
Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Music

By Harlow Gale



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Contents

About this Title	4
Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Music	5
Notes	9

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[362]

Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Music

RICHARD WAGNER in his remarkable centennial [essay on Beethoven](#) acknowledges his great indebtedness to the pessimistic philosopher Schopenhauer for his fundamental ideas on music. Indeed, the philosopher's influence on the master is apparent all through the nine volumes of Wagner's literary works, and in the music dramas we find the philosophic relation of music to the other arts worked out into a new and immortal art. So not only to comprehend Wagner, the man, author, and composer, but also to understand the meaning of "the music of the future" and to gain a greater inspiration from the chamber music and symphonies of the older masters we should be familiar with these suggestive cullings from Schopenhauer's art chapters in "Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung."

We must recall the "truth which lies at the foundation of all that" Schopenhauer has "hitherto said about art," viz: "That the object of art, the representation of which is the aim of the artist, and the knowledge of which must therefore precede his work as its germ and source, is the Idea in Plato's sense, and never anything else; not the particular thing, the object of common apprehension, and not the concept, the object of rational thought and of science." Beginning his consideration of the fine arts with architecture, whose peculiar end was the objectification of the lower grades of the visibility of the will (1) in its conflict with gravity and rigidity, Schopenhauer now comes to the highest art of music for whose unique position there has hitherto been no fitting place in the systematic [363] connection of his exposition. Music "stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts." What can it be in this great and exceedingly noble art by which it affects the inmost nature of man so powerfully and is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his secretest consciousness? After giving himself up entirely to these impressions of all forms of music, which are usually left here as insolvable in their mystery, Schopenhauer then returned to reflection and an explanation of the nature of the imitative relation of music to the rest of the world. The independence of music and the secret of its influence he found in the explanation that in music we do not recognize the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world. "Music is thus by no means like the other arts, the copy of the Ideas, but the *copy of the will itself*, whose objectivity these Ideas are. This is why the effect of music is much more powerful and penetrating than that of the other arts, for they speak only of shadows, but it speaks of the thing itself." Thus is explained the phenomenalism and individualism of the lesser arts as contrasted with the universality of music. "Music does not express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their motives. Yet we completely understand them in this extracted quintessence. Hence it arises that our imagination is so easily excited by music, and now seeks to give form to that invisible yet actively moved spirit world which speaks to us directly, and to clothe it with flesh and blood, i. e. to embody it in an analogous example. This is the origin of the song with words, and finally of the opera, the text of which should therefore never forsake that subordinate position in order to make itself the chief thing and the music the mere means of expressing it, which is a great misconception and a piece of utter perversity; for music always expresses only the quintessence of life and its events, and never these themselves, and therefore their differences do not always affect it. It is precisely this universality, which belongs exclusively to it, together with the greatest determinateness, [364] that gives music the high worth which it has as the panacea for all our woes. Thus if music is too closely united to words, and tries to form itself according to the events, it is striving to speak a language which is not its own."

"The words are and remain for music a foreign addition, of subordinate value, for the effect of the tones is incomparably more powerful, more infallible, and quicker than that of words. Therefore if words become incorporated in music, they must yet assume an entirely subordinate position, and adapt themselves completely to it. But," and here we trace the beginnings of Wagner's music dramas, "the relation appears reversed in the case of the given poetry, thus the song or the libretto of an opera to which music is adapted. For the art of music at once shows in these its power and higher fitness, disclosing the most profound, ultimate, and secret significance of the feelings expressed in the words or action of the opera, giving utterance to their peculiar and true nature and teaching us the inmost soul of the actions and events whose mere clothing and body is set before us on the stage. With regard to this superiority of the music, and also because it stands to the libretto and the action in the relation of the universal to the particular, of the rule to the example, it might perhaps appear more fitting that the libretto should be written for the music than that the music should be composed for the libretto. However, in the customary method, the words and the action of the libretto lead the composer to the affections of the will which lie at their foundation, and call up in him the feelings to be expressed; they act, therefore, as a means of exciting his musical imagination. Moreover, that the addition of poetry to music is so welcome to us, and a song with intelligible words gives us such deep satisfaction, depends upon the fact that our most direct and most indirect ways of knowing are called into play at once and in connection. The most direct is that for which music expresses the emotions of the will itself, and the most indirect that of the conceptions denoted by words. Where the language of the feelings is in question the reason does not willingly sit entirely idle. Music is certainly able with the means at its own disposal to express every movement of the will, every feeling; but by the addition of words we [365] receive besides this the objects of these feelings, the motives which occasion them. The music of an opera, as it is presented in the score, has a complete independence, separate, and, as it were, abstract existence for itself, to which the incidents and persons of the piece are foreign, and which follow its own unchanging rules; therefore it can produce its full effect without the libretto. But this music since it was composed with reference to the drama, is, as it were, the soul of the latter; for, in its connection with the incidents, persons, and words, it becomes the expression of the finer significance of all those incidents and of their ultimate and secret necessity which depends upon this significance..... If now we cast a glance at purely instrumental music, a symphony of Beethoven presents to us the greatest confusion, which yet has the most perfect order at its foundation, the most vehement conflict, which is transformed the next moment into the most beautiful concord. It is *rerum concordia discors*, a true and perfect picture of the nature of the world which rolls on in the boundless maze of innumerable forms, and through constant destruction, supports itself. But in this symphony all human passions and emotions also find utterance; joy, sorrow, love, hatred, terror, hope, etc., in innumerable degrees, yet all, as it were, only *in abstracto*, and without any particularization; it is the mere form without the substance, like a spirit world without matter. Certainly we have a tendency to realize them while we listen, to clothe them in imagination with flesh and bones, and to see in them scenes of life and nature on every hand. Yet, taken generally, this is not required for their comprehension, or enjoyment, but rather imparts to them a foreign and arbitrary addition; therefore it is better to apprehend them in their immediacy and purity."

"According to all this we may regard the phenomenal world, or nature, and music as two different expressions of the same thing"—*will*, the fundamental world-stuff, expressing itself as nature indirectly and indistinctly as through Platonic Ideas, but immediately and subtly in music as will-in-itself. "Music, therefore, if regarded as an expression of the world, is in the highest degree a universal language, which is related indeed to the universality of concepts, much as they are related [366] to the particular things. Its universality, however, is by no

means that empty universality of abstraction, but quite of a different kind, and is united with thorough and distinct definiteness. In this respect it resembles geometrical figures and numbers, which are the universal forms of all possible objects of experience and applicable to them all *à priori*, and yet are not abstract but perceptible and thoroughly determined. All possible efforts, excitements, and manifestations of will, all that goes on in the heart of man and that reason includes in the wide negative concept of feeling, may be expressed by the infinite number of possible melodies, but always in the universal, in the mere form, without the material, always according to the thing-in-itself, not the phenomenon; the inmost soul, as it were, of the phenomenon, without the body. This deep relation which music has to the true nature of all things also explains the fact that suitable music played to any scene, action, event, or surrounding seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning, and appears as the most accurate and distinct commentary upon it. This is so truly the case, that whoever gives himself up entirely to the impressions of a symphony, seems to see all the possible events of the world take place in himself, yet if he neglects, he can find no likeness between the music and the things that passed before his mind. For as we have said, music is distinguished from the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more accurately, the adequate objectification of the will, but is the direct copy of the will itself, and therefore exhibits itself as the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, and as the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon. We might, therefore, just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will; and this is the reason why music makes every picture, and indeed every scene of real life and of the world, at once appear with higher significance, certainly all the more as the melody is analogous to the inner spirit of the given phenomenon. It rests upon this that we are able to set a poem to music as a song, or a perceptible representation, as a pantomime, or both as an opera. Such particular pictures of human life, set to the universal language of music, are never bound to it or correspond to it with stringent necessity; but they stand to it only in the relation [367] of an example chosen at will to a general concept. In the determinateness of the real, they represent that which music expresses in the universality of mere form, for melodies are to a considerable extent, like general concepts, an abstraction from the actual. This actual world, then, the world of particular things, affords the object of perception, the special and individual, the particular case, both to the universality of the concepts and to the universality of the melodies. But these two universalities are in a certain respect opposed to each other; for the concepts contain particulars only as the first forms abstracted from perception, as it were, the separated shell of things. This relation may be very well expressed in the language of the schoolmen by saying that concepts are the *universalia post rem*, but music gives the *universalia ante rem*, and the real world the *universalia in re*."

"The unutterable depth of all music by which it floats through our consciousness as the vision of a paradise firmly believed in yet ever distant from us, and by which also it is so fully understood and yet is so inexpressible, rests on the fact that it restores to us all the emotions of our inmost nature, but entirely without reality and far removed from their pain. So also the seriousness which is essential to it, which excludes the absurd from its direct and peculiar province, is to be explained by the fact that its object is not the Idea, with reference to which alone deception and absurdity are possible; but its object is directly the will, and this is essentially the most serious of all things, for it is that on which all depends."

The kinship of music and philosophy Schopenhauer shows strikingly after reminding us again that he has "been trying to bring out clearly that music expresses in a perfectly universal language, in a homogeneous material, mere tones, and with the greatest determinateness and truth, the inner nature, the in-itself of the world, which we think under the concept will, because will is its most direct manifestation. Further, according to my view and contention, philosophy is nothing but a complete and accurate repetition or expression of the nature of the world in very general concepts, for only in such is it possible to get a view of that whole

nature which will everywhere be adequate and applicable. Thus whoever [368] has followed me and entered into my mode of thought will not think it so very paradoxical if I say, that supposing it were possible to give a perfectly accurate, complete explanation of music, extending even to particulars, that is to say, a detailed repetition in concepts of what it expresses, this would also be a sufficient repetition and explanation of the world in concepts, or at least entirely parallel to such an explanation, and thus it would be a true philosophy."

Harlow Gale.

Notes

Note 1 on page 5

The key to Schopenhauer's philosophical system is in the title of the work from which we quote, "The world is my idea"—subjective idealism; yet he knows more of the thing-in-itself than Kant, for he calls this causal world stuff, this "kernel of every particular thing and also of the whole" by the name of that which is the most immediately and best known to us, viz: Will.