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Formal Properties as the Basis for Value in Music

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Bruce Baugh makes a helpful distinction between “form” and “matter” in music. He defines form as the intrinsic elements of a musical piece’s composition and matter as “the way music feels to the listener.”¹ The remainder of this paper will refer to what Baugh calls the “form” of music as “formal properties” and “matter” as “non-formal properties.” After making this distinction, Baugh proceeds to argue that what makes a piece of rock music good is its non-formal properties rather than its formal properties. It is tempting to make a similar claim for music generally, namely that it is the non-formal properties of a piece of music that give it the value it has qua music. However, in this paper I will argue that a musical piece’s formal properties, rather than its non-formal properties, are what give it its value qua music. I will offer two arguments to support this thesis. These arguments will attempt to show that non-formal properties are inadequate as a basis for value in music, and that it must be the music’s formal properties that give a piece of music value qua music. I will then raise and attempt to refute objections that might be raised against my conclusion.

The argument against non-formal properties as an adequate basis for value in music is as follows:

1. If non-formal properties are the basis for value in music, then value in music is not objective.
2. Value in music is objective.
3. Therefore, non-formal properties are not the basis for value in music.

By describing value in music as “objective,” I mean that there is a correct answer to whether a piece of music is better or worse than another or good/bad at all. If value in music were not objective then there would be no correct answer to whether a piece of music was valuable or even more/less valuable than another. Put into other words, objectivity in musical value means that some musical pieces will be better or worse *simpliciter* than others.

It now becomes apparent why non-formal properties cannot be a basis for objective musical value. Since non-formal properties are concerned with how a piece of music makes us respond, they cannot ground a judgment that a piece of music is good or bad *simpliciter*. If music were valued based on non-formal properties, then its value would depend on the evaluative responses of agents, which are prone to vary widely. We would have to conclude that while a Beethoven piece has greater value than a Justin Bieber song for the virtuoso pianist, it has less value for the thirteen-year old girl. If value in music is subjective, then there is no way to arbitrate between the appropriateness of these

1. Bruce Baugh, “Prolegomena to Any Aesthetics of Rock Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 51, no. 1 (1993): 23.

two responses. The best this approach can hope for is reaching a statistical average of what music tends to please most people, but this hardly seems to be what we mean when we say that a piece of music is good or bad.

In order to show that value in music is objective, I encourage readers to find a recording of the song *Pahpam Jarkwa*, taken from the Canela tribe of Brazilian natives. Mere verbal description cannot do justice to the experience. When listeners hear the song, their response is one of revulsion, often manifesting as tension in posture, displeased facial expressions, or even sounds of disgust and incredulous laughter. When we react with aversion to the song, we are not simply conveying a belief that the piece is ugly, but that it is bad music. This reaction commits those who have it to the claim that value in music is objective. Those who would deny having this commitment must explain their aversion to a particular piece of music as merely a matter of preference-taste rather than a belief that it was truly *bad*—and that is a bullet I and many others are unwilling to bite.

A potential objection arises here. If non-formal properties are the basis for value in music, then one of the best and most common candidates for what makes music good or bad is how much pleasure or displeasure it brings us (though there are other candidates, naturally). Can one not simply say that it is the fact that *Pahpam Jarkwa* brings one displeasure that makes it bad music? Thus, our aversion would be reducible to non-formal properties after all. Unfortunately, the objection falls short. The Canela tribe that sung the piece considered the song quite pleasurable, holding that kind of sound as the very paradigm of beauty. But the fact that the tribe derives pleasure from *Pahpam Jarkwa* does nothing to undermine our sense that the song is bad music. What is pleasurable is not always good; as a clear counter-example, that a man can derive pleasure from rape fantasies does not make those fantasies good, despite the pleasure they can yield. And if he were to carry out the rape, we would reject any appeal he might make to the pleasure he derived from the act to justify it. I will return later to the question of whether pleasure in music makes it good.

The above argument has attempted to show that we are committed to the objectivity of value in music and that the non-formal properties of a piece of music do not provide a basis for this objectivity. Now, however, I would like to offer a distinct elimination argument as to why formal properties are the best basis for value in music:

1. Value in music is based primarily on one of the following: its cognitive payoff, its moral payoff, its emotional payoff, its novelty, its influence in the art-world, or its formal properties.
2. Value in music is not based primarily on cognitive payoff.
3. Value in music is not based primarily on moral payoff.

4. Value in music is not based primarily on emotional payoff.
5. Value in music is not based primarily on novelty.
6. Value in music is not based primarily on influence in the art-world.
7. Therefore, value in music is primarily based on its formal properties.

This seems to me to be an exhaustive list of the plausible candidates for giving music value. The first five options are essentially an elaboration on different kinds of non-formal properties that could be the basis of value in music. They are the usual non-formal properties that laymen, critics, and aestheticians alike might appeal to as forming the basis for value in music. I am more than happy to entertain other candidates to add the list if they should arise, but for now it seems safe to treat the above list as exhaustive.

In regard to Premise 1, why think that value in music must be *primarily* based upon one of the options listed? Why not simply say that all of them contribute to the value of a piece and that there is no hierarchy amongst them? Of course it can be the case that all of the factors listed above contribute to a work's value, but it seems that a primary factor is necessary for *objective* value. This is true especially since most of the proposed criteria are non-formal properties, which are response-dependent and therefore cannot ground objective value in music. If all of the factors in the list contribute equally to the value of a work, the weight of a piece's non-formal properties would easily outweigh the quality of its formal properties. If this were the case, then music's value would be response-dependent and vary widely, inadequate as a basis for objective evaluation.

In regards to Premise 2, it strikes me that speaking of cognitive payoff in music is largely irrelevant and ineffective as a criterion for evaluating music. By "cognitive payoff," I mean the ability of an artwork to convince us of something true or give us justification for true belief. Arguing that cognitive payoff contributes to value even in narrative art like literature or film is difficult enough, and even more so for music, which is a non-referential medium. Music is non-referential in that the elements of music such as melodies, harmonic progressions, and rhythms do not have consistent referents as words do, making it nearly impossible to convey a clear and consistent message. Unlike in visual art, where objects and shapes correspond to concrete objects or associations in a viewer's mind, music only creates certain states or moods, which gives it nowhere near the kind of specificity needed in order to have significant cognitive payoff. Music cannot be *about* things without words, images, or an associated narrative to contextualize it. This makes attempts to value music based on cognitive payoff difficult, perhaps even futile.

Now we turn to the possibility that a piece's moral payoff is what gives it value. By "moral payoff," I mean an artwork's ability to make us more prone to do what is right or good than we already were. Jerrold Levinson argues that the moral payoff of a piece of music should be considered as a candidate criterion for musical value:

[Some] music, properly grasped, exerts, through the attitudes or states of mind the music projects or the complexes of feeling it evokes, a humanizing and moralizing force, . . . all things being equal, people exposed to such music tend to be morally better, more humane, than they would otherwise be.²

The quotation is given in full because Levinson's remarks seem to suffer from a lack of clarity. Levinson does not explain *how* music acts as a humanizing and moralizing force, nor does he give examples of musical works that do this. His claims here strike me as implausible because he leaves the way that music supposedly makes people more moral and humane ambiguous. Music is a non-referential medium, so it is unclear how it is supposed to teach any moral lessons or duties. Elsewhere he posits that music helps listeners treat other people as ends in themselves by increasing the listeners' awareness of others' subjectivity,³ but again this suffers from unclarity. Music increases our awareness of whom? The composer? Characters of an imagined narrative? Other listeners? If music is non-referential and cannot convey propositional content, it is hard to see how it conveys any information about others' perspectives. The most promising thought is that music expresses the emotions and perspective of the composer, but this rests on the false assumption that the composer always feels or possesses the emotion or mood the music conveys. In any case, Levinson admits that good music does not always morally improve listeners, so a piece's moral payoff does not seem adequate to ground objective musical value.⁴ In addition, he concedes that a moral response to music of the sort he describes has not yet been proven to be regular enough to be worth considering as a primary criterion for evaluating a piece of music's worth.⁵

More promising than valuing cognitive and moral payoff in a musical work is the claim that emotional payoff gives music value. A common manifestation of this claim is that music is good to the degree that it brings

2. Jerrold Levinson, *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 189.

3. *Ibid.*, 189-190.

4. *Ibid.*, 189.

5. *Ibid.*, 188-189.

listeners pleasure. However, as argued to earlier, valuing music based on pleasure will not ground objective value in music. The Brazilian natives singing *Pahpam Jarkwa* gained much pleasure from the song and others of its kind, yet it seems wrong to say that their pleasure makes the music good. They could simply be mistaken, like the man who takes pleasure in rape fantasies.

There is further reason to think that the hedonic claim—that we should value music based on how much pleasure it brings us—is false. We often listen to music that makes us feel sad—in fact, we often *seek* it out.⁶ To make the dilemma worse, the pieces that elicit the most sadness are often ones we praise as masterpieces; Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony is a prime example of this. If the hedonic claim is true, there is a problem of motivation and a problem of evaluation. First, why do we choose to listen to music that we know will make us feel sad? Second, why are the pieces that we value as masterpieces often the ones that elicit the most sadness in listeners?

More attempts have been offered to solve this problem than I have room to cover in this paper, but here is one that seems most promising. Kendall Walton proposes that experiencing sadness is not itself unpleasant or bad, but rather the situation that makes the sadness appropriate. Given a sad situation, having the appropriate emotional reaction is desirable, perhaps even pleasant.⁷ As appealing as this sounds, it seems difficult to deny that experiencing sadness really is negative and unpleasant. We may be glad that we respond appropriately given a sad situation, but it nonetheless seems that the sadness we experience itself is unpleasant. In addition, hearing sad pieces like Tchaikovsky’s Sixth do not place us in a truly sad situation, so our sad response would actually be inappropriate and therefore not good. So, sad masterpieces still pose a large problem to using pleasure as the basis for music’s value.

Neither does it seem possible to claim that a piece’s novelty or its influence are the primary basis for its value. While a piece’s novelty can certainly be a positive factor by showcasing a composer’s uniqueness and originality, there are counter-examples to show why novelty cannot be the primary criterion for good music. Brahms’ music was considered to be a conservative reaction against the radically new music of Liszt and Wagner. His four symphonies are praised as great for their mastery of the earlier Romantic tradition, though they certainly were not very different or novel.

6. Aaron Smuts, *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, “Rubber Ring: Why do we listen to sad songs?” (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 2.

7. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 257.

Levinson argues that a piece's positive influence on the future of music is an important component of its value, which seems correct to an extent.⁸ However, this will not do as a primary basis for music's value. Imagine a piece that is magnificently composed, but for one reason or another remains unpublished or is even destroyed. There are real examples of pieces that could have been like this: Chopin's famous posthumous Nocturne was not discovered and published until twenty-six years after his death, and it quite possibly could have remained unknown. It would have had no influence, but it seems wrong to think that, if so, it would have ceased to be valuable music. Indeed, it seems counter-intuitive to think that discovering the work somehow *makes* it good when it would not have been otherwise.

Having shown that the primary basis for value in music is not its cognitive, moral, or emotional payoffs nor its novelty and influence, we can conclude that the formal properties of a piece of music are the primary basis for its value. Valuing music for its formal properties has the advantage of grounding an *objective* value in music, since the formal properties are intrinsic to the work itself. It also has the advantage of making sense of why we listen to music that makes us sad; we experience the sadness of a work as an essential part of understanding the piece and its formal properties.

Three objections might emerge at this point. First, one might object that it is implausible that listeners judge a work based on formal properties if they are not aware of them. Few listeners are trained in music analysis and theory. However, the objection rests on a false assumption that because listeners are *unaware* of the formal properties that make a particular piece good, those formal properties cannot be what *induces* a positive response in the listener. We are often affected by elements of an object even if we are unaware of those elements; for example, we experience complex tastes in food even though we are often unaware of the ingredients used to create the effect. It may be that when we listen to music, we are similarly affected by the formal properties in a work even though we are unaware of them. Listeners may be affected by a piece's progression from tension to resolution even if they cannot explain this feature of the piece further by pointing to fully diminished chords resolving to major chords. They experience a sense of familiarity and return when the theme from the piece's beginning returns, even if they cannot label it a recapitulation. Thus, the objection seems to miss the mark.

A second problem is that many people, perhaps the majority, seem to prefer music with poor formal properties to music that is formally excellent. Formal masterpieces like Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony often go unnoticed, while many popular music artists with far less concern for formal excellence are

8. Levinson, *Contemplating Art*, 192.

more widely acclaimed. Why not believe that the music that is evaluated as good by the greatest number of people is the best?

Firstly, majority opinion here counts for only so much. In order to undermine my argument, the objector would have to argue that value in music is based on one of the other options listed above. For example, majority opinion may lend support to the thesis that pleasures makes music valuable, but I have already argued against that possibility above.

Secondly, it is plausible that the majority of people are simply mistaken in their evaluative process. Perhaps they are not in an epistemically responsible position to make an appropriate judgment of music, lacking the relevant background information. By analogy, many average people would prefer playing or watching a checkers match to a chess match if they lack the relevant background information needed to appreciate the nuances of the chess match. However, few would affirm that checkers has more potential and value as a game than chess.

Another objection against my conclusion might be that the defender of formal properties must furnish and defend an account of what specific formal properties make music good. The objector might say that if the proponent of formal properties cannot provide an adequate list of formal criteria for evaluating a piece of music, then we should be just as skeptical of formal properties as a basis for musical value as we were of non-formal properties. We would not have the ability to arbitrate between two opposing claims about a piece's formal value unless we have a list of formal properties to be used as criteria.

The objection has some merit, of course. But it is easy enough to imagine the sorts of formal properties that might be relevant—properties such as form/structure, unity, melody, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, orchestration, texture, and timbre.⁹ This list is just preliminary and is open to amendment (a thorough exploration being outside of the scope of this paper), but it is consistent with the way that music has come to be analyzed over time throughout music history.

The issue with proposing aesthetic principles based on formal properties in this way is that it can often fall prey to having counterexamples raised against it. For instance, if one defines good art as “that which has unity among diversity,” an objector may draw a set of squiggly lines of differing lengths as an example of

9. Some brief definitions of music analysis jargon: Unity in a musical work has to do with how the material in one part of a piece is related to and woven into other parts of the piece. The term “Counterpoint” refers to the relationship of two or more independent lines of music occurring simultaneously. “Orchestration” refers to how the unique properties of the instruments of an ensemble are used creatively and effectively. “Texture” refers to considerations about how many voices in a piece of music are prominent and how those prominent voices are accompanied and colored. “Timbre” refers to the purposeful use of tone in an instrument, utilizing various registers and playing techniques and for unique colors.

something that has unity among diversity, yet is clearly not good art. In music, this may also be a salient objection for a proposed formal criterion. If one argues that music is valuable insofar as it has complexity, for example, an objector can point to certain compositions of the early and mid-twentieth century that were so extremely complex as to be almost unplayable and unintelligible upon hearing. Such a piece would exemplify complexity yet not be good music. However, my proposed set of nine formal properties to be used as the criteria for evaluation in music withstands attempts at making such counterexamples. Because I argue that a valuable piece needs to positively exemplify the nine properties in conjunction rather than any single one in isolation, it does not seem possible to come up with counterexamples the way that an objector used the squiggly lines in the first example. If a piece positively exhibits all nine criteria, it would seem to cease to be an effective counterexample and quite plausibly be a good piece of music. Because my aesthetic principles of value in music based on formal properties are not as broad as the “unity among diversity” example was, it will be much more difficult to counterexample.

Two points of clarification need to be made. First, all nine formal criteria listed above might not apply to certain pieces of music. For example, it would make little sense to fault a flute solo piece for its lack of orchestration or counterpoint when it is not really possible for the piece to exemplify those properties. The principle could be amended and restated thusly: “A piece of music ought to be evaluated based on the degree to which it exhibits [each of the nine formal properties listed above], but only when the piece admits of that property.” This way, the flute solo piece would not be evaluated negatively by its lack of counterpoint or orchestration since it would not admit of counterpoint or orchestration at all. Secondly, since pieces of music would be evaluated based on the conjunction of the nine formal properties, the evaluation process would be flexible enough to encompass differences of emphases in pieces across genres and time periods in music history. For example, a Bach fugue would exemplify counterpoint to a much greater degree than it would exemplify rhythmic elements, but the strength and emphasis in its counterpoint would make up for its relative weakness in other areas so that it could still be evaluated as a great piece. Even though all nine of the formal properties I listed can contribute to a musical piece’s value, a particular piece of music need not exemplify all nine to the same degree in order to be considered great.

In conclusion, I have presented two arguments to defend the thesis that formal properties, rather than non-formal properties, are the primary basis of value in music. I also entertained potential objections against this conclusion, explaining why my arguments withstand the objections. Though space constraints prevented me from exploring all the issues thoroughly, I hope my arguments have

been robust enough to show that value in music is based in its formal properties rather than its informal properties.

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