life is a specific manner of apprehending the world, the indissoluble synthesis and conjunction of subject and object. The musical composition is seen not as an object of consciousness but part of consciousness. For example, we are aware that we are apprehending the composition in a certain way. The affective world is an imaginary world in which a disposition towards an aspect of a composition is pre-conceptually struck.

Musicology and scientific explanations of the musical experience in general do not set out to define and limit a priori the object of their research: the notion of the composition is quite empirical such that the listener will only be an a posteriori conjecture intended to establish connections between disparate musical materials, i.e. the sum of characteristics which it unifies. Kolisch’s only aim is to collect observations of detail of which there is nothing further to be said and looks upon emotional response as an accident.

We study the conditions under which emotion as an aspect of affective life is possible and not as a pathological response mechanism. It is an indispensible constituent of consciousness which signifies a disposition of the human entirety, not an accidental fact about it. This consciousness does not limit itself to the projection of affective meanings upon the composition: it lives it and thereby constitutes it. In every emotion is a multitude of affective anticipations which extends into the future and presents the composition in both a logical and an emotional light. An emotion is what it signifies: the totality of apprehension in its temporal (re)construction. How are we to understand this?
“Feelings” is the most general characteristic of affective experience. The language of feeling expresses desire, sensation, mood and emotion, and articulates the way experience appears to us and how we are conscious of that experience. These are non-cognitive or pre-reflective experiences. For example, a musical composition may catch us in an affective disposition or may embody a mood, let us say, which would require that we have the ability to sense a predisposition to emotion. In this case, however, there is no intentional object or at least an object which is identifiable in its particularity. Its meaning is immanent and is in this sense pre-linguistic and more importantly non-referential. Such feelings are not susceptible to possible change by reflection as cognitive or significative emotions are.

According to Hanslick, music does not signify anything: it just is. I wish to examine the nature of affective signification and to argue that to signify is to indicate something other than that which signifies. But for Hanslick musical meaning is to be identified solely in the formal characteristics of a composition because it is impossible for any definite emotion to be represented in music. That may be so but does specifying it referentially or symbolically, as he seems to imply, result in either sentimentality or irrelevance so that this, therefore, cannot be the source of its value? Does the formalism of musical analysis get us to the heart of What it Is? And how are we to understand the relation between the life of feeling and music, structurally considered in its a priori aspects, if that relation cannot be essentially referential?

It has been suggested so far that there are broadly two kinds of meaning: designative or referential meaning and natural or embodied meaning. Assuming that there is a necessary relation between music and the life of feeling I would wish to argue as follows:

(a) Emotions are that class of feelings which are distinguished by their transitiveness. That is to say they are intentionally and hence characteristically related to particular objects or particular kinds of objects.

(b) Because there can be no objectless emotions or emotions as such they cannot properly be the objects of musical expression and if music can be said to refer at all it refers to states of affairs or objects where these states of affairs or objects may be the intentional relata of emotions (e.g. in programme music).

(c) Those feelings which are not emotions are intransitive and objectless but may be said to have a logic or structure whose form is characteristically describable in such expression as “conflict and resolution”, “excitement and calm”, “growth and attenuation”, “dynamism and rest”, descriptions which are clearly compatible with the articulate structure of the a priori unity of the composition expressed in musical experience.

(d) Music therefore embodies, but does not refer to or symbolise, objectless feelings of which embodiment is a necessary and sufficient condition for musical meaning. Somebody experiences an emotion if and only if there is an object of that emotional experience, where “object” here is broadly construed as the reason for that emotional experience. For example, I experience grief at the distress or loss of someone whom I love. The experience is not separable from that of which it is an experience although a conceptual, or ontological, distinction may be made between the episodic and intentional aspects of the experience. Pride, embarrassment, anger, shame, sadness, love, remorse and fear are all examples of emotions whose distinguishing characteristic is the objects to which they are intentionally, and therefore, essentially, related.

The specification of these objects, moreover, is sufficient to distinguish one emotion from another and it follows, as a consequence, that musical expressions cannot refer to and specify emotions where those emotions are wrongly conceived as being in abstraction from their objects. The properties of emotions as intentional states are inherent in the emotions themselves: emotions therefore bear a necessary relation to objects and cannot be interpreted as being sui generis. The value of music, therefore, is not to be sought in the evocation or excitation of emotion in the listener nor is the value of a musical composition ever dependent on its capacity to arouse “definite emotions” (Hanslick): it is not a necessary condition of understanding the meaning of the Marche Funèbre in Beethoven’s Eroica symphony that we
should be familiar with the circumstances of the death of Napoleon. In any case even if it were possible to express grief in a piece of music, we could not properly be said to be attending to the music if our attention is drawn to that emotion and its circumstances.

Not all feelings are of this kind, however, that is, are such as to require objects. Examples of such feelings are pain, pleasure, excitement, contentment, happiness and anxiety. Such feelings do not have objects and are therefore not intentional states. They have a content, however, whose generality is such that, whilst it provides any feeling with a cognitive dimension, is not sufficiently specific to be able to count as a principle of individuation. To have such feelings is to be affected by something and therefore is a cognitive awareness of a content of experience even though this cognitive awareness may not be conceptual. Feeling is the immediate awareness of a content which may or may not be conceptually specifiable but is essentially the feeling of “life-in-the-world”. That is to say, we feel something in the nature of the experience of the world itself, a disposition which is always with us, sometimes receding, sometimes at the forefront of consciousness.10

It is with this more general concept of feeling that we are concerned when we talk of music being expressive of feeling, and when we talk of the experience of music as being a felt experience. When we are merely attending to our own feelings as we listen to music we are not properly attending to the music. Full aesthetic attention must be given to the music itself, to its embodied meaning, even though this is apprehended through and along with our own feelings which can be said to be tacitly functioning. The tensions and dynamics of music and its intrinsic temporal unity express the tensions of the dynamics of felt experience, but in such a way that we can talk of music as an autonomous art which is not reducible to the life of feelings. Since the content of feeling is always immediate and particular it cannot be exactly reproduced. Therefore music cannot exactly express the feelings of life: it can express, and in so doing transform, implicit life-meanings without being reduced to them and it is in this sense that musical meaning is embodied so that feelings are suggested but not reproduced.

The musical work is not the successive presentation of symbolic or referential elements, but is a single unity in which is grasped its indivisible embodied meaning. I have argued that this view of musical meaning accords with our experience of music, not as a disparate sonic object with feelings fused into it ab ultra, but as a felt whole whose complex temporal and affective constituents are spontaneously grasped in a unifying act.

VI

I have argued that pure receptivity of sonic events is impossible. Spontaneous connection between them is a necessary condition for the apprehension of a composition and this apprehension is prior to any adventitious connectedness. It is only in time that musical moments are brought into such a connection through retention, anticipation and the act of synthesis of apprehension. The musical manifold is determinable by being run through and held together which is to say, made to adapt through synthesis. This, according to Kant, “is the mere result of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul”.

This act, which is at the same time necessarily affective, is the apprehension of musical events in thought which is precisely the imaginative procedure, the “I feel continuity, successiveness, statement, identity, similarity, contradiction, the whole and the part”, expressed through the material of musical sounds. This is the synthetic act of formative unity consisting not of the juxtaposition of isolated tones which are external to each other but the objectification of musical composition brought about through the medium of imagination, the “world-life” of expectation, remorse and joyful acceptance. Kolisch, Schoenberg’s brother-in-law, did not have that understanding of the Third String Quartet. Composition is essentially re-composition, the spontaneous affective acquisition of musical sound within a human life to make it what it is. Meyer and Hanslick, for example, were fated to musicological limitation and hence misinterpretation as were those whose empirical-reactive analysis of the effect of sound on the nervous system constitutes an explanation of composition.

What is Schoenberg’s Third String Quartet?

First performed in 1927 it is composed on the basic principle of the of the 12-tone technique, but with emphasis on rhythmic patterns rather
than pitch and with the suggested recollection of classical forms.

Schoenberg diverged from the serial row-form in this String Quartet to the extent that, when questioned about a particular passage by a violnist from Kolisch’s quartet he angrily responded: “If I hear an F-sharp I will write an F-sharp . . . Just because of your stupid theory you are telling me what to write?” This is an indication of his revulsion towards conceptual responses to composition as an actual expression of feeling in sound. He was telling the theorist What it Is.

How did Kolisch look at it? The tone rows are used as motifs and not as schematic solutions to tonic dilemmas. The series form a dense contrapuntal texture which, apparently untrue to form, return to classical compositional procedure. For example, in the First Movement there is the suggestion of sonata form and what seems to be a relaxation of 12-tone technique as the same pitches occur for 12 measures, in apparent defiance of his principled compositional stance. There is a recurrence of varied shapes which function as connective rather than motivic tissue and the movement ends with a leaping and falling theme in an increasingly higher voice.

In the Second Movement there is a series of variations which violate stylistic expectation and appear to repudiate notions of format and theme. The Intermezzo Movement with prominent viola presents a fluid thematic section, suggesting a motif with a narrow range and repeated notes culminating in a violent trio fading to a lyrical conclusion.

The Fourth Movement is dense and complex with a contrast of internal musical logic and its leaps within a narrow melodic range breathing inconclusiveness and a frenzy to recapitulate sonic material.

This is what we hear and perhaps how we might respond, but does it get to the essence of it? Strictly speaking, a composition refers to nothing but itself and in that respect Hanslick is right. But let us look more closely. I listen to the Kolisch String Quartet’s interpretation of Schoenberg’s Third Quartet because I have the desire to hear it, a desire which is born of need or curiosity. This is also because of the unfulfilled expectation that the composition will present itself in the way in which Schoenberg wanted, without any concealment or betrayal by a theorist who might imagine that a composition is the end-result of a musicological schema. I desire to experience the composition as a collaborative event in which an affective apprehension will change me. This is an urge to transformation, not a confirmation of a sedimented emotional life which I might have. It is not a plea for the reassurance of a concretely determined pathology. It is an imaginative way out, a reawakening. It possesses the logic of a dream which will alter me.

The Quartet is, therefore, not so much an object with quantifiable sonic or musicological characteristics, but an event. This event takes place in time and it was written on a particular historical occasion. But when I listen to it I do not perceive it as an event in that sense. It is an occasion with a consuming fascination in which the everyday world has evaporated and only essential meaning remains.

This is the meaning of imaginative and affective apprehension. Quantifiable and calculable external circumstances have disappeared as I give myself over to the event. My apprehension of the composition is not chronological but successive, the meaning of which unfolds as I attend to it. This is areal time, not the time of the clock, and its presenting itself is my composition, Schoenberg being the expressive inventor of the circumstance, the one who gives shape and logic to sound. The composition is not analogous to anything but itself and his Third Quartet invokes a meaning of which, temporally and affectively, I am the secret sharer.

We listen here for: What it Is.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Henry Schnitzler, ‘Gay Vienna – Myth and Reality’, Journal of the History of Ideas 15 (1954): 115.
2. Vienna. Harmonielehre. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1911. Trans. Roy E. Carter as Theory of Harmony. 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978).
3. Merle Armitage, eds., Schoenberg: Articles by Arnold Schoenberg, Erwin Stein and Others (Los Angeles, CA: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 161.
4. Voss and Clarke, ‘1/f Noise in Music: Music from 1/f Noise’, Journal of Acoustic Society Am 63, no. 1 (1978): 258–61.
5. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Los Angeles, CA: MacMillan, 1965), 180–7.
6. Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James Churchill (Los Angeles, CA: Indiana University Press, 1964), 60–3 inter alia.
7. Vintage Yeats, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (UK, 1992).
8. Leonard Myer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Los Angeles, CA: Phoenix Books, 1961).
9. Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Los Angeles, CA: Cybereditions, 2003).
10. Radford, C., ‘Emotions and Music: A Reply to the Cognitivists’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989): 69–76.