



Review of Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

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[1] Roger Scruton's *Aesthetics of Music* is a smart, witty, and eloquent book, full of passionate and persuasive argument. An articulate conservative political philosopher closely associated with Margaret Thatcher, Scruton is also an amateur composer, who obviously cares deeply about music and is much concerned with diagnosing the reasons for the decline of musical culture in recent years. Scruton's aesthetics draws heavily on German idealism, which he couples with a thorough knowledge of analytic philosophy and a surprisingly firm grasp of contemporary music theory (Schenker, Lerdahl and Jackendoff). The result is a rare thing: a book on music aesthetics where both philosophical and musical issues are handled deftly and thoughtfully.

[2] Following the tradition of idealist aesthetics, Scruton grounds his thinking about music on a distinction between sound and tone. Without tone, he says, music cannot exist. Tone, moreover, cannot be reduced to sound; instead tone arises from something we hear in sound when we hear it as music. "A tone is a sound which exists within a musical 'field of force.' This field of force is something we hear, when hearing tones" (page 17). Scruton is surely correct to emphasize that music, unlike sound, is an "intentional object of musical perception" (page 78). Consequently when discussing music, we must, Scruton argues, be careful not to commit the error of mistaking sound for music, that is, the material substrate for the ideal object, even though the temptation will be great given the material substantiality of sound. "When we hear music, we do not hear sound only; we hear something in sound, something which moves with a force of its own" (pages 19–20). What precisely is this something?

[3] Tone, according to Scruton, is wholly the product of imagination; it seems to occupy a place in some imaginary musical space. Tone is not material, then, but idea. Scruton argues that precisely when we must imagine a representational excess over the material world, "metaphors seem indispensable . . . because we are using them to describe something other than the material world; in particular because we are attempting to describe how the world seems, from the point of view of active imagination" (page 91). The experience of sound as music depends radically on our imagining the sound as something other than mere sound. "Perception is a natural epistemological power of the organism, which depends on no social context for its exercise. The musical experience, however, is not merely perceptual. It is founded in metaphor, arising when unreal movement is heard in imaginary space. Such an experience occurs only within a musical culture, in which traditions of

performance and listening shape our expectations” (page 239). Metaphor is essential rather than contingent to musical experience, for it is the means of discursively mapping an imaginary musical space. The metaphor cannot be eliminated because music is not a natural type, not wholly contained in the material object. “The indispensable metaphor occurs when the way the world seems depends upon an imaginative involvement with it, rather than on our ordinary cognitive goals. And this is the case when we listen to music” (page 92). Music then is something radically human, “the intentional object of an experience that only rational beings can have” (page 96). Sound itself is always marked by a deficiency that only the metaphors of music can redeem. “It is true that the terms used to describe music refer to material sounds. But they refer to them under a description that no material sound can satisfy. Sounds do not move as music moves. . . Nor are they organized in a spatial way, nor do they rise and fall. Yet this is how we hear them when we hear them as music” (page 93). This means that “metaphor cannot be eliminated from the description of music, because it defines the intentional object of the musical experience. Take the metaphor away, and you cease to describe the experience of music” (page 92). Consequently, forging metaphorical descriptions of music is never an extra-musical activity but a fundamental aspect of understanding sound as music: without metaphor there can be no musical descriptions but only descriptions of sound. “Metaphor,” Scruton insists, “describes exactly what we hear, when we hear sounds as music” (page 96).

[4] The central metaphor for describing our experience of music, Scruton argues, is tonality. Tonality is the name we give the fictional world of music, the metaphorical order we hear in sound when we hear sound as music. One reason the metaphors of tonality are so crucial, Scruton says, is that they permit us to experience music spatially. “Tonal harmony enables us to hear simultaneous musical events as similar or varied; as moving together through a common intentional space; as creating tension and resolution, attraction and repulsion; as answering, commenting upon, and questioning each other; as moving with the force and logic of gestures which are mutually aware, and mutually accommodating. Triadic tonality is not a system of conventions, arbitrarily devised and imposed by fiat; it is the life-giving air which the voices breathe, and through which they move in dance-like discipline” (page 271). Tonality permits us to experience music as a “journey through tonal space” (page 286). Music that lacks tonality, he says, also lacks the “paradigm of musical organization” that is tonality. Non-tonal music, in other words, suffers from a poverty of organizing metaphors, and Scruton holds this lack more responsible for the difficulties nontonal music has had in finding and sustaining an audience than anything in the actual sound of the music. Moreover, he notes that “attempts to depart from tonality, or to discard it entirely, seem only to confirm its authority over the musical ear” (page 239). To the extent that nontonal music remains indebted to tonal metaphors, its organization will seem anti-tonal, that is, a nihilistic negation of tonality, whose impulses will continue to be acutely felt as tonal absences.

[5] Scruton directs his critique of nontonal music primarily against serialism, which, he says, determines the sonic order of pitches rather than the musical order of tones. Serialism, in other words, orders sound rather than tones, which means that serialism is fundamentally incapable of displacing the centrality of the tonal metaphor. Serialism in this view becomes a kind of musical utopia that cannot succeed because in its enthusiasm to order the material properties of sound, it forgets about tone, which consequently has only an accidental appearance in the music. What is heard in a serial piece, Scruton asserts, is often anything but the serial organization. Serial music often “[elicits] the ghost of tonal order” (page 296), and we are often “hearing against the intellectual structure, and incorporating what we hear into tonal or quasi-tonal categories” (page 94). Scruton is no doubt correct that the serial organization is often of little apparent musical import, though he perhaps indicts serialism too quickly on this count. For Scruton, the lack of connection between musical and intellectual organization of serial music counts as a fatal flaw because it suggests that serialism’s utopian project, a complete transformation of musical listening, has failed. “The purpose of serial organization was precisely to replace the order of tonality with an order which, by treating the twelve tones permutationally, would confer equality on each of them. In other words, it was to endow the musical surface with a new heard order.” (page 296). But this statement of the utopian intentions of nontonal composition is not quite persuasive, for it ignores the crucial critical function of this utopia as an image of the not-yet, of what might be otherwise. Equally plausibly, it could be asserted that the purpose of serial organization was not so much to assert a novel organization of the musical surface as to endow the musical surface with a systemic resistance to tonal order. When Boulez polemically declared that Schoenberg was dead, he did not emphasize the extension of serial procedures as opening up a new order of hearing. Rather he argued that total serialism offered a means to avoid uncritically reproducing and affirming the old musical order. Boulez, in other words, conceived total serialism as the ultimate extension of the critique of tonality that Schoenberg had, in Boulez’s opinion, rather too timidly initiated.

[6] By withholding the organizing metaphors tonality grants to music, nontonal music registers a self-reflective ambivalence toward images of social order implicit in tonality. Scruton, too, unwittingly concurs with this line of argument: “Atonal music in the theatre expresses states of mind that are always partly negative: every lyrical passage is shot through with anxiety; each loving gesture is also a gesture of betrayal; there is no affirmation of life that does not mask a will to destroy it. It as though anxiety were programmed into this music and can never be wholly eliminated” (page 306). What Scruton especially disproves is the ambivalence, the lack of clear affirmation. Nontonal music asks, as it were, whether social order is possible without coercion. Unlike tonality, which calls forth an image of social harmony, as though it were actually present in the world, nontonal music does not affirm this image. In this way, nontonal music understood as a critique of tonality reveals a moment of ideological delusion in tonality, that is, tonality as false utopia. Scruton cannot acknowledge this possibility except obliquely, when he hears in Berg or Stravinsky, for instance, “a reading of serialism against itself, so that each harmony and motif contains a kind of pointer towards a distant tonal center” (page 307). Even in these instances he transmutes this effective serialism into a kind of nostalgia for a lost tonal order rather than interpreting it as a more determined critique of tonal thinking. Yet such music gains its musical power precisely through a critical orientation toward tonality, not because it returns to tonality nostalgically and unproblematically.

[7] If Scruton remains unconvinced by the product of nontonal composition, he finds the products of mass culture equally troubling, and he directs especially nasty barbs at REM, Nirvana, and heavy metal. Repeating a tired motif of cultural criticism, he ridicules the substitution of rhythm by beat in popular music and bemoans the “decline of popular culture” (page 157), which he understands as having devolved from the cheerfulness of jazz at the beginning of the century to the nihilistic despair of heavy metal and grunge today. “Music soothes, cheers, pacifies; it threatens the power of the monsters, who live by violence and lawlessness. Those lonely, antinomian beings are astounded by music, which speaks of another order of being. . . It is this very order that is threatened by the monsters of popular culture. Much modern pop is cheerless, and meant to be cheerless. But much of it is also a kind of negation of music, a dehumanizing of the spirit of song” (page 504). Such complaints about popular culture are not confined to political conservatives, of course, and Scruton is aware that his perspective on mass culture is not far removed from Adorno, from whom he remains curiously anxious to distance himself. Thus, Scruton claims a qualitative difference between Adorno’s mass culture and the mass culture of today and detects “something hasty and indiscriminating in [Adorno’s] dismissal of an entire subculture, as though we could not distinguish the cheerful and life-enhancing sound of Louis Armstrong from the monsters of Heavy Metal” (page 480). Yet Scruton too hardly prove capable of making distinctions in mass culture today—it is all “sentimental and idolatrous” (page 506).

[8] Scruton is more convincing when attempting to refute “the idea of mass culture as a ‘bourgeois’ product, and of modernism as the only available answer to it” (page 469). His intriguing thesis here is that mass culture is not the product of the bourgeoisie but of democratic culture. “If you ask yourself seriously, when the transformation of popular music began, the answer would surely be in the twentieth century, with the reduction of the jazz and blues tradition to a set of repeatable melodic and harmonic formulae, held together by a continuous ‘beat.’ This was not a bourgeois phenomenon at all, and had less to do with the triumph of capitalism than with the triumph of democracy” (pages 469–70). Scruton, as usual, draws too fine a distinction here, for it is simply implausible that “the masses themselves produced this music” (page 470), as if the productive capacities paid for by the bourgeoisie played no mediating role in the shift to a consumer-oriented culture. Without the phonograph, radio, film and, later, television—all reproductive technologies requiring capital investment far beyond the means (and so control) of the masses, no matter what the extent of their representation within the images—mass culture could not exist. And one of the characteristics of mass reproductive media is that they supply not only a product but also help create demand for it. “Spontaneous” artistic production does not generally occur in mass culture because there is simply too much money at stake. The maxim of the swing band—no practicing on the bandstand—is the general condition of cultural production in the era of mechanical reproduction.

[9] Still, Scruton is correct to emphasize the impact that the “collapse of bourgeois culture” (page 470) and its replacement by “democratic culture” have had on musical life in the present century. And Scruton, no less than Adorno, is forced into cultural retreat if not actual hibernation in the face of consumer capitalism. “High culture,” Scruton writes, “is now the province of a minority,” as if this has not always been the case; “those with ears must guard them from the white noise of modern life; and exercise them only in private, or among those like-minded listeners whom they encounter in the concert

hall” (page 470). Culture, Scruton argues, is in decline because the bourgeoisie are in decline. “It is only in certain cultural conditions—those which the bourgeois order most readily promotes, by promoting the prosperity which is the root of leisure—that this flowering of the aesthetic impulse can occur” (page 478). Scruton’s nostalgia for the old cultural order blocks critical reflection on it, something Adorno, for all his hostility toward mass culture and his reverence for traditional bourgeois culture, never forgets: namely, what are the conditions of possibility of leisure time? Or, to put it more bluntly, Who pays for it?

[10] Yet it is more productive to read Scruton charitably here as trying to open a space between the two dominant elements of modernist culture, and, to his great credit, he struggles mightily against a mandarin impulse to write off all of democratic culture. Mass culture in his view is essentially a product of American cultural hegemony. Consequently, he is inclined to treat it as a somewhat unruly step-child of European bourgeois culture. The category of taste serves to distinguish these cultures: “Democratic culture presses us to accept every taste that does no obvious damage. A teacher who criticizes the music of his pupils, or who tries to cultivate, in the place of it, a love for the classics, will be attacked as ‘judgmental.’ In matters of aesthetic taste, no adverse judgement is permitted, save judgement of the adverse judge. This attitude has helped America to survive and flourish in a world of change. An aristocratic culture has an instinctive aversion to what is vulgar, sentimental, or commonplace; not so a democratic culture, which sacrifices good taste to popularity, and places no obstacles whatsoever before the ordinary citizen in his quest for a taste of his own” (page 497). Although his sympathies clearly lie on the side of bourgeois, aristocratic taste, Scruton does occasionally describe democratic culture in almost heroic terms, as the triumph of freedom, though his celebratory tone in such instances is always tempered: democratic freedom is not a freedom he himself can fully embrace, nor really even comprehend: “What I have described is not the decadence of popular music, but its final freedom—its breaking-loose from the channel of taste, into the great ocean of equality, where the writ of taste no longer runs. The postmodern world denatures music only because it denatures everything, in order that each individual might have his chance to buy and sell. Popular music ceases to be music, just as sexual love ceases to be love: nothing less than this is required by the new form of life—the fear, inadequacy, and anger that attend the attempt to live without the blessing of the dead—is itself expressed by the popular culture and reabsorbed by it. The cheerlessness of so much pop music is therapeutic: an acknowledgement that we live outside society, that we too, in granting equality to every human type, have become monsters, and that a monster is an OK thing to be” (pages 504–5). Scruton, of course, cannot sustain this thought and I suspect he stated it even here with tongue placed firmly in cheek. For Scruton’s larger purpose is to fight for the soul of American culture, to instill in it an image of culture as something better than what is, and to promote taste as something worth having. This goal helps make sense of the strange ending of the book where instead of resolution we find a piling up of difficult problems that follow from the collapse of high modernist culture.

[11] The difficulty of Scruton’s conclusion can perhaps be best seen in his discussion of sentimentality. Sentimentality, he writes, “is a vice. Not only does it place someone at a distance from reality; it also involves an overvaluation of the self at the cost of others. The other person enters the orbit of the sentimentalist as an excuse for emotion, rather than an object of it. The other is deprived of his objectivity as a person, and absorbed into the subjectivity of the sentimentalist. The other becomes, in a very real sense, a means to emotion, rather than an end in himself” (page 486). The problem with sentimentality, then, is that it instrumentalizes the other. To his credit, Scruton realizes that popular and high art are both often sentimental. “We are all to some extent sentimentalists” (page 488). Sentimentality in Scruton’s reading turns out to be a kind of defense against the (post)modern world. It allows us to surmount intractable difficulties by saying: “let us pretend” (page 488). Yet his account of sentimentality leaves him in something of a quandary. On the one hand, he cannot really wish directly for the restoration of bourgeois culture without lapsing into sentimental nostalgia for the lost order. But on the other hand, he cannot endorse the “faint sarcastic smile” (page 492), the cynical reason, the return to “‘tonality’ in inverted commas” (page 490) in neo-romanticism because in the awareness that comes with quotation, a crucial element of innocence is lost. Composition in inverted commas, he says, instrumentalizes emotion, becomes another instantiation of sentimentality. Tonality is no longer possible when it is heard as “tonality.” “The fact that an innocent stance towards the world is unavailable, makes music uncomposable. That which music expresses has gone from the world; and so music too must go” (page 491). Scruton attributes this “death” of music to the triumph of democratic culture and the leveling of taste that goes with it, but it is equally possible that such loss of faith, as it might be called, has as much to do with a general reflection of democratic culture on its own conditions of possibility. “Tonality” registers, as it were, the necessity and impossibility of our

experience of the modern world: that we must negotiate that world using organizing metaphors that we know at some level to be ideologically suspect and false, but that also remain useful and at some level even indispensable.

[12] Scruton, however, can see only how the pragmatism of democratic culture instrumentalizes musical thought and erodes standards of judgment and taste, so he holds out hope that a new bourgeoisie will emerge that will be able to “restore” tonal thinking without instrumentalization, sentimentality, or nostalgia. He claims to detect signs that “a new bourgeois order is emerging—one which does not feel the force of modernism’s bleak alternatives. It is a fragile audience: its ears muddled by pop music, its body starved of rhythm, its soul untutored in religious hope. Yet it has encountered the old musical culture and been inspired by it” (page 507). It would be easy to ridicule this thought as the feeble hope of a profoundly conservative and nostalgic man—whatever this “new bourgeois” audience may be it is clearly happier in a Broadway theater listening to the insipid melodies of Andrew Lloyd Weber than in the concert hall—but I find it is more productive to interpret Scruton’s statement as expressing a genuine desire to see democratic culture transcend itself, to become something more than what it currently is.

[13] This brings me to a final point and that has to do with the critical interpretation of music, something about which Scruton offers many important insights. While Scruton is largely dismissive of authors such as Adorno and McClary who seek among other things to understand the way ideology becomes manifest as music, their complaints against the narrowness and the illusion of “value-free” analysis are largely accepted by Scruton. Indeed, for Scruton, hearing music as music requires the “background assumption” of musical value. Consequently, Scruton has as little patience for a “value-free” analysis of music as has Adorno or McClary: “A willed neutrality is a kind of judgement, and critics with a political judgement are rightly suspicious of scholarship which forbids us to ask the pressing questions—questions concerning meaning and value—which trouble our listening habits” (page 365). Like Adorno or McClary, Scruton pushes description into evaluation, suggesting that the language with which we describe music cannot be separated from our evaluation of it because the whole point of musical description is to get the reader to hear the music as the author does. “Aesthetic description is an immovable part of critical practice, and can be distinguished from aesthetic evaluation only with difficulty, and only at the risk of isolating the evaluative judgement and emptying it of content. The good critic is not the one who ranks works of music in an order of merit, or assigns credit marks to each, but the one who alters our perception of the thing we hear, so as to persuade us of his judgement” (pages 372–3). In terms of analysis, Scruton recommends seeking out not deep structures, which explain surface structures, but latent structures, which actually form part of the surface. Such structures, Scruton argues, “are structures we can be brought to hear in the surface, as we broaden our musical understanding, and begin to notice relations that are more subtle than those which immediately strike the ear. An analysis of latent structure is also a piece of music criticism. For it aims to bring into salience what is important in the music, and to lead us to hear with greater understanding. It effects an adjustment in the intentional object—and could indeed be compared to the work of psychoanalysis, in bringing into consciousness the full matter of the musical response” (page 425). The convergence between critics such as Adorno or McClary, whose politics he despises, and his own position, is nowhere stronger than in his attempt to sharpen the critical dimension of analysis: “Analysis makes sense, therefore, only as a prelude to criticism. Criticism begins and ends in an elaborate act of ostentation. The critic asks us to notice certain things, and to hear them differently” (page 428). Ideological critics, Scruton says, act responsibly to the extent that they seek to transform our hearing, to the extent that they make us hear differently rather than simply imposing an ideological reading on the material whether it fits or not. Yet Scruton’s complaint really amounts to nothing more than pointing out that poor ideological criticism exists—certainly nothing to be surprised about.

[14] Scruton also raises a more substantial claim against ideological criticism, that it presumes “an untenable theory of history” (page 430), namely, Marxism. While Scruton is certainly justified in pursuing this argument, he conveniently uses it as cover for the fact that his own conservative theory of history is hardly more tenable. If Scruton finds Marxian accounts of history implausible, as having been left in the dustbin of history, then it is also true that his own ideologically conservative historiography is equally bankrupt. What then are we to make of this situation? A pervasive skepticism towards the ultimate truth of the large organizing metanarratives that drive thought defines the peculiar quality of the postmodern condition, a kind of living in quotation marks: it is difficult to accept any grand theory as anything more than a working hypothesis that is evaluated pragmatically, less in terms of its general truth than in the particular insights that it allows. If Scruton stands on no firmer intellectual ground than those he labels Marxists, then this perhaps accounts for why the careful reasoning and

measured tone he otherwise employs in the book always gives way to invective whenever he confronts political criticism with which he disagrees. “Some of ‘culture’ is the unintended by-product of social order; but much of it, including art, is freely intended. And that which is freely intended is always more than ideology, even if it is also ideology. A work of art may express and endorse the social conditions which gave rise to it; but it may also question them” (page 430). Few ideological critics would disagree with Scruton’s truism so far as it goes, certainly not Adorno, the implied target. Indeed, the idea of a critical function for art, the questioning of social conditions through artistic autonomy, is at the heart of Adorno’s defense of great art. But Scruton continues: “and if it is a great work of art, it will transcend [the social conditions] entirely to see into the human heart. Its meaning as ideology may be what interests us least, when we see it as a work of art” (page 430). Even granting that ideology is indeed what interests us least when we hear music as music, it might still prove instructive to inquire into this disinterest—its conditions of possibility, say—to understand how music can be heard as music in the first place, and to measure the social interest of hearing with disinterest. Art, too, bears a social cost. Leisure, as Scruton knows, lies near the heart of the matter, but he remains blind to the full ramifications of the category, in particular, that the distribution of leisure time is not equitable.

[15] Here, then, we return to Scruton’s initial premise, the division of tone and sound, which had at first seemed so plausible and intuitively correct. In fact, this division is not so innocent, which does not mean that we can do without it. While problematic, the premise remains absolutely indispensable. Scruton is certainly right that music does not exist without tone; when we listen to sound as music, we all necessarily become idealists. Yet just because we must hear tone in sound if we are to hear sound as music does not mean that we should take the separation of sound and tone as an unproblematic given. Instead, the aesthetics of music needs to be pushed to self-reflection on the point so that the irreducible idealism of hearing music in sound is disenchanted. With self-reflection, idealism turns into its opposite, revealing the social conditions that sustain it, indeed that make it possible in the first place.

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