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# MUSIC AS THE FINEST DISGUST? A KANTIAN TAKE ON CACOPHONY IN THE CRITIQUE OF JUDGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The Kantian system of the fine arts notoriously places music at the bottom of the ladder; to be precise, it looks almost like it does not even deserve a place in the classification insofar as music, according to Kant, ought to be considered more an agreeable than a fine art. The aim of our paper is to inquire whether the peculiar status Kant ascribes to music can provide unique access to some issues of negative aesthetics that can be found in the Critique of Judgement: specifically, questions concerning the problem of the form of music as art in relation to its ability to cause unappealing as well as unwholesome feelings. Only those musical forms that preserve the formal purity of the instrument's Ton seem to foreshadow the possibility of a music that claims for itself to be deemed more than just agreeable.

**Keywords:** Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Philosophy of music, 18th century German aesthetics.

## LA MUSICA COME IL DISGUSTO PIÙ RAFFINATO? UNA VISIONE KANTIANA DELLA CACOFONIA NELLA *CRITICA DEL GIUDIZIO*

Il sistema kantiano delle belle arti colloca notoriamente la musica all'ultimo gradino della scala; per essere precisi, sembra quasi che non meriti nemmeno un posto nella classificazione, in quanto secondo Kant la musica dovrebbe essere considerata più un'arte piacevole che un'arte raffinata. Lo scopo del nostro articolo è quello di indagare se lo status peculiare che Kant attribuisce alla musica possa fornire un accesso unico ad alcune questioni di estetica negativa che si possono trovare nella Critica del giudizio: in particolare, questioni riguardanti il problema della forma della musica come arte in relazione alla sua capacità di provocare sentimenti sgradevoli e malsani. Solo quelle forme musicali che preservano la purezza formale del Ton dello strumento sembrano prefigurare la possibilità di una musica che pretenda di essere considerata più che semplicemente piacevole.

**Parole chiave:** Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Philosophy of music, 18th century German aesthetics.



My article will focus on the problem of music in Kant, but, as the title already suggests, it starts from an unusual perspective. Indeed, I will not dwell so much on the status that music occupies in the system of the fine arts, nor will I simply attempt to thematise music in relation to the general framework of reflective judgement. With my contribution, in fact, I want to try to shed light on a point in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* that is usually treated only as an object of criticism or as an appendix that occupies a minor place in relation to the two great themes that are, of course, the judgement of beauty on the one hand, and the feeling of the sublime on the other.

My concern is whether Kant, despite the very few references to the art of music in his work, might not tell us something about the nature of music that could be of interest to us beyond any historiographical intent. As a matter of fact, I shall proceed within the framework outlined by Kant himself in the second section of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, dedicated to the transcendental doctrine of method, which contains a chapter entitled "Architectonic of Pure Reason". Very briefly, here Kant establishes a distinction between historical knowledge that arises from a *cognitio ex datis*, i.e. all knowledge that starts from facts to reconstruct the history of a thought, of a discipline, of a narrative (and so, philosophy as well!); and knowledge that arises from a *cognitio ex principis*, i.e. rational knowledge that draws its understanding not from the recognition of facts, but from concepts (see Kant [1781/1787] 1998: 691-4). This distinction inspires my choice to question not *ex datis* but *ex principis* a theme that nevertheless occupies its specific place within the Kantian system.

## 1. AGREEABILITY, GRATIFICATION, BACKGROUND: KANT'S 'FURNITURE MUSIC'

Is it possible then to judge an art that, more than any other (for reasons we will shortly see), can cause such annoyance that if protracted can become repugnance? Is it conceivable to maintain that a piece of music is 'beautiful', even though it contains at its core some moments that belong neither to sensual gratification, nor to the harmonic relationship between the parts, nor to spiritual fulfilment, but instead to its opposite? A painter can represent ugliness in an artistically effective form, as Hegel already told us in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* when discussing Romantic art having Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* in mind as a paradigmatic example; a musician, on the other hand, cannot smooth out a dissonance without altering the relationships between the intervals, but in doing so, we will no longer have that same dissonance. A disinterested contemplation of music, Kant anticipates Hegel, is indeed impossible:

Bird song, which we cannot bring under any rule of music, seems to contain more freedom and hence to offer more to taste than human song, even when this human song is performed according to all the rules of the art of music, because we tire much sooner of a human song if it is repeated often and for long periods [...] Music merely plays with sensations [...] Music proceeds from sensations to indeterminate ideas (Kant [1790] 1987: 94; 199-200)

These are just a few of the Kantian examples that in the *Critique of Judgement* ascribe music to that kind of non-free beauties, and thus not to those beauties without concept that are the matter of the judgement of taste. Music, even if it complies with all the rules of composition in order to convey unpleasant sounds in a beautiful form (seventh intervals, unresolved chords, etcetera: I am sticking to the rules of tonal music because such were the rules of composition in Kant's time), well, it is too regular, Kant tells us in another passage, and therefore bores (see Kant [1790] 1987: 93).

However, are we sure that this is really the problem, viz. music's excessive regularity? Actually, Kant seems more frightened by the tremendous irregularity that can be conveyed by a piece of music. In all likelihood, he was appalled by the *Affektenlehre* or, as Peter Kivy ironically suggests, "what might have been in Kant's aesthetics of music was forestalled by none other than his well-known familial pietism" (Kivy 1993: 264).

Therefore, an aesthetic judgement of taste declaring a musical production as "beautiful" is a contradiction. When, for example, we listen to a tune, Kant argues, it is not always possible for us to clearly establish whether the enjoyment we derive from it is immediate insofar as it derives from the specific effect that the sound vibrations have on our body or whether it stems already from a reflection on the place that a particular tone occupies in relation to the overall musical form (Kant [1790] 1987: 70-1; 194); That is, we do not know whether what causes our enjoyment is the immediate response of our organism to the perception of a sound or is the moment in which we recognise, because we can distinguish it, that the tone is well suited to the composition because it is harmonic, according to the mathematical ratios that shape the form of the entire musical piece.

What music lacks, first and foremost, is the ability to be listened to for its own sake in a disinterested manner, which is why it has its most excellent affinity with the agreeable arts rather than with the fine arts. So much so that it occupies the lowest place on the scale of the fine arts hierarchy. Although it has a mathematical structure arranged in accordance with precise rules, it is not the beautiful form that gives us pleasure *per se*. Kant claims that this is simply the *conditio sine qua non* of music:

Mathematics certainly does not play the slightest part in the charm and mental agitation that music produces. Rather, it is only the indispensable condition (*conditio sine qua non*) of that ratio of the impressions, in their combination as well as change, which enables us to comprehend them (Kant [1790] 1987: 199)

Mathematics provides, if anything, the framework for the consonance of affections that bring us pleasure or displeasure. Music, in short, because of its extreme proximity to the pleasure of the senses, cannot stimulate the faculty of judgement and as such, cannot even be universally communicable: in these terms, any debate on the greatness or otherwise of a piece of music seems to become absurd.

This confusion about how to appreciate music is, moreover, inherent to music itself. There is music and music, to use Luciano Berio's *dictum*. Kant in fact appears to assume a qualitative difference between the various types of compositions (rhapsody, concerto, song...), and thus a difference of kind and not of degree within music itself. In contrast, painting, for instance, does not know such a radical differentiation between landscape painting, portrait, still life... Music is an amphibious art, so to speak, but first we still have to delve into the problem of form for yet another moment before we see what lies behind this Kantian distinction. So, music's ultimate purpose would be to cause sensible gratification and thus to be a source of entertainment. And mind you, in the set of the agreeable arts, we find

all those charms that can gratify a party at table, such as telling stories entertainingly, animating the group to open and lively conversation, or using jest and laughter to induce a certain cheerful tone among them [...] Such arts also include the art of furnishing a table so that people will enjoy themselves, or include, at large banquets, presumably even the table-music – a strange thing which is meant to be only an agreeable noise serving to keep the minds in a cheerful mood, and which fosters the free flow of conversation between each person and his neighbour without anyone's paying the slightest attention to the music's composition. Also included in these arts are any games that involve no further interest than that of making time go by unnoticed. (Kant [1790] 1987: 172-3)

In this passage, which anticipates by more than a century Erik Satie's *musique d'ameublement* and the principles of ambient music, there is also an unanswered question: What is the nature of these sources of entertainment, which, for Kant, fall within the scope of the agreeable arts insofar as they are not disinterested, having sensuous gratification as their purpose? Considering the terms under which he presents them to us, we would say that they have a 'wallpaper' function: they must not disturb, maintain a cheerful mood, stay in the background, avoid attracting attention, and allow one's affairs to be conducted pleasantly. Kant, in short, perfectly understands that the scandal of music consists in its very form. Here, it does not seem to be a question of what attitude we take towards music, as pointed out, for instance, by Samantha Matherne (2014) in an insightful article, which basically sees an underlying coherence in Kant's theory of music, and is concerned with removing the confusion that the distinction between agreeable and fine art might cause. Let us recall what Kant says in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

We ourselves bring into the appearances that order and regularity in them that we call nature, and moreover we would not be able to find it there if we, or the nature of our mind, had not originally put it there. For this unity of nature should be a necessary, i.e., *a priori* certain unity of the connection of appearances (Kant [1781] 1998: 241).

We are in no position here to impart an order to music because we are too bound by the sensual pleasure or disgust that a piece brings us, and should we decide to rely on the formal analysis of mathematical relationships, we would be mistaking for music what is after all only its necessary but not sufficient condition. In a nutshell, music will always elude all possibility of determination. We realise this especially when its effects upset us when the music is not euphonic but cacophonous. In fact, as long as music feels pleasurable to us, it is gratifying our senses, and above all, it is not intrusive because it allows us to carry on with our occupations – the examples we discussed earlier – and so to a certain extent it stands aside, it falls into the background. However, when it impinges on us, when it asserts its presence, that this inherent property of its form shows its full potential.

## 2. THE FORMLESSNESS OF THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE

Famously, Paul Guyer argues that there can be no aesthetic judgements on the ugly being impure since ugliness, by generating displeasure, prevents the harmony between imagination and understanding that underpins the free play of the faculties (Guyer 2012: 141-62). He does not, however, seem to accord particular emphasis to this peculiarity of music, suggesting even here the possibility of a lack of agreement between the faculties due to the betrayal of one's expectation about the form of an aesthetic object: he favours a formalistic interpretation of Kantian aesthetics, concluding

for Kant, of course, there are no objects that are literally unformed – our power to impose the pure forms of intuition on all our experience is enough by itself to guarantee that – and I do not think that those who insist that our displeasure in ugliness must be a pure aesthetic response have produced convincing examples of such cases (Guyer 2012: 156).

This debate is hardly of interest to our paper. Still, one might argue, as, for example, Marteen Steenhagen (2010) does in responding to the formalists, that there is an aesthetic judgement based explicitly on the disharmony between the faculties caused by the ugly; but my point here is to show that music in Kant is a real aesthetic conundrum, and as such emerges in the Kantian discussion, although the Königsberg philosopher did his best to conceal it.

Music is formlessness and form, disharmony and harmony, disgustingly cacophonous and delightfully euphonious. Only when it forgoes its most edifying task, and thus, only when it is painful for us to listen to, do we perceive its duplicity and its special status in the system of the arts. To elaborate on this further, let us come now to what I could only hint at before.

According to Kant, music seems to be made up of two fundamental qualities: one Kant realises, on several occasions, without succeeding in thematising it, while the other is put before us through a distinction, and I am referring to the distinction between *Ton* and *Schall*, which is ultimately removed by sticking precisely to the very same Kantian premises. We will first look at the first case, which we shall call, borrowing a term from Kant's system, the amphiboly of music; not to indicate equivocal reasoning, but rather the equivocal nature of music – which is precisely what Kant intuited but did not formulate systematically.

We have mentioned this peculiarity of the art of music of being cacophonous, although the primary purpose of music, sticking to the Kantian letter, is to provoke sensuous gratification. Kant, however, reports some situations where music fails to do so for various reasons. In a well-known example, whose relevance has perhaps been underestimated (and it is strange because it is one of Kant's funniest passages!), Kant complains about a problem that we have all experienced at least once: the lack of urbanity of the neighbours annoying us with their racket.

Music has a certain lack of urbanity about it. For, depending mainly on the character of its instruments, it extends its influence (on the neighbourhood) farther than people wish, and so, as it were, imposes itself on others and hence impairs the freedom of those outside of the musical parts (Kant [1790] 1987: 200).

Looking beyond the comic part, we can see how Kant realised that the unpleasantness provoked by music is stronger than the unpleasantness caused by any other agreeable art. Firstly, because it is beyond our control: we literally have to move our whole body away from the sound source to nullify its horrifying effects, whereas in front of a distasteful object, we can simply close our eyes or turn away. Secondly, because music is the art that has the greatest grip on our temperament and our moods, and therefore it is the art that makes it most difficult for us to think. Kant was an Enlightenment man, so he loathed this power that today, we sons of Nietzsche have learned to call the 'Dionysian' aspect of music.

Of course, Kant is not saying anything completely new here, as Kivy (1993) already pointed out. It is also a theory already known by the Pythagoreans and then systematised by Plato, but here it is possible to deduce with unusual clarity and effectiveness that music is the supremely synaesthetic art because it involves our whole body and even excites its inner movements. It may be the most agreeable of the arts, but for the same reason, it can turn into its exact opposite: it is the most dangerous art insofar as it can also be the most unpleasant, precisely due to this intrinsic disposition to affect the body in its entirety by captivating all its senses, despotically focusing them all on itself. In Kant's own words:

It is not our judging of the harmony we find in tones or in flashes of wit – this harmony, with its beauty, merely serves as a necessary vehicle – but the furtherance of the vital processes in the body, the affect that agitates the intestines and the diaphragm, in a word the feeling of health (which we cannot feel without such prompting), which constitutes the gratification we find in the fact that we can reach the body through the soul as well, and use the soul as the physician of the body. In music this play proceeds from bodily sensation to aesthetic ideas (of the objects of affects), and from these back again [to the body], but with the force exerted on the body concentrated [*vereinigt*] (Kant [1790] 1987: 203)

Only when he discusses the feeling of the sublime, and thus that which goes beyond the free play between imagination and intellect, and thus the dimension of form, does he use such tense and vivid language in bodily metaphors.

As for the validity of the second point, the equivocal distinction between *Ton* and *Schall*, we refer again to the *Critique of Judgement* section devoted to comparing the aesthetic values of the various fine arts. And it is interesting to note how Kant's theory of music is contained here in a nutshell; in the section perhaps least appropriate to its nature if we are to trust Kant when he demotes it to a purely sensible art. For here, in treating music as a fine art, Kant is forced to focus explicitly on its formal structure, defining music as *Tonkunst*, literally the art of tones. Christian Wenzel (1999) pointed out how the ugly aesthetic object, which therefore defies the free play of the faculties, represents a negative purposiveness, sparking the debate about the existence of a negative aesthetic in Kant, or rather the existence of an aesthetic judgement of the ugly. But in any case, the aesthetic judgement of beauty (or of ugliness, granted that it can exist) still requires a confrontation with the free play between imagination and intellect concerning the faculty of subjectively experiencing the form of an aesthetic object universally and without concept.

Stepping outside the subtleties of the debate, I would rather point out that music seems to elude aesthetic judgement altogether in all its conceivable formulations. Now, Kant appears to distinguish between what pertains properly to the *Ton*, in which he considers the extreme variability of musical effects, and the pure sound vibration, the *Schall*. We do not know here whether Kant, by making this distinction, confuses his sources (which, judging by the references, could be the doctrine of affections and the studies on the physics of sound) and gives a personal interpretation by mixing the theories. What we have seen so far with respect to the panoply of sensations caused by music, in Kantian terms, belongs to its structure, and thus Kant speaks of it in reference to the *Ton*:

The art of music employs this language all by itself in its full force, namely as a language of affects; in this way it communicates to everyone, according to the law of association, the aesthetic ideas that we naturally connect with such affects. But since these aesthetic ideas are not concepts, not determinate thoughts, the form of the arrangement of these sensations (harmony and melody), which takes the place of the form of a language, only serves to express, by means of [the] proportioned attunement of the sensations, the aesthetic idea of a coherent whole of an unspeakable wealth of thought, and to express it in conformity with a certain theme that is the prevalent affect in the piece. [...] Although we do not present this mathematical form through determinate concepts, to such form alone is attached the liking that, when we merely reflect on such a multitude of concomitant or consecutive sensations, is connected with their play, as a condition, valid for everyone, of this play's beauty; and it is with regard to this form alone that taste can claim the right to pronounce in advance upon the judgment of everyone. (Kant [1790] 1987: 199).

Yet the two realms seem to overlap nonetheless: for one thing, Kant clearly tells us that tone is the modification of sound (*Schall*). Secondly, inasmuch as Kant states the existence of certain musical forms, such as purely instrumental music, which would seem to belong to a different class compared to the song, which grows dull because of its monotony, or to improvisation – and his argument is based notably on the specific qualities of the instrument (today we would say of its timbre), and thus on the type of sound vibrations it is capable of producing with respect to a specific musical form. So, there are types of music that, by virtue of the richness of sound that can only be experienced in them, thrill us just as we sometimes lose ourselves in the richness of the ornaments produced by nature.

It is not possible to establish whether a piece of music is beautiful or ugly; only, according to Kant, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant – but this tremendous aspect of music, this ability to put forward a

theme and resolve it into its opposite, is something which inherently relates in a metaphysical sense to its form. Again, form: So, would a universally valid judgement on musical form seem possible? Suppose we accept its radical diversity from the other arts in the Kantian system. In that case, we see that its *a priori* form is given by the existence of a theme that is developed in great detail by instrumental music, as in the concerto. Should the musical form succeed in mastering the extreme variability of affections through the position of a dominant theme, then why should it not become universally communicable? In short, Kant could have said that music is the finest disgust, and I use the term disgust instead of ugliness in the sense suggested by Serena Feloj (2013), which identifies it as a genuine aesthetic category as opposed to ugliness, which in Kant ultimately has no real value. Furthermore, a more coherent picture would arise from this, trying to account for Kant's lack of acceptance of the more dramatic music component.

And yet, music, which is the very art of time, has the ability through form to bring together the manifold, even the most sensitively harrowing, and to give it accomplished expression – no matter whether beautiful or ugly, but certainly productive in terms of knowledge.

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