

# Considerations of the concept of form and content in music against a background of cultural and philosophical studies

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**Abstract.** Everyone who comes into contact with a musical work has the right to his or her own interpretation and experiences built on the basis of both form and content, insofar as this is possible. Cultural and musical knowledge broadens the scope of this experience, but does not change the ultimate goal of art, which is aesthetic satisfaction. In the relationship between a work and its listener, an additional function is fulfilled by the cultural preparation of the subject, providing a range of relevant and objective (verifiable) interpretive tools to penetrate to the content of the work.

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Imagine that we, as Europeans, are attending a reading of the poetry of Mao Zedong. When we have taken our seats in the hall and the lights have been dimmed, a rather short, almond-eyed man comes onstage. Only now does it occur to us that this artist will recite the poet's work in the vernacular. Unfortunately, we know no Cantonese, traditional Chinese, or Mandarin. However, it would not be proper to leave, as the reading has begun. We observe that despite not knowing the language, we are, without a doubt, taking part in a certain aesthetic event; perhaps our ignorance of the language will not prevent us from experiencing it as an artistic performance. We also observe that our mere attendance at an aesthetic event created in this way is already providing us with many experiences.

Understanding the words of a poem is a prerequisite for actual (full) participation in its content<sup>1</sup> and enables its contemplation – to be precise: contemplation of the con-

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we present a new, philosophical understanding of the concepts of form and content in music, and thus we use appropriate emphasis, namely, expanded character spacing. When these concepts appear in the article in their colloquial meaning, or in a sense different from ours, we do not apply emphasis

tent of the poem based on linguistic conventions, sense, grammar, metaphor, etc. The essence of this art is contemplation of its content, which is accompanied by sometimes unnecessary, sometimes necessary artefacts such as sounds, voice and its dynamics, colour, expression, etc., which we call form. Among unnecessary additional artefacts of poetry we count clattering, wheezing, the speaker's features, even the wallpaper, velvet curtains, the mild mustiness of mouldering velvet theatre seats, the solemn atmosphere of the event and all its circumstantial clutter, which evoke corresponding rich emotional impressions, aesthetic reactions and reflections in our imagination and senses. Here, then, is the form of art: an essential aspect of its existence, inevitable but, doubtless, not quite sufficient.

What is the source or subject of our aesthetic experience in the proposed example? Without doubt, we are dealing here with stimuli of an aural and visual character. The dynamics and smoothness of phrases, words and sentences, syntax, rhythm, all elicit impressions of an aesthetic nature. Tonality, expression and the exotic (to us) timbre of this Asian man's voice lead us into a kind of 'aesthetic mood'; impassioned declamations (though we do not understand them) carry us off into a fairy-tale world; and as viewers and listeners, accustomed to interpreting stimuli in terms of similar events and treating art as mimesis, we have a chance to hear the sounds of nature, the singing of birds and other significant sounds, limited only by our fancy. Interestingly, the presented example has a great deal in common with music – so much so, that in lieu of form, we are going to substitute here precisely *acoustic medium of content*. The consequence of this approach is the well-known historical thesis that music is 'pure form', because, essentially, whatever the listener draws from it is contained materially in the form. It is in this "stream of form" that the essence, the sense, indeed the content, is found. Extraction of the content, its extent and scale of structural complexity, or of the information contained therein, depends on the cognitive apparatus of the listener, who first must possess appropriate skills.

Applied to the problem of music, the example of the Chinese poet demonstrates the potential for misidentification of what we call the essence of music: each of us is aware of the incongruence of our attendance at a Chinese poetry reading without possessing the indispensable prerequisites in the form of knowledge of Chinese. We observe this problem less frequently in music, because we identify music with the acoustic stream itself – that is, the form of music. In other words, we take the form of music for its content. Every human being is equipped by nature to extract musical content, if only at its most basic level, especially since, these elementary, natural, anthropological attributes are nearly always accompanied by cultural determination<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, because each representative of the human race is somehow affected by this acoustic stream, he or she accepts this stream, indeed this form, identifying it with music.

As we have shown, sophisticated understanding may not be necessary for an elementary aesthetic experience of music. For both the experienced musician bringing con-

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the identification of music with its form (which is, *nota bene*, the error of *pars pro toto*) also yields positive but 'extramusical' results, e.g. 'musical therapy', in which the acoustic stream, through its physical and psychological properties, acts as a remedy even in cases of profound disabilities in which there is no possibility of grasping content.

ceptual effort to bear and his or her listener, this ultimately involves a kind of euphoria provided by contact with this phenomenon. In the case of sophisticated music, the creation of musical content is a process similar on one hand to a passionate game of chess, where appropriate rules, strategy, and the use of artifice apply, and on the other hand to the creative endeavours of physicists and mathematicians. Thus, from the perspective of the musician, scientist or chess player, elements of the language of his or her particular convention are somehow set in motion, whereupon they spontaneously form all possible combinations. These combinations are usually innumerable, and if not for some mechanism, some subconscious selection operating on the emerging combinations, the whole process would lead to nothing. Skilled musicians, in a sequence of spontaneously generated sounds, capture beautiful motives; brilliant scholars are able to detect these combinations, which, thanks to their simplicity, augur the hope that they will prove appropriate. Because this happens partly subconsciously, a scholar is not in a position afterwards to state what the process of discovery of the theory depended upon, just as a talented improviser does not reproduce from memory the identical, complex, previously generated musical phrase which fits perfectly into that moment and musical space. Creative artists equipped with a highly developed sense of beauty and harmony have a chance to extract, from the sea emerging from the subconscious, those combinations which will prove fruitful. The processes of creation, participation, contemplation, and consequently perception of this wholly intellectual beauty enhance sophisticated aesthetic satisfaction of a sensory nature. From here the interdependence of intellectual beauty and sensory experiences can be deduced.

The content of music can be demonstrated by another interesting example. Chinese calligraphy is the art of applying ink to paper so as to achieve perfection, harmony, and beauty. Although the language of music is often compared to mathematics, its perfection does not result directly from numerical relationships, but is – like a sign traced in ink by the hand of a master – simply visible and obvious for one who understands its language (its content). In China, a work of art is valorised in a manner quite unusual from the point of view of a representative of Western civilisation; for example, in the case of calligraphed poetry, a copy can attain greater value than the original. In the contemplation of such works, what is most important? It would seem to us that in poetry, what is important is above all the transmission of semantic and factual content; this is not ignored by the Chinese, but for them the calligraphed copy of the work is more important. Translated into philosophical terminology, this means that in Chinese calligraphy, the semantic content of poetry – in this particular example – becomes (or already in fact it is) the form, as opposed to what European intuition would suggest. A Chinese who practises or learns calligraphy possesses a formidable prerequisite for the understanding of what beauty and harmony are in his or her guidance of the brush, finesse, lightness, dancing quality, rhythm, sensuality, etc. The contemplation of such a work comes down to tracking the movements of the brush; these provide a wide gamut of information, including even the spiritual condition of the artist; this energy reaches the viewer, providing pleasure similar to that obtained in the contemplation of music. A competent viewer needs no ostentatious signposts to intuitively recognise the hand of a great or talented artist.

The example of Chinese calligraphy shows us the essential feature of the content of music: it is implicated in the culture, and to understand it, linguistic, technological,

and cultural competence is required. The adoption of these principles and conclusions leads us directly to *intellectual elitism*: musical content can be read by those steeped in the appropriate convention.

The need to understand the object of perception is, however, spontaneous and natural for everyone. Hence, sometimes certain misunderstandings related to the content of music arise. Musical content is not often perceived or supported by critics of 'the visual character of music'. Music neither serves as a vehicle for emotion nor expresses any emotion, as the philosophers of music who follow the Platonic tradition would have it (in this case, we adhere to the position of the Aristotelian tradition<sup>3</sup>). The use of musical idioms today is naive and outdated. This phenomenon, also sometimes called the cinematic effect, is based on the supplementation of musical forms with narrative and images (non-musical stories) which take over the role of true musical content. There is nothing wrong with this phenomenon, provided that we recognise that it is a by-product of music.

Everyone who comes into contact with a musical work has the right to his or her own interpretation and experiences built on the basis of both form and content, insofar as this is possible. Cultural and musical knowledge broadens the scope of this experience, but does not change the ultimate goal of art, which is aesthetic satisfaction. In the relationship between a work and its listener, an additional function is fulfilled by the cultural preparation of the subject, providing a range of relevant and objective (verifiable) interpretive tools to penetrate to the content of the work. In order to fully perceive the sophistication and intricate complexity of the convention, however, what is needed above all is effort on the part of the listener, effort which is sometimes comparable to that exerted by the work's composer.

In spite of the perspective thus presented, which emphasises the role of the aesthetic experience of art, we advocate objectivity in the philosophy of music, especially with regard to its content. Freedom is one thing; ignorance of the language of music is something else altogether. These two cases should be clearly delimited. Familiarity with the tools used to build musical content *enables* e.g. *improvisation*. Performance of improvised music with a band is a test of one's familiarity with musical language: entering into an artistic collaboration with another performer requires one to be able to read the language of the particular piece and of what the other artist is saying to him. Virtuosity, meanwhile, depends on the creation of new advanced linguistic structures and new musical vocabularies, the implementation of which yields aesthetic delight.

In postulating the existence of objective principles for creating musical structures and languages, we emphasise the importance not only of experience and knowledge, but also of freedom in the field of music. Only philosophical objectivity protects us from

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<sup>3</sup> The Aristotelian tradition, in which the 'paradigm of internality' is used. Music expresses emotion through a resemblance to the internal course of emotions 'deep down in one's soul'. Representatives of this trend include (interestingly) St Augustine, as is visible in his writings about sounds corresponding to the movement of the soul; Arthur Schopenhauer, in his understanding of music as a pure form of passion without content; Nietzsche (followed by Wagner); Eduard Hanslick and his paper 'On the beautiful in music'; and Susanne Langer, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hermann Kretschmar, and Malcolm Budd.

the relativism of contemporary popular and mass culture (and thus also music). This culture is characterised by maximal simplification of musical structure and language which takes place not only on the level of the audience, but also on that of production. In its banality, popular (mass) art, like ideology and market commodities, panders to the tastes of each viewer in democratic fashion, since it requires no commitment or competence. Such a vulgarised art gives rise to the imaging and visualisation of emotion; based on a simplified structure and language, it is therefore universally read; it possesses the features of global, mass, and kitsch culture. This phenomenon of simplifying art favours form to an extent sufficient to render the content of music irrelevant. The paradigm of mass art is form (as confirmed by the compiling and copying of ready-made musical streams in mass art).

Music – if we wish to talk about its form – can be described in *categories of quality*, enabling us to speak of such qualities as ‘melodic’, ‘pleasant’, ‘calm’, ‘pretty’, ‘uplifting’, ‘catchy’, ‘calm’, ‘joyful’, etc. Many of these categories seem to be aesthetic valuations, which, formally, they are; however, it is worth noting the source of these aesthetic experiences. Often, indeed, we may find that this kind of experience results not from the music itself, but from imaging and visualisation as a side effect of the projection of our minds.

We can also describe music in *quantitative terms*. Such a description refers not only to the musical language used (‘vocabulary of music’) and techniques of playing, structure, and composition, but also to the cultural and philosophical context of a given work. Here, we see in a musical work a synthesis of the principles of music as such. In searching for objective, though not necessarily mathematical, principles for the evaluation and description of music, we avoid speculation and remain within the framework of philosophical language and method. But in fact the pure philosophical method leaves us with a sense of insufficiency: after all, philosophy is not music itself. Therefore, we must not forget that music is sound, art, speech, desire, and delight. The division between intellectual and carnal beauty that appears sometimes in philosophical literature overlooks an important aspect of beauty: regardless of its source, it must be understood as a value. Philosophical beauty is close to the concept of truth, differing only in that it must be achieved in reality.

A relationship of this kind, in which the content and form of music aim at synthesising the principles of music, enables us to discuss the possible renewal of the classical aesthetic concepts of European civilisation. The history of philosophy supplies us with a huge number of important and functional concepts that can be used to describe contemporary music. If we refer to the division of music into content and form, we can be inspired in subsequent studies by, e.g. the classical meaning of the word *kalon*, which, after all, has an objective sense (expressed, among other ways, in the relationship between the parts of a work of art, i.e. the sounds, but also in appropriateness and *paideia*); we can also draw on the justification of beauty derived from Pythagorean mathematics, or the classical meaning of the term *idea*. These concepts are the basis of all European objectivist theories of music. Apart from these, the European artistic tradition refers to a number of additional Greek concepts which build the overall classical understanding of aesthetics and art, such as order, symmetry, measure, proportion, and skill (*techne*).

Music combines in a particular way the principle of structure and order with a temporary, ephemeral, and momentary mode of existence. The beauty of the language of

music is realised in both of these elements. Just as the mathematician sees beauty in an equation, a physicist in a formula, and a scientist in a theory, so the musician sees beauty in music as the structure and composition of sounds. Objective intuition is a feature of a performer, who, via the path of perception and practice, has come to know that he is playing well. He can hear that he is playing well.

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