Book Review


Reviewed by Matteo Ravasio

James O. Young’s main purpose in this book is to defend a version of anti-formalism against what he takes to be the standard formalist position favored by contemporary philosophers of music. His main critical target is the arch-formalist Peter Kivy. Young’s treatment of Kivy’s arguments expresses not only deep disagreement but also respect and admiration. This is evident from the fact that Young takes his theory of musical expressiveness to be identical to the one first proposed by Kivy himself in *The Corded Shell* (1980) and now rejected by its proponent.¹ According to this theory, which Young calls ‘resemblance theory’, we perceive emotion in music because music resembles human expressive behavior. Young argues that the resemblance theory is essentially an empirical hypothesis, and that psychological experiments have established a resemblance between musical and vocal expression. Moreover, the expression of emotions by means of dynamic patterns in different sensory modalities such as touch and hearing shows clear cross-cultural correlations, confirming how bodily expressive movements and expressive music share a common dynamic structure: sad music moves in tonal space in the way that sad people move in physical space.

It is on this theory of musical expressiveness that Young builds his arguments against formalism. First, music is argued to be capable of arousing ordinary emotions such as happiness and sadness. Kivy’s arguments against this possibility are carefully examined and countered. Young’s discussion of both the philosophical arguments and the psychological evidence in this chapter is one of the most complete and illuminating in the philosophical literature. Young then discusses different ways in which music can arouse emotions and argues for its capacity to arouse a broader palette of emotional states than philosophers normally allow, a point that lends support to his anti-formalist concerns.

Young’s main anti-formalist tenet is to be found in the book’s central chapter, titled “The Content of Music.” There it is claimed that music’s expressive character, along with an appropriate intention from the composer and a suitably qualified listener, provide all that is needed for a musical representation of the emotions, the cognitive content of which is to be identified with the emotional

reaction the music is able to arouse in the listener. This provides Young with resources unavailable to formalist philosophers when tackling the issue of the relation between music and lyrics and when dealing with the important problem of musical value. As to the first issue, the main polemical target is again Kivy, who has described music and literature as ‘antithetical arts’. According to Young, however, music and its lyrics share the potential to arouse emotions in the listener. As soon as we realize this, he claims, the so-called ‘problem of opera’, which rests on the allegedly incompatible properties and goal of good literature and good music, dissolves. By means of a combined action, the music and libretto of an opera arouse emotional states in the listener and provide him or her with psychological insight.

The final chapter on musical value represents the natural conclusion for a book like Young’s. Having argued that the content of music is much greater than formalists allow, he is in a position to discuss how this content contributes to music’s aesthetic value. Anti-formalism, Young argues, offers powerful reasons to understand the value we attach to music, whereas formalism is confined to elementary accounts of musical value, which is ultimately reduced to a mystery. Thanks to its capacity to represent and arouse in the listener a large variety of emotional states, music is aesthetically valuable as a source of insight into our emotional life. By providing us with an intimate acquaintance with emotions of all sorts, music is rewarding even when it involves the arousal of negative emotions such as sadness.

I will conclude this review with a brief remark on the resemblance theory of musical expressiveness. Although not the focus of Young’s book, this theory represents an important strategic point, as it permits expressive properties to be part of the musical fabric. Young believes his version of the theory to be orthodox. However, resemblance theories of musical expressiveness, such as those defended by Kivy and Stephen Davies, can be taken to consist in two interrelated claims: (1) our perception of expressive music depends on a resemblance between the music and human expressive behavior, and (2) to perceive expression in music is to perceive the music as resembling human expressive behavior. Call (1) the causal claim and (2) the phenomenal claim. By insisting that resemblance theory is essentially an empirical hypothesis about what makes music expressive, Young seems to reduce resemblance theory to the causal claim alone. Thus his theory cannot serve as an analysis of what the experience of musical expressiveness consists in (i.e., an analysis of its phenomenal content). The tension between the causal and phenomenal claims about musical expressiveness in orthodox resemblance theories was evident from the start and has represented one of the focal points of its critical reception. In his otherwise original and thoughtful book, Young has missed an occasion to cast a new light on this issue.

Critique of Pure Music represents a thorough defense of an unpopular anti-formalist view of music by a scholar with a solid reputation in the field of aesthetics. For this reason, the book is likely to become a landmark for future anti-formalist accounts of music. Young’s critical confrontation with the purveyors of formalism is careful and systematic. His use of the most recent psychological and neurobiological evidence in support of his ideas adds to the already considerable wealth of information provided. Although the book has no specific didactic aim, Young’s remarkably concise and clear writing and the scope of his interests make it an ideal introduction to the debate on formalism in the philosophy of music, accessible even to undergraduates.

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2 For an exemplary examination of these matters, see Derek Matravers, Art and Emotion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Ch. 7.