

Ontology of Form and the Cognitive Divide: The Autonomy Dilemma in Hanslick's Musical Aesthetics

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Abstract: This article begins by reading Edward Hanslick's '*On the Musically Beautiful*'. Following this, the question that arises for me is: Why is it necessary to discuss music itself so clearly? And what circumstances have led to music becoming less pure in the eyes of some people? In my opinion, a fundamental reason is whether one possesses musical talent and knowledge. When there is a gap in these aspects, people's understanding of music will also be different. Therefore, I will analyze from several aspects: the purity of music, the content and form of music, the relationship between music and emotions, and the relationship between interpreting the audience and music.

1. Introduction

Edward Hanslick is generally considered one of the earliest and most influential advocates of formalist music theory^[1]. His book, '*On the Musically Beautiful*', is considered the most controversial in the history of music aesthetics. Its core viewpoint challenges traditional emotional music aesthetics and proposes the formalist proposition that "the beauty of music lies in the movement of musical sounds." The author believes that this is an academic contest between objective existence and subjective consciousness. Edward Hanslick's self-disciplined wheel of music aesthetics represents a revolutionary breakthrough in 19th-century music philosophy. Edward Hanslick is a model of music formalism. This is a profound respect for music and the highest recognition of its value.

Music belongs to the field of art, so what is art? What is the autonomy of art? The autonomy of art is a core concept in aesthetics and art philosophy. It is also a core concept in Edward Hanslick's view because the concept is that art has its own value, logic and evaluation criteria independent of external utilitarian purposes. Is this completely consistent with Edward Hanslick's formalism of music, which emphasizes the self-sufficiency of artistic form, meaning, and aesthetic experience while also believing that art should not become an appendage of other social fields? The value of art lies in its form, beauty, and expression, not in preaching or serving a purposeful or effective function. Art provides a non-utilitarian aesthetic experience. When the audience appreciates and perceives the work, they experience the sensory aspect brought about by the inner harmony of the work rather than seeking knowledge. Art is noble, but at the same time, it is presented in a beautiful

state when it comes into contact with the public. It may not be necessary for the audience to consider whether art has its own rules in their brains. This is to verify the previous idea that people who can truly understand the art of music need a certain amount of knowledge reserves. At the same time, in the world of artists, they are unique and can refuse external intervention, which also guarantees the uniqueness of each work of art.

After reading *'On the Musically Beautiful'*, I realized the importance of the beauty of music itself. The musical structure of music itself has a unique aesthetic feeling. What is the autonomy of music? In Edward Hanslick's view of the autonomy of music, music itself cannot be covered by any emotion or external content, but based on the unique beauty of music itself, the law is explored from the special conditions of music itself^[1]. Edward Hanslick's music is self-sufficient beauty, which does not need external content. It is the purpose itself. This once again denies the expression of emotions expressed by the art combination, which is not the content of music. I think *'On the Musically Beautiful'* has laid a philosophical foundation for the ontological value of music art itself, because the effect of music also depends on the physical and mental state of the audience, which is easy to confuse with each other, so this book explains all this more comprehensively. We should clearly distinguish between ordinary emotions and aesthetic emotions. In my view, there is an insurmountable gap between musicians and their audience.

2. The Structure of the Music Itself

2.1. Purity of Music

The purity of music is what the author wants to prove most. What is purity? The purity of music refers to the structure, form, and sound essence of music itself, as well as the movement of music composed of musical elements such as melody, rhythm, chords, harmony, and others. The most direct feeling brought by the movement of music is the physiological and psychological changes that are felt subjectively and actively after the music is transmitted to the central nervous system of the brain through the ears. This is the effect brought by the musical achievements. In this case, the music itself remains pure because it is the active party. We must pay attention to the music itself. Music contains its own unique musical ideas and music logic. It is impossible to find music in any emotional background. In the ears of the listeners, "it sounds so beautiful" should be that the music itself is beautiful. Music cannot be described as the display of words. Music cannot be described at all. The beauty of music itself is self-sufficient and has nothing to do with any external content. Any educated and knowledgeable person can recognize and appreciate the beauty of music itself because when the composer first created it, they created a melody rather than generating emotions. Beauty is in music, and music creates beauty^[3].

However, people often apply their consciousness to a piece of music and give it meaning. Alternatively, some music creators express their emotions and feelings through music, creating a work that matches their emotions. At this time, music is no longer pure; it becomes a carrier, a so-called form of expression, and no longer has its unique meaning. No traditional music object classification system can explain the musical form experience that is inseparable from the content, which can be regarded as a further explanation of some contradictions and points of difficulty in argumentation.

2.2. How to Interpret the Content of Music

Some people would ask whether music has content. What is the content of music? Edward Hanslick answered this question very clearly. From the perspective of music itself, the content of music is the form of musical movement, not the artistic expression of emotions in music,

as many music lovers think. The author does not want music to belong to this form, but music has its uniqueness. The beauty inherent in the musicality of movement itself is a unique charm akin to the beauty of music. The beauty of musical movement is unrestricted to a certain extent. Composers explore different chord combinations, melody fluctuations, and rhythm changes, creating beauty that considers various forms of musical movement. Finally, a musical work is completed through the sum, which is eternal.

3. Music and Emotion

3.1. The Relationship between the Beauty of Music and Emotional Connection

Edward Hanslick denied that music is inherently associated with any expression of emotion and argued that music is not essentially an expression of emotion. However, at the same time, Edward Hanslick did not deny that music can evoke emotions in people and trigger them to a certain extent. How to explain the relationship between ‘the ultimate value of beauty’ and ‘direct verification of emotion’? First of all, this question is complex, encompassing philosophy, psychology, and art theory. Edward Hanslick believes that the beauty of music lies in its structure, so the value of music's beauty is reflected in the profound emotional response triggered by the presentation form, and music directly expresses the will itself. Pure aesthetic contemplation is obtained. The direct verification of emotion is reflected in the fact that music further strengthens the emotional response and experience of the audience when it makes sounds, and the audience obtains verification by grasping this form.

It is precisely because music has such an ability and power that some people who create musical works often exhibit selfishness, infusing their own emotions and the emotions they want to express into their music creation, thereby expressing their emotional diversity and attempting to awaken similar emotions in other listeners, in order to experience empathy. The essence of music is not to express emotions but to awaken or represent them. So, are the two compatible? In my opinion, Edward Hanslick is very sure of the value of music itself, so he hopes that everyone will focus on the music itself. Arousing emotions and feelings is the power of music, not the purpose of music. In this respect, music possesses a certain scientific nature, which is closely related to psychology and physiology. Edward Hanslick's theory places music in a dominant position, granting it absolute initiative. On the premise of clarifying the order of before and after and the active and passive relationship, the two can be compatible, but not vice versa. So, in this document, I think the viewpoint put forward by the author is very appropriate, namely that music should maintain a "neutral" stance in terms of emotions.

It is precisely because of the direct verification of emotion that we have a door to understand beauty. There is a certain unity between the two, and this unity also reflects the essence of art.

3.2. How to Analyze the Differences Between Composers and Music Lovers - Reasons for the Emergence of Pros and Cons

According to my study abroad experience, appreciating symphonies, operas, ballets, and other arts abroad is a regular way of life and entertainment for the masses. Regardless of whether they possess professional knowledge or not, young or old, they all agree that beauty is communicated effectively and is received very well^[2]. This is closely related to social spontaneity. People's behavior is unconstrained and selective. In their concept, it is joyful and romantic. This may be the reason why the Romantic period experienced such a flourishing. In the eyes of artists, art comes from art and goes back to art, but from the perspective of the audience, it is a sensory perception. Art will reach the masses, but it is difficult for the masses to engage with art truly. I think

Edward Hanslick's book, *'On the Musically Beautiful'* is written for music lovers, music critics, and artists. Through the essence of music, it guides music lovers and critics to understand music correctly and demonstrate that beauty is objective. At the same time, Edward Hanslick also stands from the perspective of psychology and physiology to understand the audience's performance after listening to the concert because the effect of music sound on people's emotional state can be popularly understood as "speaking for music." Edward Hanslick clearly explains two viewing states: one is passive and wrapped in personal emotions, and the other is active and rational.

Why is it difficult to understand the views expressed by Edward Hanslick in this book? The author believes that because it is a minority against the masses, who can recognize the beauty of music itself? Those who have musical talent are well-versed in music theory, and can apply their knowledge of music theory. They have a very strong and reasonable music logic, as well as the ability to develop it. This ability requires absolute control of technology and thorough self-discipline in aesthetics. When music was created, it was originally expressed in the score, meaning that only the composer could recognize this work of art. The music composer must have shared the beauty of his work at the beginning to popularize the wonderful music and allow people to appreciate it. However, the special charm of music can evoke people's psychological and physiological emotional resonance allowing them to add their own emotions to it, thereby blurring the meaning of the music itself. Gradually, people will think of what kind of music can express my unspeakable or inexpressible emotions. At this time, they stand on the opposite side of the beauty and purity of music itself. Music itself can inspire people's emotions, but this cannot be the purpose of creating music!

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It is precisely because of the direct verification of emotion that we have a door to understand beauty. There is a certain unity between the two, and this unity also reflects the essence of art.

3.3. The Relationship between Music and Emotions in the Eyes of the Public

So, can music express emotions? Edward Hanslick opposed viewing music as a "carrier" of emotions, arguing that emotions are the result of the audience's subjective projection rather than being inherent to the music itself. Another question that extends from here is, if music cannot express emotions, why do people in different periods have similar emotional reactions to the sound effects of the same work?

This question cannot be given a definitive and flawless explanation in today's world. It is related to people's subjective spontaneity. The subjective understanding of music's feelings is similar. All of this comes from the subjective fantasy of the audience. The audience who lacks music quality training will rely on the lyrics or titles of the work to understand the music. So, how to appreciate music correctly? The author advocates that an ideal listener is only focused on the form and spirit itself, such as the musical structure of this work, the development of the theme (e.g., sonata, waltz, symphony), and the resolution of harmony.

4. The Beauty of Music

4.1. Pure Music and Instrumental Music

Pure music and instrumental performances can more purely showcase the charm of music. The author's answer is yes because they are not disturbed by non-musical elements, allowing them to return to the essence of sound. Such music has no lyrics and better reflects the self-discipline of this form. For example, classical music, such as sonatas, waltzes, and symphonies, relies on the internal logic of music to develop, and the musical structure is clear enough^[4]. No emotional titles or themes guide the music, allowing listeners to appreciate its formal beauty better. For example, Bach's 'Twelve-tone Keyboard Suite' was also created by constantly exploring the possibilities of music, which is the continuous improvement of techniques without any other purpose. When music is free from all non-musical dependencies, its form itself becomes more solid and expresses the deepest meaning.

4.2. How to Correctly Define and Understand the Beauty of Music and Its Reasons

How should we correctly define the beauty of music? The author believes that music beauty is a unique kind of beauty specific to music itself, which does not need to be attached to external elements. The most fundamental element of music is harmonious sounds, and the structure of music cannot be without coordination.

This also explains what was mentioned earlier, that music is both free and not free. If it leaves the range of harmony and the framework of music theory, it will produce very harsh and bad sounds, which are no longer music but noise.

The beauty of music is characterized by its colorfulness and diversity and is infinitely variable, yet it is always related.

Hanslick used a kaleidoscope as an analogy in his work to better help readers recognize the diversity of music's beauty. In the formalist aesthetics of readers, the pure contrapuntal beauty in Bach's "The Art of Contrapuntal Composition" is a group of harmonious musical structures that is inherently beautiful and does not require any emotional or narrative context to enhance it.

From a psychological perspective, the beauty of music stems from the physiological sensation (mainly pleasure) of the human brain's processing of this pattern. In Edward Hanslick's view, he focused on "top-down" rational cognition, weakening the emotional feedback from the biological instinct level to the form^[5]. At the same time, Edward Hanslick did not deny the emotional

reactions music evokes in people. Aesthetic experience is the product of the interaction of instinctive reaction and rational analysis and interpretation.

5. The Subjective Impression of Music

5.1. The Relationship between the Emotional Responses of the Audience to Music and Their Personal Associations

Edward Hanslick's analysis of the subjective impressions of music is a critical examination of the emotional responses and personal associations that the audience has toward music. Edward Hanslick does not deny the existence of subjective impressions but firmly opposes equating them with the essence of musical beauty itself. The author believes that when the audience is enjoying music, they will feel personal emotions and thereby imagine specific images. However, this belongs to the projection of personal psychology and is not the essence of musical beauty itself. Then, the question that needs to be raised is: What is the difference between subjective impressions and the essence of musical beauty? This core proposition remains that the beauty of music exists only in the "movement form of musical sounds" and is not the personal emotions and associations of the audience when they enjoy music. Edward Hanslick also clearly pointed out that the acoustic effects directly affect people's nervous systems through physical vibrations, thereby triggering physiological and psychological reactions. This is the result of physiological stimulation and cannot be attributed to the content of the music. For the audience, observing and appreciating the structural form of music is a difficult and limited task. In contrast, direct sensory perception and direct personal associations are easier to achieve^[6]. Without prior knowledge reserves, for most audiences, music is an entertainment, a refined artistic form, and a way to connect with their spirit.

5.2. Analyze from Both Objective and Subjective Perspectives on How to Accept Music as Being Correct

How can one distinguish between an aesthetic acceptance of music and a pathological acceptance of music? The author believes that an aesthetic acceptance of music is a purely aesthetic experience dominated by form perception. It is active, possesses cognitive abilities, and, to a certain extent, can be regarded as objective. It can also perceive the musical form and one's own emotions simultaneously and can rationally distinguish between the two. A pathological acceptance of music is a non-autonomous musical reaction caused by psychological and physiological abnormalities. It is passive. The experience of appreciating music is directly equivalent to understanding music, and it is the original force of free will. It confuses the original effect of music and the beauty of music itself as an art form. This phenomenon has important inspirations for the clinical application of music.

6. Music and Nature

The Relationship between the Sounds of Nature and the Musical Tones

In his work, Edward Hanslick also discussed the relationship between music and nature. How can the sounds of music be produced? Nature provides raw materials for music, such as wood, brass, and other natural substances that can be used to make musical instruments. How can one correctly understand the essential differences between natural sounds and musical sounds^[7]? The sounds in nature also provide certain materials for music creation. However, Edward Hanslick would oppose the imitation of natural sounds by music. In nature, there are sounds such as the rustling of leaves, the flowing sound of rivers, and the regular ticking of clocks, which all belong to physical

phenomena and are purposeless, resulting from the accidental laws of constantly changing nature. However, musical sounds are an organized system of musical tones, are rigorous and are created and constructed based on pure musical beauty. Natural sounds may inspire the creation of musical forms unconsciously, such as rhythm, but this is not imitation; it is merely a structural similarity, not a direct correspondence. The sounds produced by natural phenomena may inspire music in an instant, but they cannot be defined as music.

7. Conclusion

What are the concepts of "content" and "form" in music? They are mutually dependent and complementary, forming a pair of aesthetic core concepts that are both opposed and unified. In Edward Hanslick's argument, the content of music is the music itself as its form. This overturns the traditional answer of emotional aesthetics. He believes that the beauty of the form of music is objectively existent, regardless of whether it is being listened to, and this musical structural logic still holds. In the traditional sense, the content of music refers to the meaning conveyed by music, including emotions, thoughts, and stories. However, the author firmly opposes this view, arguing that music cannot represent a specific person or thing, and external content cannot be imposed on the music itself. Therefore, form is content.

The autonomous theory of music aesthetics completely challenges the traditional heteronomy theory that regards music as a means of expressing emotions and literature. Music does not need to prove its value by relying on emotions, text, or narrative background. Its meaning lies within the organizational structure logic of the musical sounds. At the same time, it criticizes romanticism and refuses to define music in terms of emotions, emphasizing that music should be understood from the perspective of its formal structure rather than emotional association. This promotes the deepening and development of music aesthetics.

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