

KANT

INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was one of the most important philosophers of the modern period. He is best known for contributions to metaphysics and epistemology (*Critique of Pure Reason*) and to ethics (*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, *Critique of Practical Reason*), but his work in aesthetics (*Critique of Judgment*, first published in 1790) is equally groundbreaking. In this article, I focus on his aesthetics, with emphasis on elements relevant to philosophical thinking about music.

Kant follows eighteenth-century tradition in distinguishing two aesthetic categories, the beautiful and the sublime, and his aesthetic theory includes discussions of both. I focus primarily on the beautiful, both because it is more relevant to the aesthetics of music, and because his account of the beautiful represents a more original contribution to philosophy.

KANT ON BEAUTY

Judgments of beauty: non-cognitive but universally valid

The core of Kant's discussion of beauty is contained in the "Analytic of the Beautiful," §§1-22 of his *Critique of Judgment* (here I cite the Pluhar translation [1987], but using the standard Academy Edition page numbers which also appear in other recent editions; all further references to Kant are to this work). Kant's discussion is framed in terms of "judgments of

beauty" or, equivalently, "judgments of taste." It is a controversial question exactly what Kant means by a judgment of beauty, and in particular whether it consists only in the explicit claim that an object is beautiful, or whether it can also be the feeling of pleasure in an object's beauty. Here, relying on an interpretation I have defended elsewhere (for references, and details of the controversy, see Ginsborg 2005), I take the view that Kant does not draw a sharp distinction between aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment, and that a judgment of beauty is best understood as the pleasurable experience that we might call "finding" something beautiful, and which might or not be articulated as the explicit thought or statement that the thing is beautiful.

Kant's theory of beauty can be seen as addressing a dilemma about the objectivity of aesthetic experience and judgment. When we experience a thing as beautiful, are we registering a genuinely objective property that the thing has independently of our response to it? Or are we simply reacting to it subjectively, as when we feel pleasure or displeasure in something we eat or drink? Relatedly, when we say that something is beautiful, are we making a conceptual claim about it, which could in principle either be verified or shown to be false? Or are we merely expressing our liking for it, without any implications about the objective properties of the thing? The dilemma here is manifested historically in two contrasting eighteenth-century approaches to aesthetic judgment. On the "rationalist" approach, influenced by Leibniz, and adopted by Meier and Baumgarten, a feeling of pleasure in the beautiful is a kind of cognitive representation -- a "confused" representation, but objective nonetheless -- of a genuinely mind-independent feature of an object, namely its goodness or perfection. On the contrasting "empiricist" approach, associated with Shaftesbury, Burke and to some extent Hume, there is nothing objective or cognitive about the feeling of pleasure in beauty. While we can make a cognitive judgment

which ascribes to the object a disposition to produce that kind of feeling in normal perceivers, the feeling itself does not register an objective property of the thing.

Kant responds to this dilemma by arguing that judgments of beauty are neither objective nor merely subjective. He argues against their objectivity by emphasizing their dependence on the individual's own affective response to an object. Someone can judge that an object is beautiful only if she herself experiences pleasure in the object. She cannot infer its beauty on objective grounds, for example that it meets certain supposed criteria for beauty or that other people describe it as beautiful. There is thus an ineliminably subjective element in the judgment of beauty, which distinguishes it from all cognitive judgments (including judgments of the good or of perfection, which for Kant are a species of cognitive judgment). But in spite of this dependence on the individual's own affective response, Kant argues, judgments of beauty should not be regarded as merely subjective. For, in contrast to someone who expresses pleasure in food or drink (the paradigm example of what Kant calls "pleasure in the agreeable"), someone who claims that an object is beautiful makes a normative claim on everyone else's agreement: she claims that everyone ought to share her pleasure in the object. Judgments of beauty, unlike judgments of the merely agreeable, are thus not merely expressions of the individual's own liking for the object, but, in Kant's terms "universally valid." Someone who judges an object to be beautiful speaks, as Kant puts it, with a "universal voice" (§8, 216) claiming to represent not just her own attitude, but rather the attitude which everyone who perceives the object *ought* to take to it, whether or not they in fact do so.

Kant's answer to the dilemma can be put in contemporary terms by saying that he is not a realist about beauty, but that he still thinks that aesthetic judgments have a kind of (what would now be called) objectivity, in that they make a legitimate claim to universal agreement. It is a

corollary of this point (emphasized in the Antinomy, §§ 56-57), that there can be genuine aesthetic disagreement, as opposed to mere difference in aesthetic reaction, even though such disagreement cannot be conclusively resolved by means of argument. The point that that aesthetic judgments cannot be proved by argument (emphasized in §§32-33) might seem to conflict with the possibility of critical discourse about works of art. But there is still room for critical discourse and even argument in Kantian aesthetics, as long as the argument is understood not as aiming to prove that the object is beautiful, but rather as getting one's interlocutor to experience the object in such a way that she herself comes to judge it to be beautiful.

Disinterested pleasure

Kant develops his view of aesthetic judgment in part by contrasting the pleasure we feel in beauty with other kinds of pleasure, in particular pleasure in the agreeable and pleasure in the good. The upshot is the historically influential claim that pleasure in the beautiful is "disinterested," which is roughly to say that it does not depend on the object's satisfying, or being thought to satisfy, a desire for the object. Our experience of an object as beautiful, unlike our appreciation of its goodness, does not require that we take it fulfil any goal or purpose; nor, unlike pleasure in the agreeable, does it intrinsically involve the arousal and satisfaction of desire for the object. This is not incompatible with the claim that we can in fact take an interest in the preservation and protection of beautiful things, and that we can desire to experience them.

The free play of the faculties

How is it possible for there to be a kind of judging which is not objective, yet involves a claim to universal validity? Kant's answer, introduced at §9, is in terms of the notion of the "free harmonious play" of understanding and imagination, which are the two faculties operative in ordinary objective cognition. In ordinary empirical cognition, paradigmatically the perceptual recognition of an object as having certain features (for example that this is a purple flower with oval leaves), imagination and understanding work harmoniously together, but in such a way that imagination is governed by concepts (here "purple," "flower," "oval" etc.) which function as rules, so that imagination is, as Kant puts it, constrained by understanding. In the experience of the beautiful, imagination and understanding harmonize as in ordinary cognition, but the imagination is "free" rather than governed by concepts. Kant sometimes describes the free play as an activity in which the imagination and understanding do what is normally required for the application of concepts to the object, but without any particular concept being applied, so that we have, in effect, conceptualization without determinate concepts. According to Kant (in a "deduction of taste" sketched briefly at §9 and §21, and presented officially at §38), this "free play" manifests a "subjective condition of cognition in general" and thus can make the same claim to universal validity that is made in a cognitive judgment. Many commentators question the success of this argument, on the grounds that if the free play is a genuine condition of cognition, as the argument seems to require, then we would have to judge every cognizable object to be beautiful. The success of the argument seems to depend on providing an interpretation of the free play on which its universal validity follows from the universal validity of cognition, but without its being the case that the free play actually takes place in every act of cognition.

The free play of the faculties is often thought of as a distinctive psychological occurrence which we can be aware of through introspection, and which is manifested paradigmatically by the experience of looking at an abstract painting, where one might try out various ways of perceiving the relations among the elements without settling on any determinate one. One might suppose that the same kind of imaginative play is involved in listening to music in which, again, there is scope for hearing the same arrangement of sounds in a variety of different ways (for example a particular melodic line can be heard either as an accompanying figure or as a melody in its own right, or an F major chord as the subdominant in C or the dominant in B-flat). But there is a great deal of controversy about the proper interpretation of the free play, due partly to difficulties in understanding Kant's "faculty psychology" in general, and partly to the obscurity of the notion of the free play itself. I have argued for a view on which, rather than the free play corresponding to a phenomenologically identifiable element of the experience of a work of art, talk of the free play is a metaphorical way of describing the nonconceptual claim to universality implicit in the judgment of beauty itself (for more on the controversy, and references, see Ginsborg 2005)..

Purposiveness without a purpose

Kant describes the experience of the beautiful in terms of the apparently paradoxical idea of "purposiveness without a purpose" [*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*] (sometimes translated with "end" for "*Zweck*" and the neologism "finality" for "*Zweckmäßigkeit* "). This feature is variously ascribed to the activity of the cognitive faculties in the experience of the beautiful, to the relation between the faculties and the beautiful object, and to the beautiful object itself. The

significance of these ascriptions is disputed, but they can be read as very closely related to the point that a judgment of beauty makes a claim to universal validity but does not ascribe an objective property, in particular a property of goodness. In judging a thing to be beautiful I take there to be a relation of fitness or appropriateness ("purposiveness") between my mental activity and the object, such that everyone else ought to judge the object in the same way. I thus take my activity and its relation to the object are thus purposive in the sense of not being arbitrary or random: I am judging the object as it ought to be judged, not just as I happen to judge it. Yet I do not judge the the object to have the objective property of satisfying some particular aim or purpose, nor is my mental activity aimed at any purpose (for example, that of getting information about the object), so that the purposiveness can be said to be without a purpose. Kant conveys the same idea by speaking of "formal purposiveness," which has been partly responsible for his reputation as a formalist (see section on Kant's alleged formalism below.)

Impure judgments of beauty

So far our discussion has concerned what Kant calls "pure" judgments of beauty. But there are two different ways in which judgments of beauty can fall short of being pure. They can involve an element of pleasure which does not derive from the cognitive faculties, in particular "charm" [*Reiz*] or emotion [*Rührung*]. In that case they fall short of being disinterested because they involve an experience of the agreeable, which in turn depends on the arousal and satisfaction of (sensory) desire. Alternatively, they can be contingent on the application of concepts to the object. Here again they fall short of disinterestedness because they involve the recognition of the object as satisfying a purpose, and hence as meeting a (rational) desire.

Judgments which fail to be pure in this second sense are referred to by Kant as judgments of "accessory" or "dependent" [anhängende], as opposed to free, beauty. Representational art would seem, for him, to fall into the category of dependent beauty, but music -- or more specifically music not set to words -- is cited by him as an example of "free beauty" (§16, 229).

KANT ON SUBLIMITY

Kant follows other eighteenth-century thinkers, in particular Burke, in recognizing two distinct kinds of aesthetic experience, that of the beautiful and that of the sublime. He describes the feeling of the sublime as involving displeasure as well as pleasure, at one point comparing it to a "vibration" between repulsion and attraction to the same thing (§27, 258). As in the case of the beautiful, the feeling is explained in terms of the activity of our cognitive faculties, but in the case of the sublime these are imagination and reason rather than understanding. In the "mathematical" sublime, we feel the inadequacy of the imagination to grasp the immensity of an object presented to us, but this awakens the awareness of our power of reason, which is capable of grasping the infinite. In the "dynamical" sublime, we are aware through imagination of the power of the object and its potential to be physically dangerous to us, but at the same time we feel ourselves to be, as rational beings, superior to nature rather than dominated by it. Kant thinks that it is primarily nature which offers examples of sublimity, although he does cite examples of artefacts as well (the Pyramids, St. Peter's in Rome). It has been proposed (Parret 1998) that if Kant had been able to listen to Strauss or Mahler, he would have characterized their works as sublime. A possible connection between music and the sublime is suggested by Kant's

association of the sublime with emotion [*Rührung*] (§14, 226; see also §23, 245) and his claim that music is particularly suited to the arousal of emotion (§53, 328ff).

KANT ON ART

Kant often discusses artistic beauty tangentially in his treatment of judgments of beauty in general, but he addresses the topic of "fine art" or "beautiful art" [*schöne Kunst*] systematically at §§43-54. Kant is concerned here with distinguishing fine art from the production of artefacts more generally (for example, craft or handwork) and in particular with the differentiation of fine or beautiful art from art which is "merely agreeable," for example the arts of social entertaining.

Genius

An important part of Kant's discussion of art concerns the question of how beautiful art objects are produced. Since there are no rules or criteria for determining the beauty of something, we cannot explain the production of beautiful art, as we can the production of artefacts more generally, by supposing that the artist is guided by rules or prescriptions. The answer is that the artist has a natural faculty of "genius" which enables him to produce beautiful works without being consciously guided by rules. Beautiful objects are thus in a sense products of nature operating through the artist. This has implications for the teaching and transmission of art. The artist can learn from examples, and his own works can be examples for future artists,

but the capacity to produce beautiful art cannot be acquired through learning and internalizing rules.

Aesthetic ideas

Kant's discussion of "beautiful art" introduces a new element which does not figure, at least not explicitly, in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, namely that art is the expression of "aesthetic ideas." Kant describes an aesthetic idea as "a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking, though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it" (§49, 314). In his initial characterization of aesthetic ideas, he describes them as the "counterpart" of "rational ideas," whose objects, unlike those of empirical concepts like *dog* or *table*, cannot be represented by the senses or the imagination. Kant gives as examples of these rational ideas the ideas of invisible beings, hell, eternity, creation, and he also mentions the ideas of death, envy, love, fame and the virtues and vices more generally, which can indeed be realised in experience, but only incompletely. Aesthetic ideas provide an imaginative correlate to rational ideas, in that sense attempting to play the same role with respect to rational ideas as, say, the image of a dog plays for the empirical concept *dog*: "they "strive towards something that lies beyond the bounds of experience, and hence try to approach an exhibition [*Darstellung*] of rational concepts (intellectual ideas)... and thus these are given a semblance of objective reality" (ibid.). Thus the artist, in creating a work which expresses aesthetic ideas, is also attempting to give sensible expression to rational ideas "in a way which goes beyond the limits of experience" (ibid.).

In a subsequent section, Kant seems to suggest that there can be aesthetic ideas which are not connected with rational ideas, and that this is the case in particular for those expressed by music: "the form of the arrangement of [sensations of tone] 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" (§53, 329). Similar interpretive difficulties arise here as in the case of the free play of the faculties: how can music express a wealth of thought without expressing any thought in particular? But the suggestion seems to fit something about the phenomenology of musical experiences, which is perhaps captured in Scruton's (1997) suggestion that we can think of music as "expressive" in an intransitive sense, prior to thinking of it as expressing anything in particular.

Kant's alleged formalism

Kant is often thought of as the originator of formalism in aesthetics, and, largely as a result of his influence on Hanslick, in the aesthetics of music more specifically. But it is an open question whether Kant himself deserves to be called a formalist. The question is complicated by unclarity in the very notion of formalism, in particular the degree to which it is compatible with expressivism.

Kant's reputation as a formalist derives primarily from the Third Moment of the Analytic of the Beautiful, in which Kant argues that a judgment of beauty is based on the "mere form of purposiveness" in the representation by which an object is given to us (§11, 221). Kant goes on to equate the "form of purposiveness" of an object, or the representation of it, with the "purposiveness of [its] form" (§13, 223), saying that beauty should concern only form and not

matter (ibid.). In illustrating the point at §14, he seems to identify "form" with the spatial and temporal arrangement of sensory elements (colours and musical tones). Here he argues that colours and tones, which he regards, following Euler, as vibrations of the aether and of the air respectively, could count as beautiful only if the mind could perceive the vibrations by reflection as well as by sense. That is, for the experience of an individual tone or colour to be one of beauty as opposed to mere agreeableness, the vibrations would need not merely to affect us in such a way as to give rise to a pleasant sensation, but would also have to be in some way be perceived by the cognitive powers, so that we could recognize their spatial and temporal structure. (It is not clear whether Kant thinks that this condition is satisfied, since he seems to take conflicting positions on this point in different editions; he does make clear that he thinks it could be satisfied at most for "pure" colours and tones.) He also claims that, in the visual arts, it is design rather than colour that is essential for beauty, and, similarly, in music, that what matters for beauty is not the agreeable tone of an instrument but rather the "composition" of tones, suggesting again that pleasure in the beautiful is derived from the perception of the spatial and temporal arrangement of elements of the beautiful thing.

Another, and perhaps more significant, reason for regarding Kant as a formalist is his denial, made especially clear in the Second and Fourth Moments, that a judgment of beauty is conceptual. This seems to rule out ascribing beauty to a work of art on the basis of its representational or expressive character, since recognizing what is represented or expressed would seem to require the application of concepts. Kant does allow, in the Third Moment, that there can be judgments of beauty which are conditional on the object's being brought under concepts (as when one judges that something is a beautiful shoe, or a beautiful horse, but not necessarily beautiful *tout court*). These are the judgments of dependent beauty mentioned above,

and they would seem to include judgments about the beauty of representational art. But his characterization of them as "impure" has led many philosophers to assume that he does not regard them as genuine judgments of beauty and that representational art for him has a second-class status. This would again seem to support the formalist reading, in that it suggests that the success of a work, say of music, in representing or expressing a reality external to that work (for example, in the case of music, human emotion) could not be a ground for regarding it as beautiful.

However, a number of considerations can be raised against the formalist reading. First, regarding the Third Moment, it is not obvious that Kant is genuinely committed to the view that beauty concerns only the spatial and temporal relations among the elements of a thing. It is possible to understand "form" in a broader sense which allows the experience of an object's "form" to include everything about its appearance as such, excluding only its immediate sensory effects on us and our grasp of what kind of object it is and the uses to which it can be put. (On the restrictiveness of the notion of form in Kant, see Guyer 1979, ch.6 and Allison 2001, ch. 6).

Second, regarding the nonconceptual character of the judgment of beauty, it can be argued that "dependent beauty," including the beauty of representational art, does not have second-class status for Kant (Schaper 1979). As we shall see below, Kant's discussion of art gives a privileged status to art which is connected with moral ideas, in particular poetry and representational painting. Moreover, as we saw above, Kant sees art as the expression of "aesthetic ideas," and this doctrine appears on the face of it appears to be incompatible with formalism, at least as it is usually understood.

KANT ON MUSIC

Kant wrote very little about music as such. Most of what he did write is in §§51-54 of the *Critique of Judgment*, in the context of his account of art, but music is also discussed or at least mentioned in §14 (on the beauty or otherwise of individual musical tones), in §16 (on music as "free beauty"), and in §44 (on *Tafelmusik*, that is, music as background to a dinner-party).

At §51 Kant classifies the fine arts in a tentative scheme corresponding to three elements of linguistic communication: word (oratory and poetry), gesture (visual art, including sculpture, architecture, landscape gardening and painting), and tone, which includes music and "the art of colour," both of which he refers to as offering "a play of sensations." One of his concerns in this section is the question, already discussed in §14 (see above under "Kant's alleged formalism") of whether individual musical tones can be beautiful. This is important for determining the status of music, Kant says, because if the tones are beautiful then "music is wholly beautiful art," but if not then it is, at least in part "only agreeable art." At this point though it is left open that, even if individual musical tones are merely agreeable, a musical piece can still be beautiful by virtue of its overall composition.

At §53-54, however, Kant gives indications that music overall is merely agreeable rather than beautiful, and also that its aesthetic value is less than that of the other arts. In §53 he ranks the various arts, giving poetry the highest place, and then saying that "if our concern is with charm and mental agitation" then music should be ranked next, above the visual arts. But he goes on to say that if we assess the value of the fine arts by the "cultivation" which they offer the mind, then "music, since it merely plays with sensations, has the lowest place among the fine arts." He criticizes music for the transitory character of the impressions it produces and also for its lack of "urbanity," in that music imposes itself on others in the vicinity and thus "impairs the

freedom of those outside of the musical party" (§54, 330). (This last point is often ridiculed, but it reflects Kant's deep commitment, reflected elsewhere in his philosophy, to the importance of freedom, specifically in the exercise of one's mental capacities.) At §54 he expands on the suggestion that pleasure in music is merely sensory by saying that it consists in a feeling of bodily health brought about by the lively alternation of the various emotions it arouses. And he compares music to the telling of jokes, claiming that both deserve to be considered more as agreeable arts than as beautiful arts.

It is important to note that Kant's account of music, in particular his reductive view of pleasure in music and consequent dismissal of music's claims to be beautiful, does not represent a commitment of the core aesthetic theory presented in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. On the contrary, the discussion at §§51-54 seems to be based on assumptions which conflict with the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, in particular that the experience of beauty must include the entertaining of moral ideas "which alone carry with them an independent liking" (§52, 326). Kant seems to assume, in these passages, that the only alternative to a pleasure which is associated with moral ideas is sensory or bodily gratification. But this seems to run counter to a (perhaps *the*) central theme of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, which is that pleasure in the beautiful is a distinctive kind of pleasure, associated with the functioning of the cognitive faculties, which is independent both of sensory gratification and of moral feeling. If we privilege the *Analytic* as the heart of Kant's aesthetic theory, then it would seem that music's lack of association with moral ideas should constitute it as a paradigm of the beautiful in art (as indeed suggested by Kant's characterization of it at §16 as "free beauty").

CONCLUSION: A KANTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC?

I have suggested that Kant's aesthetic theory commits him neither to musical formalism nor to his own reductive characterization of musical experience at §§53-54. What, then, are its positive implications for philosophical thinking about music? As I understand his account, it leaves open a wide range of views about the appreciation of music, including views which ascribe meaning to music or take it to express emotions. But I take a view of music that is Kantian in spirit to be committed at least to the following claims:

(1) The beauty of a piece of music (and by extension, other aesthetic features we might ascribe to it) is not a real or objective feature of it.

(2) The pleasure of listening to music does not derive merely from the senses, but from an exercise of the same capacities that are required for cognition, in particular imagination.

(3) There can be genuine agreement and disagreement about judgments of the aesthetic value of music: in other words, divergence in such aesthetic judgments is not just a matter of differing likes and dislikes

(4) While there is a genuine point to critical discourse about music, and musical analysis more specifically, claims that are made in critical discourse do not have the status of rational arguments.

Among contemporary philosophical accounts of music, Scruton 1997 seems to me to come closest to a view which is Kantian in the sense suggested here.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Bicknell, Jeannette (2002). "Can Music Convey Semantic Content? A Kantian Approach," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60: 253-261. (Applies Kant's views on aesthetic ideas to contemporary questions about the experience of music.)
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Kivy, P. (2009). *Antithetical Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Chapter 2 contains more recent reflections on Kant and musical formalism.)

Weatherston, Martin (1996). "Kant's Assessment of Music in the Critique of Judgment," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36:56-65. (Examines Kant's negative characterization of music.)

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