

EXPLORING THE ENTITIES OF MUSIC

What is music? The question may seem deviously simple; music is of course what many of us listen to every day, sometimes we are moved by it and it consists of sound waves. However, if we assert that music is sound waves and sound waves only, then how does the framework of the physical sciences explain how music moves us? Many believe it does not and accordingly try to explain the functions of music in idealist terms. In this paper certain physical and non-physical accounts of music are explored, and an evaluation of them is attempted.

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The ontology of music is no trivial matter. Thomas Hofweber puts it succinctly when saying that at “first approximation, ontology is the study of what there is” (Hofweber 2002). The ontologically minded want to explain what comprises the world we perceive and interact with. Today many, if not all of us, subscribe to the more or less deterministic ontology of modern physics. Yet, some aspects of human life seem to elude capture by a purely physical description, and among these we find music. We shall see how a purely physical conception of music fails to account for the role music plays in our lives. We should then perhaps like to think that an idealist theory of music might be better suited. Through analysis of R. G. Collingwood’s theory of art I purport to argue that idealists fare no better; in fact all theories of music seem at some point unable to account for some commonsense ideas we have about music. I suggest the reason for this may be that our vocabulary of the ontology of music is ill defined.

The ontology of art concerns what art really is, how, or if, it comes to be, and how, or if, it ceases to be, and seeks to answer other questions concerning the very existence or non-existence of art. The ontology of art is not concerned with the defining aspects of art, but with “various entities accepted as paradigm works of art of different genres (*Guernica, Clair de la Lune, or Emma*)” and asks “what sort of entity [this is]” (Thomasson 2004: 78–92). That is to say, our opening question is not *what is music?*, but rather *this is music, and what is it?* We thus rely on some, arguably not very controversial, pre-theoretical notions about music in order to begin our inquiry.

Nominalism and Idealism

Peter Kivy, in his book *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, presents three ways to understand the ontology of music. They range from idealist to nominalist on the following scale: 1) Extreme Platonism 2) Qualified Platonism, and 3) Compliance-class theory. The three theories are mutually exclusive, but also just about equally successful in describing what kind of entity music is. All three theories rely in one way or another on the distinction between type and token, and some time will be well spent explaining the basic idea of this distinction. “The distinction between a *type* and its *tokens* is an ontological one between a general sort of thing and its particular concrete instances” (Wetzel 2006). In the case of music the type could be

Mozart’s *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, while the tokens could be the concrete performances of the same piece of music, ranging from the first ever performance in Vienna in 1787, the one you heard last year in your local concert

house, or even the one you hear on CD every once in a while. It is important to distinguish between the performance as an action which results in the sounds of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, and the performance as the sounds themselves. When discussing ontology, it is generally more interesting to speak of the sounds themselves, as I will throughout

the length of this paper.

When first confronted with the question of what music is, many will tend to lean towards a physical explanation: music is sound waves. This is commonsensical, easy to understand and in accordance with the current paradigms of natural science. Interpreting music as merely a physical entity consisting of sound waves, does however conflict with some other commonsense beliefs about music. We tend to speak of art in wider terms than natural science is able to, which leads to the inevitable question: Are musical pieces “describable *purely* in terms of physics?” (Thomasson 2004: 81-82). Very few people would speak of music *purely* by virtue of it having wave properties such as *angular frequency, phase* and *group velocity*, and as far as I know we do not in normal discourse describe music by equations such things as $\omega = \beta v$, $\phi = 2\pi f t - \frac{2\pi}{\lambda} x$ or $v_g = \frac{d\omega}{dk}$. These equations obviously describe music insofar as music is sound waves, but they are also intellectually unsatisfying for us because they fail to take into consideration many other properties that music seems to have, for instance how music is able to move us in particular ways. A merely physical theory of music seems to deal unsatisfactorily with some properties of music that we may experience every time we indulge ourselves in some musical pleasantries.¹ If the purely physical explanation of music fails, then what is music?

The compliance-class theory is a nominalist theory that is not merely concerned with physical properties. Compliance-class theory states that “the complaints of a score are performances, and the compliance class is a work” (Kivy 2002: 206). For those who hold that simplicity is important in ontology, compliance-class theory is the only theory presented by Kivy that does not have an ontologically unintuitive definition of the type. Contrary to forms of Platonism, compliance-class theory does not posit music as some ethereal and transcendent form. It de-

finer the type merely as the sum of all the performances of a work, which makes the compliance-class a nominal type. There is nothing more mysterious to the type than the fact that we name it.

We can easily relate to such a definition, but it still gives a very unwieldy class with which to deal: as far as we know, the class may be infinite, because (disregarding the apocalypse) there may be an infinite number of new performances of any musical work in the future. Compliance-class theory succeeds in letting us talk about music the way we are accustomed to in some sense, but, as Kivy points out, we must deny the obvious claim that a particular musical work was created at a particular time. If the compliance-class defines the work, and the compliance-class may be infinite, then the work can never be wholly and fully defined. Such an objection is problematic for a nominal theory of the ontology of music, as we, among other truismers of music, would like to say that all of Beethoven's music was created between 1770–1827.

If we can never be able to say that a musical work actually is finished, if we cannot intuitively relate to what music is by help of our nominal apparatus, then there is perhaps no use in speaking of its ontology. Will an idealist theory be dealt more satisfactorily with the ontology of music? Let us examine a theory that construes art as a mental entity, perceivable only through imagination.

Preliminaries of Collingwood's Ontology

British philosopher Robin George Collingwood gives his answers to some problems of the ontology of art in his 1938 book *The Principles of Art*. Collingwood is concerned with the ontology of art in general, but he draws many of his examples from music. And it is obvious that he means his theory to apply to music as well as any other form of art. Is the ontological theory of Collingwood an isotope of one or more of the theories Kivy presents, or is it a different theory with different presuppositions? How does Collingwood's theory relate to type/token theory? Is Collingwood's theory as defensible as these other three theories? In some respects every ontological theory of music has been unable to accurately account for some ideas that we have of music. It seems a general problem of the ontology of music that every theory at some point collapses, or at least is not preferable over any other theory. One objective of this paper is to show that this is the case for both nominalist and idealist theories of the ontology of music. Finally, I will try to point in the direction I believe one should look to find a solution. But first let us take a

closer look at Collingwood's theory.

Collingwood sets out to build a theory that will explain what art is, and how art is created. His theory warrants interest due to being a daring theory that attempts a completely non-physical account of art. Let us begin with examining what Collingwood takes to be art, and in order to do so we should begin, as Collingwood himself does, with a theory of how art is created. For Collingwood the process of creating art is a process of creation. As he rather bluntly puts it, he does not mean *creation* in a theological sense, for that would offend the “[r]eaders suffering from theophobia” (Collingwood 1997: 248). Rather he means creation in a more worldly sense: “To create something means to make it non-technically, but yet consciously and voluntarily” (Collingwood 1997: 247). Integral to the act of creating art, is that art does not need to be made “according to a preconceived plan” (Collingwood 1997: 248). The artist is a “finite” being, and requires certain conditions to be able to create art, and Collingwood holds these conditions to be “certain unexpressed emotions, and (...) the wherewithal to express them” (Collingwood 1997: 249). God, however is an “infinite” being and requires no such conditions. Having established there is no necessary connection between art and divinity, Collingwood proceeds to place art in its ontological category.

Art as Imagination

Collingwood holds the *very* idealist claim that a work of art is *not* a physical object, “not even in the widest sense” (Cooper 1997: 245). Many philosophers of art believe the artwork to be something in this world and of this world, something we are able to see or hear. Despite knowing that the discussion of definitions of art is not directly related to the ontology of art, I will dare venture into it, as I believe it will help clarify Collingwood's ontological position: The father of non-essentialism Morris Weitz, believes artifactuality “a necessary property for being an artwork, if anything is” (Davies 1991: 5). Arthur Danto takes this further and takes artifactuality as *the* necessary condition for something to be art. When using artifactuality in this particular context, I should make clear that I believe that for artifactuality to be defined as intentional modification, the artwork must be a *physical object*: In the case of music an artifact of this world consisting of a number of sound waves in relation to each other.² I take this to be a rather modest claim, because the possibility of something being turned into an artifact, presupposes that there must be something that can be modified into an ar-

tifact. What can this something be if not physical? Insofar as only physical entities enter into causal relations with other physical entities, the something must be physical. In other words the presence of a physical object is a necessary condition for there to be artifactuality. Collingwood does not do away with the necessary condition; instead he denies the whole argument, stating that artifactuality has nothing to do with art at all. At this point it is necessary to introduce Collingwood's demarcation between the *work of art* and *art proper*; the former is a mere vessel for the latter. For Collingwood the 'work of art' has nothing to do with art proper.

If this is the case, then what is the work of art? The work of art "is an imaginary thing." (Collingwood 1997: 255), Collingwood answers. In order to explain such a claim, we must look back to how art comes to be, through creation. He compares the process of creating art to that of creating a bridge. The bridge is created in two steps: "(1) Making the plan, which is creating. (2) Imposing that plan on a certain matter, which is fabricating." (Collingwood 1997: 251) The plan itself only exists in the engineer's head, and if he puts the plan down on paper it is only because he believes that his memory may fail him. And of course, memory often does. But still, Collingwood holds, the plan on paper is not *the plan itself*. Art also has this element of creating a plan, but whereas the fabricated bridge contains the plan, analogous to Aristotelian form, the *work of art* has nothing to do with the plan, i.e. art proper. When a tune is played on an instrument, the sounds are not art proper, rather art proper is "the actual making of the tune [which] is something that goes on in [the artist's] head, and nowhere else" (Collingwood 1997: 252).

To the Cartesian idealist reader this might have a certain Pythagorean flair: With Collingwood, as with Pythagoras the idealist can argue that there is a form of invincibility to art as a mental (i.e. excluded from the physical realm) and relational entity (i.e. the plan defined by parts of the plan in relation to other parts of the plan). In music this would be defined as the relation of the pitch of one tone to the pitch of another tone. If, or when, the world comes to an end, there will be no houses, no conversations, no lectures at the university, no sentient life. But there will be art. There will not be any *works of art*: no paintings, no statues, no books, no performances – but there will be the eternal, immutable relationship between the parts of the plan as was conceived in the artist's head. There will be *art proper*. Of course Collingwood can only be held to this given an idealist world-view. Should we like to think that

our world is purely physical, we shall not be able to draw this conclusion. The argument fails with regard to physicalism because if we assume that physical phenomena are all there is, we cannot acknowledge the existence of mental entities while assuming the total destruction of all physical objects. If mentality in some way is necessarily tied to its instantiation in a physical system, there cannot be anything mental after the end of the physical world. For Collingwood's theory to have Pythagorean implications we should have to posit some eternal realm of souls or other non-physical form of reality.

Such an understanding of Collingwood implies that his theory is an *a posteriori* form of a Kivyan Platonism, of which one of the defining properties must be that the *type* of any musical work exists independent of its composer. The work of art *proper* according to Collingwood is of course *created* to begin with, not discovered - but once the artwork *proper* has been created it roams among the platonic forms as if it had always been with them. Kivy defends Platonism, and says that it "is not a counterintuitive idea at all, and might be a new, refreshing and insightful way to see what composers are doing" (!) (Kivy 2002: 214). Kivy believes that a composer is not *creating* a symphony, he is *discovering* it. When a composer has finished a symphony he has not created anything, he has merely discovered the first token of a particular type, so called first-tokening. Kivy's argument for this as given in his *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* is rather thin, and Kivy himself admits that there are valid objections to his claim. But still he believes that "describing what is going on in composition as 'discovery' works *as well as* describing it as creation" (Kivy 2002: 215). The way is still clear for any other theory of the ontology of music.

Creating a work of art does not involve embodying the plan in the work of art. Collingwood takes this even further as he deplores the mere aural quality of music as nothing but the "means by which the audience, if they listen intelligently (not otherwise), can reconstruct for themselves the imaginary tune (...)" (Collingwood 1997: 256). If the audience listens unintelligently or is at a concert only to enjoy the pleasure of the sounds in themselves, it is just as bad for music as "the presence of a person who went to a scientific lecture for the sensual pleasure he got out of the lecturer's mouth would be for science" (Collingwood 1997: 257). Music is not merely a sensory experience, but the reconstruction in the listener's mind of what the performer is conveying through his medium. Hence art in Collingwood's view makes it possible for the

observer of art to experience the emotions of the artist, making the theory a spiritual successor to Tolstoy's theory that art *infects* the observer with the emotions of the artist. Even though no significant property of artness is given the sensory experience, Collingwood does not deny that sensory experience is necessary for the observer of art to be able to *reconstruct* art proper; a sensory experience is a necessary condition for reconstruction of art proper in any subject other than the artist herself. Thus, sensory experience will be necessary for art to be shared.

Viability of Art as Imagination

I mentioned that Collingwood's ontology should not be studied for its correctness in relation to the world, and indeed I believe that Collingwood fails in giving an acceptable account of the ontology of music. The theory seems to give an interesting perspective on how we can understand the *musical entity*. However, I shall argue that Collingwood's theory does not have the purported metaphysical implications that it seems to have. Amie Thomasson argues that Collingwood "is only calling attention to the fact that *to understand* a work of art we must do more than experience auditory and visual phenomena" (Thomasson 2004: 91). Collingwood may be correct in saying that we must do more than experience stimuli to understand a work of art, but he is wrong in believing this argument of understanding, or rather interpreting music to have metaphysical implications.

Let us consider an example: If I were to listen to Beethoven's fifth symphony, then according to Collingwood, there would be two possible results in my mind. Either I am just hearing sounds and not thinking about them, or I am actively processing these sounds, filtering out unwanted noise and trying to understand the artist's intention. Thus I am in one of two mental states, a passive listening state, or an active interpreting state, and these two mental states must be a result of my reaction to the aural experience of listening to music. My point is that this does not say anything about the ontological status of music. It is not an argument for the ontological status of a musical work. Collingwood is in fact arguing for the ability of art to induce mental states in human beings; he is not discussing the *entity* of music. All we have found out thus far is that whatever ontological entity music in the end will turn out to be, it must be able to induce mental states in human beings. Collingwood does not give much of a convincing argument for *why* music must be understood as imagination, except for pointing out that art can-

not be understood merely in physical terms. It may seem as though Collingwood goes too far in trying to avoid the fallacy of thinking of music purely in physical terms. In fact it might almost seem as though Collingwood has developed a theory of musical interpretation disguised in ontological language.

There is also another problem to Collingwood's understanding of music, and even to other idealist theories. Let us suppose for now that art is our active imaginative reconstruction of what the artist thought when she created a physical object through which she intended to share her experience. If music is to be ontologically defined as imaginative reconstruction, then we have come no further in establishing a definite type of what any piece of music is. If the imaginative experience is integral to the ontology of music, then "it fails to make works intersubjectively accessible, since the number of works going under the name *The Rite of Spring* will be as multifarious as the imaginative experiences people have at performances with that name" (Kania 2007). This would not be a problem if we were speaking of *how we interpret art*, but we are speaking of *what we believe to be the work of art itself*. Imaginative reconstruction makes it difficult to grasp the notion of *The Rite of Spring*, because if any or all persons that listen to it may have different experiences, then given Collingwood's understanding of art, every one of these experiences is as legitimate as any other. This will result in us never being able to speak of an authoritative version of *The Rite of Spring*. We have no way of knowing whether a person A's experience of *The Rite of Spring*, is anything like the experience of a person B.

When listening to any piece of music there is reason to believe that we have a conscious experience that have a specific qualitative aspect. We call this aspect the *quale* (qualia in plural). The philosophy of mind deals with the problem of spectrum inversion, which we can state as this: Person A and person B are standing in a room with a basket of red and green apples. They are asked each to pick out a green apple. Of course both pick green apples. The point is that we have no idea of whether what A and B is seeing is really the same color, all we know is that the color(s) A and B are seeing conforms to our common notion of green. They may in fact have different inner experiences, and what A calls green, B may call red. The spectrum of qualitative feel of the experiences may be inverted, resulting in the qualia of person A and B being different, but still their behavior will be indistinguishable by an observer. The problem of qualia in a simple situation is as valid in a complex situa-

tion such as listening to *The Rite of Spring*, just substitute *seeing green* with *hearing c* and *seeing red* with *hearing e-flat* and the implications should be clear. Defining music ontologically as imagination actually denies the possibility of there being a definite type of *The Rite of Spring*, because there is no way of knowing whether the tokens will fit the type or not.

There is also another serious objection to the understanding of art as imagination, and that is that it makes “the medium of the work irrelevant to an understanding of it” (Kania 2007). When using imagination as the defining aspect of art, then it is possible for me to have the same imaginative experience whatever the medium is. When listening to Beethoven’s ninth symphony being played by a CD-player, a full symphony orchestra, or even when hearing my neighbor humming parts of it when mowing the lawn, it will be possible for me to have the same imaginative experience. Thus, there is possibly no aesthetic difference between performances in different mediums. Though it may be tempting to conclude that this is a serious flaw because there obviously exists some important aesthetic difference between performances in different mediums, I would only defend the weaker conclusion that any theory that ontologically defines music as imagination leaves it an “open question whether the [different] media are aesthetically equivalent” (Kania 2007).³

A Solution in the Distance?

The ontology of music still eludes us. Completely nominal theories of music fail us in some aspects, and the idealist theories fail us in other aspects. In some respects both the nominalist and idealist theories of music give satisfying answers to some questions about the ontology of music. But in other respects they fail more or less spectacularly. Stephen Davies says that if “ontology should be more than a philosopher’s game, then it should respond to the way we actually engage with and discuss music and its works” (Hamilton 2007: 192). How can a theory succeed in doing this, and at the same time be consistent with every notion we have of music? For the time being it seems it cannot. How can we get out of the quagmire that keeps every theory insufficient in at least one respect? Unfortunately I have no final answer, and there will be no miraculous solution to anything in my final words, but I will try to point

in the general direction of where one at least may begin to look for a better way of explaining the ontology of music.

A basic problem of the philosophy of mind is the mind-body problem. The relationship between the realm of the mind and that of the body is a philosophical battleground. John Searle thinks the reason the problem has not been solved is that the philosophical vocabulary we use to state the problem is ill-defined. Searle thinks that the concepts of dualism and monism with their different adjectival modifiers do not help us in solving the problem; instead they serve only to confuse us. We assume the distinction between the physical and the mental. We assume that everything can be reduced to something more basic.⁴ Searle thinks that these are misassumptions, and that they are in fact the reason why we cannot solve the mind-body problem.

Does this also apply to music? It may be possible that our vocabulary of types and tokens, and our understanding of musical works as either mental or physical entities are just as ill-defined as the vocabulary in the philosophy of mind. I will try to explicate what the analogy from the philosophy of mind is, but it is arguably not very clear. Types and tokens are tied to the categories of particulars and universals, and these two categories have given us more philosophical problems than solutions. Perhaps assimilating music into this well-used vocabulary serves only to make it harder to truly understand music, though I must admit that escaping these categories seems near impossible. Perhaps, following Searle on consciousness, our understanding of music is tied to our conscious experience as a higher level property of the physical instantiation of the sound waves. That is to say, might it not be that music qua physical is only sound waves, but that music qua experience emerges from the sound waves – that there are different levels of analysis seemingly inconsistent but true at the same time. Might it even be that somehow the interplay between listener and music is as important as the listener and the music understood separately? Should we perhaps not start at the beginning and examine music and listener separately, but rather start in the middle and look at the *relation* between music and listener? When it comes to how we experience music the basic universal might not necessarily be *properties*; perhaps it is *relations*.

At any rate, our musical-ontological vocabulary may be

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a hindrance to rather than a catalyst for a solution. Perhaps this is the reason why we cannot find a theory that is completely coherent in all respects. The philosophy of mind is directly related to the ontology of music, so it may not be too far-fetched to think that an ill-defined vocabulary also is a problem for the ontology of music. If we want to have a complete theory of the ontology of music, I think we should not examine the problem itself, but rather how we formulate the problem. This may be our way to a solution to the problem of the ontology of music.

NOTES

1 In fact music seems to be the second most permissive of the arts to be described purely in physical terms. It may make more sense to describe a painting by its material components. We could for example distinguish between the chemical components of the paint, and how these give rise to particular visual phenomena that we see in the painting. Some parts of the painting may be difficult to describe solely from a physical point of view, but because the semantics of the painting is so tightly bound to its form there may be some point in describing paintings merely in terms of physics. On the other hand, literature is near impossible to speak of in purely physical terms, and this has to do with the difference between the semantic content of the literature, as opposed to the medium through which it is conveyed. There is no necessary connection between the physical properties of the novel (paper, ink etc.) and the semantic content (meaningful words and sentences). Otherwise audiobooks would be meaningless.

2 In the case of the visual arts, the artifact would consist of elementary particles. In the case of literature there can perhaps be a discussion, as the feeling of “artness” in literature is propagated by semantics rather than visual or aural sensation.

3 The objection is even more serious when speaking of painting. It seems almost impossible that one will have the same aesthetic experience when seeing Picasso’s *Guernica* hanging on the wall of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, as when seeing *Guernica* on a postcard while sitting in one’s own living room. This difference in aesthetic experience can be attributed to the cultural magnitude of the ‘token’ of *Guernica* in the Reina Sofía. If it is the case that the cultural heritage and history of the ‘token’ of *Guernica* are the only parts that affects us, then there might be no *aesthetic* difference between the two tokens of *Guernica*. I however believe that there also is qualitative aesthetic difference between the tokens. There is for example difference in the form of the tokens, the photography being of another quality than oil on canvas. Differences such as this I believe to give different aesthetic experiences when the work of art is presented in different mediums. Thus, when thinking of art as imagination, the visual arts are just as affected by the objection that the medium is irrelevant.

4 Searle also gives two more assumptions, but they are more complex than the first two and it is the point of Searle having objections, not the objections themselves that is relevant here.

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