

BOOK REVIEW

Critique of Pure Music, by James O. Young

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Reviewed by Vítor Guerreiro

Ever since people have written about the idea that music has some sort of extra-musical content (expressive or representational) it has enjoyed wide acceptance. It was not until the publication, in 1854, of *On the Musically Beautiful*, by the Viennese musical critic Eduard Hanslick, that formalism arose as a serious alternative to this idea that extra-musical content partly explains music's value.¹ Formalism in music has perhaps been most eloquently stated in the words of one of its present-day defenders, Nick Zangwill, who tells us that:

Listening to music is an isolated and lonely encounter with another world, a disembodied world of beautiful sound, far from the world of human life. . . . To humanize music is to desecrate it. Music is inhuman, and awesome because of it, like stars in the night sky.²

James Young defends anti-formalism about music (and art) in works such as *Art and Knowledge*.³ Young's position can be characterized as the conjunction of the following two theses:

¹Hanslick 1986.

²Zangwill 2012, p. 389.

³Young 2001.

1. Music can be (and some music in fact is) about extra-musical reality, in particular human emotions.
2. Not all musical value is formal value, i.e., value that depends solely on formal properties of the music.

In *Art and Knowledge* Young proposes that “a work of art can be beautiful because it is a source of knowledge”.⁴ He defends the view that there are two fundamentally different kinds of representation—*semantic* and *illustrative*—and that the representation proper to the arts is the latter, rather than the former, even when taking into account the literary arts. The main difference between these two kinds of representation is that illustrative representations do not (in fact cannot) make *statements* about reality; neither do they (nor can they) present arguments, in the absence of which the ability to make statements would not go a long way in improving artworks’ cognitive significance. The knowledge we get from art is not propositional knowledge. Instead, artistic (illustrative) representation puts one “in the position to recognize the rightness of a perspective”,⁵ or it provides insight on *what it is like* to be in a certain situation.

Building on his previous ideas, here in *Critique of Pure Music* Young holds that music provides insight into emotional experience by arousing emotions in the listener. This is a particular case of illustrative representation.

The book is organized into five chapters. In the first chapter (Music and Emotion) a *resemblance theory* is put forward (resemblance between certain experienced features of music and human behaviour expressive of emotion) as an explanation for why people persistently describe music in emotion terms. The chapter includes a captivating and empirically informed discussion of the role of convention in determining the expressive character of certain intervals, chords, and scales (e.g. the familiar association between the minor mode and “negative” emotions). Here Young holds that the role of convention, though significant, is substantively less so than some writers (such as Kivy) sup-

⁴Young 2001, p. ix.

⁵Ibid., p. 69.

pose. In the second chapter (Music and the Arousal of Emotions) he defends the view that music *arouses* emotions in listeners in virtue of the resemblance we perceive between our experience of music and our experience of human behaviour expressive of emotions.

Neither the resemblance theory nor the idea that music arouses emotions are defended solely with philosophical arguments. To defend both, Young makes use of evidence afforded by empirical research, since in his view the resemblance theory is an empirical theory and, as such, it can't be confirmed or disproved solely by way of *a priori* reasoning. In this respect, Young's book strongly contrasts much of the philosophical literature on the subject. Drawing on such evidence, Young identifies four mechanisms by which music arouses emotion: i) automatic brain reflexes; ii) emotional contagion; iii) somatic effects; and iv) frustration and realization of musical expectations.

According to Young, the resemblance between certain aspects of music and human behaviour expressive of emotion is what gives music its emotionally expressive character. The most common mechanism through which this happens is "a pervasive feature of our experience of the world," namely our ability to exploit *cross-domain mappings*, i.e., to enact a "transfer of concepts derived from one sensory modality to experiences derived from another sensory modality" (p. 19). It is in virtue of this ability that we can hear *movement* in the music, and it is the experience of diverse *kinds* of movement (as well as one of music's most notorious somatic effects: the urge it instills in listeners to move along with it) that gives rise to *similarities* between experiences of music and experiences of emotion. The fact that such resemblances found in music are the intentional result of the composer's action makes it the case that music counts as a *representation* of emotionally expressive behaviour. The fact that the arousal of emotions by music thus conceived is also the intentional result of the composer's action makes it the case that the music counts as a representation of the *phenomenology* of expressed emotions, not just of emotionally expressive behaviour. These conclusions are sustained by a conception of representation presented in Chapter Three (The Content of Music). According to this conception, there are three conditions a thing must

satisfy in order to be classed a representation:

the *content* condition: if R is a representation, then R is a source of knowledge about the represented object;

the *intentionality* condition: if R is a representation, then someone intended R to have cognitive significance (nothing is a representation by accident);

the *accessibility* condition: if R is a representation, then some audience members, distinct from the person who intended R to be a representation, must be able to recognize the cognitive significance of R.

If the characterization of representation given by these conditions is correct, and if both the resemblance theory and the idea that music arouses emotion are true, we are but a step away, Young argues, from acknowledging that (some) music represents emotion: by intentionally endowing music with properties that give rise to expression and arousal of emotion, the composer intends music to have cognitive significance, satisfying the intentionality condition; if all goes well, the content condition is also satisfied and, furthermore, if an audience recognizes the expressive qualities of music and, while listening to the music, experiences the emotions the composer intends to arouse, the accessibility condition is thus also satisfied.

Young speaks of “cognitive significance” (or “content”) rather than “meaning,” because of the clear distinction he makes between semantic and illustrative representation. Sometimes we speak of the “meaning” of a musical work or a painting, but this is for Young an imprecise use of the word (p. 91). Meaning is but one kind of cognitive significance: the cognitive significance proper to semantic representations (e.g. a declarative sentence); but something can have cognitive significance without having (semantic) meaning. This sets Young against writers, such as Scruton, who conceive of representation in terms of propositional content and infer music’s inability to represent extra-musical reality from the premise that music does not express propositions—unlike Young, Scruton thinks pictorial depictions express propositions.

In the fourth chapter (Music and Lyrics) Young attacks the idea that music and literature are fundamentally different arts, based upon the kind of representations they employ and how they relate to emotions, or, in the phrase used by Kivy in the title of a recent book, “antithetical arts.”⁶ The conviction that music and literature are “antithetical arts” results, according to Young, from the erroneous adoption of a “propositional theory of literature,” together with a formalist view of music. Briefly, the former sees literature as “a series of statements whose only cognitive content is its semantic meaning” (p. 127); the latter states that “music is contentless form and makes sense only in purely musical terms” (p. 125). From the conjunction of these two views comes the idea that the combination of music and words in a hybrid artwork (in opera, for example) poses a problem: composers can “compose music that is subservient to the text and enhances its semantic content, or they can write music that is successful in purely musical terms.” Young thinks this is a pseudo-problem: “music and words can work together to arouse emotion in complementary ways.” (p. 132). The problem dissolves, according to Young, if we eliminate the confusion relating to how both music and literature represent emotion. The author holds that in both literature and music the kind of representation that prevails is illustrative, not semantic:

Works of literature do not make statements. Literary works provide insight by changing how people see the world. One way of doing this is to evoke emotions. (pp. 132–33)

And such insight cannot be condensed in a statement.

Though different, the ways literature and music represent also partly overlap when we consider, Young suggests, that some literature is designed to be read aloud (as well as, in some cases, sung). “Words can, when uttered, have properties akin to those of music and the sounds of words can have an emotional impact” (p. 135). In defence of this idea the author, once more, draws not only on philosophical argument, but also on empirical evidence.

⁶Kivy 2009.

The book ends with a chapter on the value of music. Why do we find the experience of music valuable? Young's view is that the formalist gives us at best an incomplete answer to this question: as it was mentioned, the anti-formalist accepts that part of music's value is formal, but he holds that not all musical value is.

Appealing to what he calls the heresy of substitutable experience, Young employs against the formalist a well-known argument used against the view that music is emotionally expressive, evocative, or representational: if music were valuable in virtue of the fact that it arouses emotions, we could substitute something else that has the same emotional effect for the music—a drug, for example. But no music lover would be willing to make such a trade. But Young argues that the formalist, once committed to the idea that value in music is formal value, owes us an explanation of why people find music aesthetically gratifying, if the relevant musical experience is experience of formal properties and relations. The hypothesis that, according to Young, generates the heresy of substitutable experience is the idea that listeners engage in intellectual games, such as *cherchez le thème* and the “hypothesis game” (searching for the themes and forming hypotheses about what will happen next): if music were valuable because it affords listeners the opportunity to play a sort of “musical chess,” then we could substitute it for something else that had the same effect (e.g., reading the score), without thereby losing anything. Even if “musical chess” is in fact a source of pleasure—and the anti-formalist need not deny this—it doesn't offer us a complete explanation of the value people ascribe to music.

Young also raises doubts about the way formalism appeals to beauty in order to explain the value of musical experience. In particular, he attacks what seems to him a unanimous view among defenders of formalism: the idea that the aesthetic properties of music are ineffable (which supposedly makes the experience of beauty an unexplained explainer). Some formalists hold that most descriptions of music, especially those that employ emotion predicates, are metaphorical; that musical experience can't be described (or, if it can, only in a very limited way) in literal terms. Zangwill calls this view

“this-worldly mysticism” about music: musical experience has properties that are ineffable or not susceptible of literal description.⁷ Against this sort of approach, Young holds that the beauty of music is at least partly explained by its cognitive value, that is, its capacity to represent emotions. The view that aesthetic value incorporates both hedonic and cognitive value echoes the remark made by Aristotle that pleasure taken in representations is an integral feature of human nature, and that we contemplate with pleasure even “reproductions of objects which in real life it pains us to look upon” (*Poet*, 1448^b3).

Young’s criticism of this aspect of the formalist doctrine is actually one of the book’s most disputable claims, it seems to me. It is not clear that such criticism is even remotely fair. In defence of the formalist (and one should bear in mind that not all formalists accept the “essential metaphor thesis”) we can point out, first, that there is a difference between being mysterious or unexplainable and being ineffable in the sense of being describable only in non-literal terms; second, that it is not that aesthetic properties themselves are ineffable (we can speak intelligibly about elegance, delicateness, graciousness and a host of akin properties, for example), it just so happens that the experience of music is always more fine-grained than any description we can give of it; and third, that there is nothing particularly mysterious about the relative ineffability of musical experience, since all perceptive experience shares this quality (how would you explain the smell of coffee to someone who has never experienced it?). There is nothing here to suggest that the experience of aesthetic properties is unexplainable, even if some formalists adopt such stance. Here is an analogy: the difficulty in describing the visual experience of a shade of colour does not imply an absence of explanations for the fact that we have colour experiences. So at least this part of Young’s critique of formalism simply moves too fast.

No less important than putting forward true propositions backed up with sound arguments (and it is up to the reader to decide whether Young’s book succeeds in this task) is to prevent ideas from becoming stale by force of being taken too often as the default view. In this sense,

⁷Zangwill 2009, p. 15.

a passionate, clear, focused, and engaging defence of anti-formalism was needed. Young's book certainly succeeds in this task.

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