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Aesthetic and Understanding of Music: An Interview with Sir Roger Scruton

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The present text is an interview with Sir Roger Scruton, one of today's most prolific thinkers. Disregarding polemics about politics and conservatism, this interview addresses only questions related to music. The main subjects considered here are philosophy, aesthetics, meaning, and the understanding of music. Two of his books are particularly explored: *The Aesthetic of Music* and *Understanding Music: philosophy and interpretation*. The result is a provocative confrontation with some of Scruton's ideas.

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Sir Roger Scruton is certainly one of the most prolific thinkers of the contemporary world. Since the publication of his first book titled *Art and Imagination* in 1974 he has already written more than 50 books. This astonishing productivity of more than one book per year occurs parallel to his extensive publications for scientific journals, book chapters, newspapers, as well as various guest appearances at conferences and television programs for which he is constantly invited. Amidst this astounding productivity, he shares his time as a professor at the University of Buckingham and at Scrutopia summer school, "an immersion experience in the philosophy and outlook of Sir Roger Scruton." Roger Scruton holds a Ph.D. in philosophy at Cambridge University with his thesis on aesthetics (1972). In 2016 he was granted a Knight Bachelor, a dignity from the British honours system rewarding his achievements and services to the United Kingdom.

Scruton is known as one of the strongholds of conservatism, and his political convictions are sometimes the target of hasty or biased criticisms that ultimately obscure his insights in the field of art. By assuming that hurried judgment occurs when people disregard formally articulated and intellectually grounded arguments and, instead, cast their glances at ideological predilections, in this interview I have decided to throw the spotlight only on questions related to music and aesthetics.

Scruton openly discusses controversial issues. And because he does not runaway from polemic subjects, he is often misinterpreted and his words even maliciously distorted. Just to exemplify one of these twisted allegations or fake news, I found a particular case rather mischievous from one of the several Internet articles claiming Scruton as the guru and preferred intellectual of the Brazilian right wing. There is an interview available on YouTube in which Scruton clearly states the importance of ecological preservation and the danger of handing over the country's natural wealth to multinational companies. Scruton's exact phrase is "keep the multinationals at distance." Nevertheless, the title used for this interview is: "Scruton Agrees with Bolsonaro (Brazil's current president) Regarding Privatizations" [Own translation]. It is known the president has manifested his wish in privatizing national companies. Therefore, the headline of this youtube video is rather the opposite of what Scruton declared in the interview"

Therefore, hoping to avoid any misunderstanding, I must clearly render the aim of this interview. Regardless of any social or economic right-wing standpoints or any conservative political creed, what I hope to achieve here is to address philosophically rooted arguments for some of the key points from Scruton's bibliographic production in the field of music, especially focusing on his books *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (2009) and *The Aesthetics of Music* (1999).

Some critics who reviewed Scruton's texts on the perception and aesthetic of music have posited their objections by attacking his ideological positions. By doing so, these criticisms intended to undermine or discredit ideas without, however, delving into a truly philosophical discussion. For this reason, many of the questions here addressed were intended to elucidate Scruton's insights regarding the cognitive mechanisms that make possible the understanding and appraisal of a musical work.

Some questions related to the problem of meaning in music were precisely intended to confront perspectives of both Scruton and Leonard Meyer. Meyer was a pioneer in proposing a theory to explain the process involved in the transmission of emotion and meaning in music. Since

1956, after the launch of *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, Meyer has been considered as an authority in this area.

In a nutshell, according to Meyer, meaning in music implies a process structured on the creation and inhibition of expectations. In general, the arguments used to explain emotion in music were based on extra musical factors. That is to say, music makes one feel happy or sad by reason of resemblance to external situations. Meyer, on the other hand, grounded his assumption on the elements of music themselves and the forms in which they interact during the music flow. These interacting structures are responsible for creating implicative relations. Implicative relations indicate the propensity of a musical situation, that is, the possible consequences of a musical event. Listening to music generates familiarity with different genres and styles. This familiarity induces the listener to expect probable developments and closures. If the process occurs as it is expected, there is little significance. Otherwise, when the composer imposes some kind of deviation and our expectations are delayed or blocked, so musical meaning occurs.

Scruton claims the aesthetic apprehension of music demands an intentional act of hearing tones. "A tone is a sound which exists within a musical 'field of force.' This field of force is something we hear, when hearing tones", he says. This assumption is founded on the necessary distinction between sound and tone. Sounds exist everywhere, tones, however, come to exist within a specific context of a music discourse. To put it in Scruton's own words: "when we hear music, we do not hear sound only; we hear something in sound, something which moves with a force of its own". This is meaningful because it informs us that tone arises from something we hear in sound when we hear it as music, and brings perception to the foreground as a main component of music understanding, since perceiving and discriminating sounds and tones is necessary if one wishes to make an aesthetic sense of music.

I consider both *The Aesthetic of Music* and *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* as invaluable contributions to music literature, and I hope the reader feels motivated to read these works.

Interview

Antenor Ferreira Corrêa: The very first aspect that caught my attention when I started to read *The Aesthetics of Music* was the set of subjects you chose to present throughout the chapters. The books on music aesthetics I had read since my time as a student were all about the philosophy of music (Enrico Fubini and Dahlhaus, for instance). These books provide historical accounts of some philosophers and their insights on music. I have never seen a book about aesthetics with musical analysis, for example. And, even music scores are rare in this literature. Conversely, you chose to discuss the essence of music, its materials: sound, tone, rhythm, tonality, form, etc. providing a good amount of examples and analysis. Do you consider it as an original approach towards the aesthetics of music?

Roger Scruton: When I began to look at the literature on musical aesthetics, I was struck by the fact that, in comparison with the aesthetics of visual art and literature, examples were rare and vaguely characterised. Many of the interesting questions in musical aesthetics–such as that of the distinction between sound and tone–cannot be addressed if you don't give examples to guide the argument.

It should be said that I distinguish the general questions of aesthetics, brought before us in so striking a way by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, from the philosophical exploration of particular art forms. In *The Aesthetics of Architecture* I had already carved out a sub-discipline of aesthetics, attempting to isolate those philosophical questions that are peculiar to architecture, and in doing so had pursued the intellectual arguments down to the perceptual detail, with a wide range of examples that I illustrated largely through photographs. In approaching music in the same spirit, I had the advantage of musical notation, which enabled me to present exactly on the page the musical details that could illustrate my intellectual purpose. I don't consider this approach particularly original, though perhaps I go further than others in giving detailed illustrations of my argument.

A. F. C.: Dahlhaus wrote that the system of aesthetics is its history. It seems to me that he really believed in his own assertion since even in his musical analysis (in which he aimed to substantiate a value judgment) one can observe his concerns in pinpointing historical features intrinsic to the piece under consideration. Do you think that the interdependency between aesthetics and history is a good device for professors and scholars to prove their assumptions, or are these aspects not present during music listening, and, therefore, unnecessary to music understanding?

R. S.: In contrast to Kant, Hegel saw the questions of aesthetics under the aspect of historical change. For Hegel, the philosophical study of art involves situating it historically, in the on-going movement of the spirit, on its way to the Absolute Idea. This mesmerising idea shaped the humanities as they were taught in the German university, and created those subjects, like art history, that were able to lean on history as a method for assembling and distinguishing aspects of our aesthetic and cultural experience. Dahlhaus is heir to this tradition, and of course there is much to be said for it. However, it also has the effect of turning attention away from critical questions and rephrasing all discussion of art as though no trans-historical judgments could be made. Musical history is interesting, and of course in the tradition of Western classical music we have a perfect example of an evolving realm of discovery: usually you can date any piece that you hear to within a decade or so of its actual composition. And undeniably it helps our musical understanding to have a sense of the period in which a given piece of music was composed. But there is more to musical understanding than a sense of history. It is not enough to understand *Winterreise* as an expression of the German romantic vision of landscape and the "wanderer" who invests it with his loneliness. You have to understand this as one of the great explorations of emotional bereavement, which lays bare all the ways in which we search for consolation in the face of irrecoverable loss. Then you understand that this work is not just part of history, but a voice addressing me here and now.

A. F. C.: I could observe points of contact between you and Leonard Meyer. For instance, Meyer admitted two types of understandings: understanding the musical structure and process presented to the listener's mind, on the one hand, and understanding, or discovering, the repertory of tonal materials and the rules for their manipulation upon which the composition was based. You also understand this sort of separation but called them "musical order" and "intellectual order". [A similar division can be read in Nicholas Cook, but named "musical" and "musicological". Adriana Renero (probably based on Jerrold Levinson) used "experiential" and "analytical". I like to say "phenomenological" and "intellectual".] In another passage, Meyer emphasizes the importance of perceiving the coherence among musical elements: "The

perception of physical stimuli as constituents of a pattern or form results from the human ability to relate the constituent parts of the stimulus or series of stimulus to one another in an intelligible and meaningful way." (MEYER, 1956, p. 157). You also explained, "Musical events, once ordered rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically as tones, stand in perceivable relations to one another" (1999, p. 230).

Even though, you have some objections towards Meyer's proposal. Could you summarize your objections?

R. S.: I don't think I can summarize my objections to Meyer in any terms other than those that I use in *The Aesthetics of Music*. Along with all the writers to whom you refer I distinguish musical from intellectual organisation, the first being something that is heard, and which does not make sense apart from the act of hearing. In this way a modulation to the dominant is part of the musical organisation of a piece. But a piece of music might have an intellectual organisation also, and one that is not musical at all. I give an example or two from Stockhausen, in "The Music of the Future", in my lecture of 2016 to the Donaueschingen Festival: meticulous intellectual reasons for putting one sound after another, which do nothing to create a musical relation between them.

A. F. C.: Still about Leonard Meyer: do you disagree with his idea of implicative relationships (the propensity of a musical situation that engenders an expectation that can be confirmed or inhibited) as a way to explain the process of meaning in music?

R. S.: I don't agree with the view that you can capture the idea of musical meaning in terms of the implicative relationships explored by Meyer (and Narmour too). Of course, if you have put down a sequence of notes, this creates expectations as to what might come next. But a highly meaningful piece of music may involve no surprises, no departures from an easily grasped and repetitive structure – Schubert's "Wiegenlied" for example. In this area, we need to look at examples, and see the many different ways in which expectations and implications are generated in music – by chromatic voice-leading (Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*), by ostinato rhythm (Sibelius, *Violin Concerto*, last movement), by imitation (Mozart, *41st Symphony*, last movement), by shifts through a sequence of thirds (Brahms, *4th Symphony*, first movement) and so on.

A. F. C.: Your thesis on music understanding demands the acousmatic listening and perception of sounds as tones. (By acousmatic listening, I mean the type of listening where the cause of the sound is forgotten, or, to put it differently, the sound source does not play a decisive role in the process). Regarding this aspect, do you see a differentiation between your proposal and what Pierre Schaefer called "sound object" (objet sonore) and "musical object" (objet musicaux)?

R. S.: It has been a long time since I looked at Pierre Schaeffer's work, though I give him credit for introducing the idea of acousmatic listening, and inspiring the use to which I put this idea – i.e. to describe the way in which we lift musical movement out of the physical space in which the sounds occur, and situate it in a space of its own.

A. F. C.: It is already a common-sense claim that electroacoustic music has promoted renewed ways of listening to music. You pointed to this aspect as a replacement of tones by sounds and music by acoustical hearing. Having a new form of hearing music, does it not necessarily require a new way to understand it?

R. S.: I keep an open mind as to whether electroacoustic music will ever achieve the kind of audience that you seem to predict. I don't know what to say about it, except that, so far, I have

not been really impressed by what I have heard. My point has always been to insist that sounds are distinct from the tones that we hear in them, and that a purely acoustic treatment of sounds will not necessarily produce the kind of organisation that we know from works of music. But let's see what people produce.

A. F. C.: In your lecture at Donaueschingen Festival (2016), you pinpointed that "Bach addressed listeners whose ears had been shaped by allemandes, gigues, and sarabands–dance rhythms that open the way to melodic and harmonic invention. The modern composer has no such luck. The 4/4 ostinato is everywhere around us, and its effect on the soul, and ear of post-modern people is both enormous and unpredictable". I believe the patterns and forms of popular genres play a crucial role in the learning and comprehension of all kinds of music. Once we hear new music, our brain works comparatively, establishing connections with the music we are acquainted with since early childhood. How do you consider the impact of such ubiquity of pop/rock music regarding the understanding of classical (and even contemporary/avant-garde) repertoire?

R. S.: It seems to me undeniable that composers of serious music, when they attempt to address young audiences, will, consciously or not, make use of the vernacular ostinato of pop. This is clearly the case with John Adams and Michael Torke, and I rather regret the days when Stravinsky, in *The Rite of Spring*, could put down a bar with 11 beats in it and expect his audience to hold their breath and not jog along in time. In my view, we have not yet come to terms with the damage done to the human ear and the human soul by pop music, and by its constant presence in our lives, filling the spaces where silence ought to be. That, however, is the theme for a book.

A. F. C.: At least since Impressionism (intensified with Schoenberg's "Klangfarbenmelodie" and definitely after the advent of electroacoustic music), composers have put great effort into creating from sound. This procedure is called sound-based composition, in contrast to "note-based composition". Liget *Lux Aeterna* or Gerard Grisey *Partiels* are instances of sound-based compositions. However, this type of composition does not share the same mechanism of tension and relaxation, nor heard as "pointing towards" or "requiring another", as in tonal music. And, even so, the comprehension of this kind of music is feasible, implying that understanding is not precluded or compromised by the lack of tonal expectations. How does our intuition act in such cases?

R. S.: It is entirely true that the established ways of creating tension and release through chord progressions, counterpoint, and chromatic voice leading of the Wagnerian kind have given way to other ways of building expectations. There is no a priori reason why other aspects of the sonic realm should not come to the fore as compositional devices–and you mention some of them, noting that they often do not create the equivalent of tension and release, question and answer, and so on. It is undeniable, however, that composers today are returning to the more traditional ways of creating musical expectations, and that people like Ligeti are assuming the status of marginal eccentrics, rather than the voice of our times.

A. F. C.: In *Aesthetics* (p. 308) you made this somewhat polemic statement: "tonal music is the only music that will ever really mean anything to us, and that, if atonal music sometimes gains a hearing, it is because we can elicit within it a latent tonal order." Leonard Meyer, In *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (1994), wrote an assessment of the prognoses he made in *Emotion and Meaning in Music*

in 1956. And one of these predictions was about the possibility of atonal music (he used the term complex music) becoming meaningful for the people in reason of the growing music industry. Therefore, complex music will be more broadcasted (so allowing for stylistic familiarity) and, consequently, appreciated. In his review, Meyer admits it did not happen. Even after a huge growth of mass media in the hiatus of 20 years between his two books, complex music did not reach a considerable part of the population. On the other hand, regarding the visual arts the situation is opposite and modern painting, for instance, is highly appreciated. We have a Biennial of Contemporary Arts in Brazil (São Paulo) that attracts a massive public. How to explain this difference[1]?

R. S.: I don't know what you mean by modern painting–there are so many varieties. The great difference between painting and music is that music takes time: you have to sit through Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* from beginning to end, and forward-looking bright people don't usually have time for that, and become quickly aware of the need to be somewhere else when the music has started. But you can glance at a work of pop art or a Warhol Brillo Box and say, "so that's what it is: OK", and then move on. Indeed, the very fact that there is nothing more to it than what strikes you at first glance makes this kind of art particularly appropriate to our times: it is instant art, and the point of it (namely, that it has no point) can be immediately grasped by anyone who has read the critics.

A. F. C.: The experience with random music has significantly contributed to the way we think of musical understanding: the listener is the one who organizes what he/she hears. That is, musical form has little participation in cognition and musical intelligibility. If we admit to this "discovery", would it not also be correct to admit to the possibility that non-tonal music could also be understood?

R. S.: Of course, non-tonal music can be understood and misunderstood. There is great non-tonal music (Bartok *Quartet No. 3*, Berg *Lyric Suite*, etc.), and some aleatoric (random) music with considerable appeal, though usually it becomes appealing when it settles into a pattern, like advanced jazz improvisation. Everything depends on whether the composer or performer is able to lead the listener into the music, so that one event sounds like a sequel to the preceding event. You don't do this by giving an erudite lecture on how the piece was put together; you do it by *charming the ear*. Faced by the mountains of charmless music today the ordinary listener is apt to give up and say, let's stick to Brahms. And of course, that would be wrong.

I should add a personal observation. For me, life is a battle against entropy–against randomness of every kind. One of the blessings of music is that it chases entropy away from the space that it occupies, injecting energy, purpose, and a sense of order. Why introduce randomness into an art that has such an effect? It is like inviting enemy soldiers into the ranks as the battle begins.

A. F. C.: By means of concluding remarks, I would like to add that the ideas involving meaning in music could be extended in order to encompass issues from the interpretative realm. Some terms disapproved by formalists, such as representation and content when applied to music, indeed suggest the ability of music to communicate something external to itself. It is common for a student to ask: "what should I express when interpreting this piece?". And answering the question with: "you must express the relations among the tones" is not an easily grasped reply. To this end,

[1] Similar issues were considered by Sloboda and Ford (2019).

it will be necessary to explore and differentiate expression from meaning. The question of meaning and expression in music is considered by Scruton, Nancy Kovaleff Baker, and Max Halle Paddison in the entry "Expression" of the *Grove Dictionary*.

Finally, it should be noticed that Sir Scruton deals with the subjects addressed in this interview not only in the field of music, but in the broad domain of the Arts. I suggest the reader to watch the BBC Documentary *Why Beauty Matters* in which Scruton analyses the replacement of the ideal of beauty for originality and disturbance accomplished by the XX century artists. In the absence of beauty and moral values attached to this ideal one could ask how to choose any cogent criterion to evaluate works of modern art? This question is, perhaps, for another interview

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