
Reviewed by Greg Trotter

*On Music*, Theodore Gracyk’s contribution to the “Thinking in Action” series, is intended as a general introduction to the philosophy of music. Gracyk treats his topic thematically and considers philosophical questions that might arise about music in the practice of listening to it. This approach is remarkably effective and is presented in an accessible but rigorous fashion. Gracyk’s principle question is why music counts as art. His answer is that music is a cultural product situated within particular historical contexts with their own accompanying practical conventions. This idea unfolds throughout the book, and it forms the connecting tissue between all four chapters.

Gracyk’s first chapter is explicitly concerned with establishing music as an art form. He approaches this difficult problem by considering a phenomenon that is often thought to be music but which doesn’t count as such in the final analysis, namely, birdsong. Birdsong presents a challenge to the view that music is art; as Gracyk puts it, “If some birds sing, then we humans make music because we are musical animals, alongside other musical animals, and it is an error to suppose that all music is art” (4). But Gracyk denies this conclusion, instead providing an account of what separates the human production of music from the sometimes beautiful melodies produced by birds.

Gracyk employs Joseph Haydn’s 45th symphony as a particularly illustrative example. The performance of Haydn’s piece concludes in an odd way with each musician gradually ceasing to play, then standing and leaving the stage. The original performance was intended as a message to Haydn’s employer, the Esterházy family, that it was time for Haydn and his musicians to return home from their summer tenure at the Esterházy palace. The crucial point here is that this performance only works within a particular set of conditions. Haydn was able to express himself by challenging the musical conventions of his day, which is something that birds simply cannot do. Birdsongs may be musical, but they aren’t music. Music appropriates and manipulates conventions and traditions.

Gracyk goes on to argue that music also exhibits a certain kind of style: “all music is art because all music has style which means that all music engages actively with the tradition that feeds it” (33). It’s hard to see, however, what this notion of style adds to Gracyk’s previous point about the manipulation of musical conventions. Style cannot adequately distinguish music from other cultural
practices which also engage with a tradition, e.g., marriage or linguistic practices. Gracyk suggests that music reflects purposive human action, purposiveness which intends a piece to be heard as a piece of music. But this claim doesn’t tell us much about why music is art beyond the point that art is itself a cultural concept in which music has traditionally figured. We may want a more robust definition of art.

The cultural dimension of music forms the core of Gracyk’s argument, in his second chapter, against musical purists who claim that in order to properly appreciate music, no extra-musical content should feature in either the music itself or our experience of it. But as Gracyk points out, we cannot even describe music without considering extra-musical content. It seems that for the purist, the moment a piece is described as an adagio, for instance, the experience has been sullied. For Gracyk, however, the appreciation of music is intimately bound up with language. One cannot properly contextualize music without the requisite conceptual and linguistic tools. Without language, without certain extra-musical concepts, our listening experience would be reduced to a diminished, immediate sensory experience.

The third chapter addresses the question of whether music is expressive of emotion. Some argue that music can embody pure emotion and that this is where music’s essence lies. But Gracyk suggests that music expresses emotion only in a conventional way. Music expresses emotion in the same way that Haydn’s symphony delivered a message to the Esterházs, namely, by manipulating musical conventions. A great example of this is the tritone, which was referred to in the eighteenth century as “the devil in music.” The dissonance of the tritone often signaled the entrance of evil characters in operas. However, as time passed, the tritone was used in other contexts, one of which, Gracyk points out, is the song “Maria,” from West Side Story. The point here is that musical conventions changed with time and so, too, did the expressiveness of musical passages. Apropos the claim that expression constitutes the essence of music, Gracyk argues, “If the art of music is born anywhere, it emerges from a society’s conventions for adapting music’s expressive qualities to its specific purposes. Art reflects culture. Unchecked natural outpourings of emotion are not art” (71).

If it’s not emotion which moves us when we listen to music, what accounts for the capacity of some music to affect us in truly profound ways? In his fourth chapter, Gracyk discusses the sublime as it is encountered in music. The sublime is characterized by an overwhelming feeling of “awe and astonishment” (112). Gracyk suggests that music can render intelligible a radically ineffable or transcendent dimension of experience by “showing” us this dimension through the unique mode of access that music provides, namely, by exemplifying the sublime. This, too, is cultural phenomenon. A composer creates a piece which is intended to overwhelm the listener and radically alter his or her perspective on the world by appropriating and manipulating certain musical conventions. We must be shown things which lie beyond ordinary experience through lenses which we encounter in ordinary experience.

On Music is an excellent introduction to the philosophy of music. Gracyk covers an astonishing amount of ground in a very limited space, but he does so in a way that accounts for the richness and complexity of his topic. Moreover, Gracyk’s abundant use of examples keeps the reader engaged. I think Gracyk’s book would be ideal for introducing students to the philosophy of music. But the book could equally well serve to put an interesting gloss on some of these problems for philosophers whose specialties lie elsewhere.

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