

Book review by Bruno H. Repp (Music Perception, 1998, 15, 412-422)

Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1997. 530 + xxii pp. ISBN 0-19-816638-9, \$39.95 (cloth).

Ideally, a book review is undertaken with two motivations: the altruistic one of informing one's colleagues about a new and interesting publication (perhaps criticizing it in the process) and the selfish one of being compelled to wallow in the text and benefit from the information and insights it contains. Both motivations propelled the present review. I originally bought *The Aesthetics of Music* as a Christmas present for myself, not thinking it was the kind of book that needed to be reviewed in this empirical journal. However, as I read on I was increasingly impressed by the significance of the issues addressed by Scruton and by his perceptive treatment of them, and when I had reached the end of the book I felt that it might be useful to communicate some of Scruton's more important arguments to my colleagues in music psychology, in the hope of stimulating related empirical work.

Obviously, this is not going to be a critical review. Although I am not a total novice to the philosophical literature on music, as an experimental psychologist and amateur musician I do not have the expertise to engage in serious philosophical or music-theoretical arguments. This would perhaps also seem out of place in this journal. Rather, my aim is to focus on those of Scruton's ideas that seem to have particular relevance to the psychology of music. For even though Scruton does not refer to any psychological literature, and even though his ideas may not have immediate implications for empirical research, they are fundamental to understanding what music means to some of us. If there are weaknesses in his arguments that I have overlooked, so be it. My review will have fulfilled its purpose if it increases psychologists' awareness of the important issues discussed in *The Aesthetics of Music*.

A few general observations at the outset. Roger Scruton has written more than 20 books on aesthetics, philosophy, politics, literature, architecture, and modern culture, as well as works of fiction. He is also a composer and seems well informed about music theory. Although his thoughts on music must have matured over many years, the book appears to be an original monograph, not a collection of previously published articles. (At least, Scruton does not cite any earlier published versions of any of the chapters, although he refers to several of his earlier books.) The blurb inside the jacket proclaims that this is "perhaps the first comprehensive account of the nature and significance of music from the perspective of modern philosophy, and the only treatment of the subject which is properly illustrated with musical examples." Indeed, there are no less than 256 musical examples, which are extremely helpful in illustrating various basic points. Although Scruton cites a number of philosophical and music-theoretical works and provides critical discussions of other authors' ideas, this is not a textbook or a historical review of aesthetic philosophy. Rather, it is primarily a platform for Scruton's own views, which are developed lucidly and forcefully, often aided by imaginative turns of phrase. It is not only an original and wide-ranging contribution to the subject, but also a very personal one: Although the author's erudition and intellect are evident on every page, I feel that he is also palpably involved with the issues, especially as philosophical argument gives way to cultural criticism toward the end of the book. The power of Scruton's arguments derives in equal parts from their cogency and from the passionate conviction that lies behind them. A valuable and endangered part of Western cultural heritage is at stake.

There are 15 chapters with titles so succinct that they can be listed here in toto: 1. Sound, 2. Tone, 3. Imagination and Metaphor, 4. Ontology, 5. Representation, 6. Expression, 7. Language, 8. Understanding, 9. Tonality, 10. Form, 11. Content, 12. Value, 13. Analysis, 14. Performance, and 15. Culture.

The first two chapters are devoted to a discussion of the distinction between *sound* and *tone*, which is fundamental to Scruton's philosophy and obviously relevant to research on music perception and cognition. Scruton begins by arguing that—unlike colors for example, which are properties of things—sounds are separable from their causes: “You could identify a sound while failing to identify its source, and there seems to be nothing absurd in the idea of a sound occurring somewhere without an identifiable cause” (p. 4). Clearly, this claim is contrary to the tenets of ecological acoustics (see, e.g., Gaver, 1993), which emphasize that sounds inform the perceiver about their sources. However, Scruton is not saying that listeners *cannot* perceive the sources of sounds, only that this kind of perception is bypassed or de-emphasized in music listening. Following the French philosopher Pierre Schaeffer, he calls the deliberate detachment of sound from source “the acousmatic experience” and claims that this is what music exploits. In particular, “an aesthetic interest in sound need attribute to sounds no more than ... the reality of a well-founded phenomenon, of a ‘material’ (as opposed to ‘intentional’) object that is not strictly part of the underlying physical order” (p. 5). Sounds as aesthetic objects thus are regarded as *pure events*: “The thing that produces the sound, even if it is ‘something heard’, is not the intentional object of hearing, but only the cause of what I hear” (p. 11). The world of sounds contains nothing but sounds; unlike the visual world, it is metaphysically apart from the perceiving individual who is not in it, yet has cognizance of it.

Music is a special kind of organized sound. Although Scruton finds it futile to define what is music and what is not, he avers that one must begin with an account of the central instances of the art, which he takes to be the great masterpieces of Western classical music. What these central instances achieve is “a transformation of sounds into tones. A tone is a sound which exists within a musical ‘field of force’” (p. 17). Scruton likens this to the transformation of speech sounds into phonemes, a process familiar to psychologists working on speech perception (see, e.g., Liberman & Mattingly, 1985). Just as the purely auditory properties (but perhaps not the ecological properties—see Fowler, 1986) of speech sounds are less important and partially inaccessible in the context of coherent and meaningful speech, so the acoustic *and* ecological properties of musical sounds are deemphasized in the context of prototypical Western music, as systemic forces and relationships take center stage. Moreover, “every sound intentionally made is instinctively taken to be an attempt at communication. And this is as true of music as it is of speech” (p. 18). Thus Scruton ends Chapter 1, setting the stage for his further explorations.

Chapter 2 deals at length with various aspects of musical organization that create the forces acting on tones (pitch, rhythm, hierarchical structure, foreground and background, melody, harmony, etc.). Scruton argues that

these forces result in a "virtual causality" that makes us hear *movement* between tones in an imaginary space, and this movement is reminiscent of actions in real life. This is actually akin to an ecological acoustics view concerning *dynamic* source specification (see, e.g., Warren & Verbrugge, 1984), but with the important difference that the source is not real but imaginary.

The important topics of imagination and metaphor are broached in Chapter 3. After spending some time on defining metaphor, Scruton proposes that, in aesthetic perception, "I can concentrate on the appearance of one thing, while attending equally to the appearance of another, and my response to the second is transferred to the first.... I thereby make a connection between them—a connection that is real in my emotions, but only imagined in the objects themselves" (p. 86). He believes this kind of imaginative thinking to be indispensable for the musical experience: "Musical qualities ... are perceived only by rational beings, and only through a certain exercise of imagination, involving the transfer of concepts from another sphere" (p. 94). While admitting that music might be perceived "preconceptually," as temporally organized sound, *before* it is perceived metaphorically as tonal movement, Scruton prefers to view these two perceptions as part of a single, simultaneous experience having "double intentionality." Scruton understandably has little interest in (or even awareness of) psychoacoustic investigations that do suggest a preconceptual level of music perception (e.g., Repp, in press). Indeed, this research seems to have little relevance to musical aesthetics as he conceives it.

Chapter 4, on ontology, is mainly for philosophical readers concerned with the thorny issue of defining the identity of a musical work or passage. Scruton rejects any such definitions in terms of physical sounds but rather views similarity and identity of musical objects in terms of the metaphorical qualities that imaginative perception bestows on them.

Chapter 5, on representation, begins with a central question largely shunned by psychologists (but see Sloboda, 1998; Watt & Ash, 1998): What is the meaning of music? Scruton argues that it does not lie in representation, by which he means "the presentation of thoughts about a fictional world" (p. 127). He points out that imitation of real-world sounds, which is rare enough in music, either takes the form of an intrusion (such as the recorded bird song in Respighi's *Fountains of Rome*) or is absorbed into the tonal world (such as the bird calls in Beethoven's Sixth Symphony). In the latter case, "it takes a detail from nature, in order to exploit its associations. But it emancipates that detail from any narrative" (p. 127). In program music, Scruton says, what is often considered to be representation is really expression. He gives the example of Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote*, whose opening section is not a *representation* of the knight but rather has an *expression* appropriate to his character. That passage can be understood

perfectly well as music without any knowledge of the extramusical reference the composer had in mind. Most musical understanding, Scruton argues, is of that sort.

To further develop his conception of musical understanding, Scruton turns to expression in Chapter 6. This is in large part a critical discussion of other authors' ideas about expression, out of which emerge several criteria that Scruton believes a theory of expression must satisfy. For him, "when we say that a piece of music has 'expression', we mean that it invites us into its orbit. Expression is intrinsically an object of aesthetic interest" (p. 148). He calls this the *value test*. Another criterion is the *structure test*: "A theory of expression must show how the organization of a work of music serves to articulate the emotional content" (p. 156). Scruton calls emotional connotations of music "tertiary qualities" because they are perceived only by humans and are subject to effects of intention and suggestion. He points out the great sensitivity of expression to context, the impossibility to provide rules for it, and its specificity to a given work. Finally, he arrives at the *understanding test*: "Expression is part of what is understood, when a piece is understood as music. If a piece of music is expressive, then this must be understood by the one who hears with understanding" (p. 170). If this seems a bit circular, further clarification is promised in Chapter 11. Meanwhile, in Chapters 7–10, Scruton aims to "show just what we understand, when we understand music as expressive" (p. 170).

Chapter 7 deals with possible analogies between music and language. Brief discussions of semiology, the interdependence of syntax and semantics, and generative grammar lead to a consideration of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's (1983) *Generative Theory of Tonal Music*. Scruton argues that their theory falls short of explaining the meaning of music because it fails to combine syntax and semantics into a unitary theory: "Music has a quasi-syntactic structure; it also has a kind of meaning. But unless the first articulates the second, and is interpreted in terms of it, there is no reason to believe that the structure is genuinely syntactical, or that *structure* is the vehicle of meaning" (p. 198). Scruton also rejects Raffman's (1993) proposal that ineffable meanings arise from the processing of musical structure. Musical syntax, he argues, does not form a true grammar but is merely a generalization from compositional practice. And, significantly, "rule-governed music is, in general, uninteresting.... It is the unexpected nuance that counts—the detail which seems inevitable only in retrospect" (p. 202). In discussing Cooke's (1959) much maligned *The Language of Music*, he notes that, although Cooke seriously underestimated the contextual dependence of musical meaning, he nevertheless pinpointed certain regularities in the relation between musical devices and feelings, which may be considered aesthetic conventions. Scruton concludes, however, that "the meaning of a piece of music is given not by convention, but by perception. And it is

understood only by the person who hears the music correctly—the person whose aesthetic experience comprehends the ‘experience of meaning’” (p. 210).

Chapter 8 deals with the understanding of music. Understanding can occur both in listening and in playing: “We say that a player can ‘play with understanding’ because his performance expresses a way of hearing what he plays. The performance communicates this way of hearing from performer to listener” (p. 212). Scruton points out that the ability to provide a formal analysis of music is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding, and that composers’ use of complex compositional devices is no guarantee that their music is meaningful. He distinguishes between intellectual and musical expectations in listening, and more generally between listening for information and listening for its own sake: “What we understand, in understanding music, is not the material world, but the intentional object: the organization that can be heard *in* the experience.... I have no other reason for attending to the music, than the fact that it sounds as it does” (p. 221). This is the aesthetic experience. “Ordinary perception looks out on the world, and assesses its utility. Aesthetic perception looks inward to itself, and arranges the world as in a picture, for the effect” (p. 228). “We should never enjoy this experience, if it did not in some way communicate to us the life that is ours—either through representation, or through some system of metaphor which implants our life in the thing that we perceive” (p. 229).

The perception of musical organization, Scruton says, is subject to the will and can be criticized: “And although a good performance aims precisely to guide us to the right perception, no feature of the sounds and their production can guarantee this result, which depends upon the ear of the listener and the musical culture which informs it” (p. 230). Scruton avers that “most music that seems meaningful to us is tonal” and that “the ‘laws of motion’ of this tonal realm seem to be constant from epoque to epoque and style to style” (p. 233). Having noted the “extraordinary power exerted by our experience of form” (p. 231), he says that “we should take very seriously the suggestion that tonality contains the key to musical form, and that when we understand a piece of tonal music, it is because we have grasped the tonal order which generates the musical surface” (p. 234). Moreover, by understanding this order in terms of imaginative metaphor derived from real life, we learn about life by listening to music.

In Chapter 9, Scruton expands on the central role of tonality in Western musical culture, and on attempts to abandon and resurrect it in this century. He reviews modal precursors to triadic tonality and then, in considerable detail, the defining characteristics and effects of the latter. Tonality, he concludes, “is not just a *style*, but an *order*, which we hear in music despite the greatest divergences of style.... Triadic tonality is not a system of con-

ventions, 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. Tonal relations are *audible* relations, constituted intentionally.... In describing the tonal order of a work, therefore, we are describing what is heard, when it is heard as music" (p. 271). He goes on to discuss examples of imperfect tonality and atonality. With regard to unsystematic atonality, he observes that such music "retreats from the intentional to the material realm; and what we hear, in hearing Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, for instance, is precisely what we do not hear in a Beethoven symphony: a series of sounds, produced by many different sources in physical space, as opposed to a movement of tones which summon and answer one another in a space of their own" (p. 281). By inventing *systematic* atonality, composers such as Schoenberg and Webern "wished to find a way of translating sound into tone, without using the order of tonality" (p. 283), a wish that Scruton believes has not been fulfilled: "There is all the difference in the world, between hearing *that* some process occurs in the world of sound, and *hearing the process*. And there is a further difference between hearing the process as a sequence of sounds, and hearing it as a movement of tones.... The order established by Webern, however [in his *Konzert*, op. 24], makes no reference to such an organization, and deliberately negates the experiences—melodic movement, harmonic tension and release, metrical pulse—which bring it into being.... The mere existence of a serial order, therefore, does nothing to prove that it is a *musical* order, or that it is the order that we hear, when we hear the music" (pp. 284–285). Scruton goes on to describe in more detail how the various meaningful effects of tonality are absent in atonal music. With regard to atonal expression, he observes that it was artistically motivated by "a need to render into audible forms the complex and harrowing emotions that arose with the collapse of spiritual order in Central Europe" (p. 305). He ends the chapter by referring to the difficulty present-day composers are having in using tonality anew in an unselfconscious way.

Chapter 10 is on form. The first half is a critical discussion of Schenker's concept of "deep structure." Scruton denies its generative capacity: "The 'deep structure' becomes another way of describing long-range relationships in the foreground; but it does not explain them, still less show how they are generated from a root idea" (p. 323). He is more sympathetic to Leonard Meyer's notion of hierarchically arranged implications and closures in music, but finds that Meyer has neglected the primary experience giving rise to these hierarchies—that of tonal movement: "Metaphor is here indispensable, since it forms the structure of the musical experience. The sense of closure in music is not the primitive fact, as Meyer would have it: on the contrary, it derives from the experience of movement, which it cannot be used to explain" (p. 332). And he goes on to say that, "just because this experience of movement is delivered by a metaphorical trans-

fer, we should be suspicious of all attempts to provide rules for the organization of the musical surface. Whatever rules are proposed—whether linear, hierarchical, or epistemic—they will misrepresent the organization of the musical *Gestalt*, which is a spontaneous result of an imaginative act of attention. [paragraph] The formal relations that we perceive in music neither are, nor result from, a structure below the surface. Form and structure in music are purely phenomenal” (pp. 332–333).

Additional important insights ensue—and I apologize for the extensive quotations, but I could not say it any better than Scruton does: “Both Meyer and Schenker attempt to find structural rules and principles which are internal to music—which assume no prior organization of the musical surface. But sounds become music only when organized through concepts taken from another sphere. The organization of music is perceived not merely as movement, but as gesture.... Musical activity is not just movement, but the peculiar form of movement that we call action—the confluence of life and rational agency which distinguishes humanity from every other phenomenon in the natural world. This explains the peculiar effect of silence in music: we hear silence as a *Schweigen*, a being-silent. It is not a cessation of action, but action of another kind—refraining, withholding, refusing” (p. 333). Scruton further argues that atonal music, even though it is constructed according to very different principles, is organized perceptually in the same way (in terms of movement, closure, tension, etc.) as tonal music, even though some or all of these organizational features may be deliberately thwarted by the composer. Although Scruton finds deep structure unsubstantiated, he grants a role to structural analysis, at least in tonal music, in that it helps create intentional objects of listening: “The structural analysis of music does not so much describe as create its object—for an intentional object owes its nature to the description under which it is perceived” (p. 336).

Struggling for an answer to the age-old question of why we find music so rewarding to listen to, Scruton offers some remarkable speculations. The experience of society, he says, requires coordination of activities. “Dancing and sport illustrate the peculiar pleasure that rational beings take in coordination, a pleasure that rises above every practical purpose” (p. 338). Whereas dancers occupy separate spaces, in music “movements coalesce and flow together in a single stream” (p. 338). Thus, “in the experience of music we find our social nature condensed in a single life—a translation of the dance into a unitary process, endowed with the ‘transcendental unity’ of a perceiving self” (p. 339).

I believe it is in Chapter 11, on content, that Scruton reaches some of his most significant insights. Discussing the important role of emotions in musical expression, he writes that “art provides us with a means not merely to project our emotions outwards, but also to encounter ourselves *in them*” (p. 348). “We encounter works of art as perfected icons of our felt poten-

tial, and appropriate them in order to bring form, lucidity, and self-knowledge to our inner life.... Art realizes what is otherwise inchoate, unformed, and incommunicable. It does this because we recognize its expressive properties, and appropriate them as vehicles of our own emotion" (p. 352). In a section entitled *The Dance of Sympathy*, Scruton argues that the response to expression is a *sympathetic* response. He points out that sympathetic emotions are easily aroused by imaginary situations: "In entering a fictional world, we are *exercising* our feelings, but not *acting from* them ... This peculiar exercise of sympathy therefore presents us with the residue of emotion, when the motive has been neutralized" (p. 355). This exercise may be supported by sympathetic gestures and actions, although they are usually covert: "Light is cast on the expressive character of music if we see the response of the listener as a kind of latent dancing—a sublimated desire to 'move with' the music, and so to focus on its moving forms" (p. 357). Importantly, Scruton notes, "understanding lies in the dance, not in the description". (p. 356). Moreover, he says, this form of aesthetic response to music is tantamount to attaching value to music. Great music provides an emotional education and is valued for that reason.

Why is it so difficult to describe what music expresses, and why do different individuals give very different descriptions of it? First of all, Scruton says, "the description of the expressive content in a piece of music is simply a description of the music. It is an attempt, through metaphor, to identify what we hear, when we hear with understanding" (p. 360). But, he goes on, there is something ineffable about the musical experience, and it is the result of obtaining "a first-person awareness of a world that is neither ours nor anyone's. It is a creation of the imagination prompted by sympathy.... The ineffability of artistic meaning is ... simply a special case of the ineffability of first-person awareness—the impossibility of translating 'what it is like' into a description" (pp. 363–364). He acknowledges Schopenhauer's previous attempts to develop ideas that "make music central to our self-understanding" (p. 365).

It is these important ideas that I would like to leave psychologist readers with, to contemplate them further at their leisure and perhaps find ways of substantiating, refuting, or refining them through empirical research concerned specifically with the aesthetic perception of music, as contrasted with psychoacoustic or structural perception, which the large bulk of research in music psychology seems to be dealing with. The remaining four chapters of Scruton's book—on value, analysis, performance, and culture, respectively—are primarily of interest to musicologists. They also address increasingly controversial issues. Thus, Scruton equates aesthetic perception, as defined by him, with good taste and proceeds to argue in the final chapter that musical taste has sadly declined in recent decades. In the chapter on analysis, he criticizes atonality, set-theoretic analysis ("a description

of nothing that it would be interesting to hear," p. 415), and Schenkerian analysis, among other things: "What matters is the experience with which the analysis concludes. The experience is the criterion which distinguishes mere paper theory from an understanding of the musical surface. True analysis is also a synthesis, a building of the intentional object through comparisons and contrasts that can be *heard*" (p. 427). In his chapter on performance, Scruton makes this important observation: "It is precisely because the tradition of Western music still lives that we gain access, through the music of previous generations, to states of mind that we no longer encounter in our daily experience" (p. 449). In contemporary rock music, Scruton sees "an abdication of music to sound" (p. 499). "Beat is not rhythm, but the last sad skeleton of rhythm, stripped bare of human life" (p. 502). And finally: "Democratic man is essentially 'culture-less', without the aspirations that require him to exalt his image in literature and art. The postmodern world is the world that follows the death of the 'last man'—the last human being who has attempted to *better* himself, and to strive towards the inequality which is the mark of the truly human" (p. 505). These are just a few highlights from these very rich and thought-provoking final chapters.

As I said at the outset, this is not a critical review. Such assessments, from qualified philosophers and musicologists, will surely appear in other journals. Yet, I cannot deny being profoundly in sympathy with Scruton's arguments. Although not all of them are novel and some may be mistaken—Scruton's own critical attitude towards the ideas of others may be predictive of considerable reciprocity in that regard—I believe they go to the heart of what great music is all about, and it is good to see them all assembled in a single volume. In the daily routine of empirical research and competition for grant money in music psychology, and more generally in a consumer society in which "elitism" has become a bad word, fundamental issues and values often get short shrift. There is still not enough appreciation, especially among those not directly engaged with music, of the deep significance that great music has in the lives of those who are in daily communion with it and of the fact that it is part of a unique and irreplaceable cultural heritage that is truly endangered today. The musical experience is a mirror of the listener's emotional and metaphorical capacities, of his or her "inner life." A better understanding of the psychological benefits of self-knowledge gained through music should be one of the top priorities of psychological science.<sup>1</sup>

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