

What does music mean? Examples from Bach, theory from Kant

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Appearances are a glimpse of the unseen.

-Anaxagoras, fragment B21a

Is music *about* anything? Can music *represent* anything at all? That is, can it *mean* something besides itself?

Much of our music may seem to bear meaning unproblematically, since it consists of sung lyrics. Indeed, the association of musical tones with speech is primeval and enduring: the oldest poems and prayers were at the same time songs, we are told. But if music as *music* can represent, it doesn't do so in the manner of its ancient companion, speech. Like musical tones, words are sounds, but these sounds are taken by us as tokens of concepts, universals which we put to use in judgment, predicating the concepts of one another. There has been great controversy across the ages over *how* exactly strings of words in a sentence manage to mean something, but no one doubts that words have meaning. (It would be difficult to articulate such a doubt to yourself, or to anyone else, for obvious reasons.)

We are less sure about tones. Since music is not a language of signs, it cannot be translated or decoded into prose in a way that carries over its power as *music*. At the same time, many of us would resist the claim that music is meaningless. Beethoven inscribed on his *Missa Solemnis*: "from the heart, may it reach other hearts." The composer wasn't merely a deft technician able to incite feelings in others; he took himself to be a thinker- that is, someone with a communicable inner life. What is in our hearts as we make music, and what do our hearts receive upon listening? In order to begin to answer these questions, we will first survey three of the ways music can be thought to mean, or to represent, using as our sourcebook of examples Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. In the second part of the lecture, we will turn to the account of the meaning of beautiful art offered by Immanuel Kant, perhaps the greatest modern theorist of the beautiful. As we shall see, Kant's deep metaphysics of representation may be especially well-suited to making sense of the beautiful representations of music.¹

¹ Kant is thought not to have been a music-lover. Nevertheless, his brief remarks on music in the *Critique of Judgement* are insightful. He argues that music is only beautiful in so far as it pleases through our reflection

I. BACH

At least three different species of musical representing can be found in the Passion. In many of the oratorio's passages, combinations of these categories are mixed and blurred; our analysis will to some extent abstract from this highly multifarious character of Bach's work. Furthermore, our examples will all be taken from the recitative portions of the work, Bach's setting of the scripture text. The recitatives, while ornate and dense with musical invention, involve less complicated poetic and musical structures than do the song-like arias, chorales, and choral numbers, making our task of analysis and organization a bit easier.

Type 1: Sound Imitation

Perhaps the simplest way for a musical sound to point beyond itself is by resembling some other sound from the wider world. Think here of a timpani rolling in imitation of thunder, or of a bassoon muttering in imitation of your grandfather's voice. Like a portrait of a friend is, among other things, a likeness of our friend, the timpani roll sounds something like thunder, and can therefore represent as a stand-in. This is the model of representation scrutinized by Socrates in Book 10 of the *Republic*: representation here stands to thing represented as image to original. Obviously, the objects artificially imitated by sound can only be things that are already audible.

Let's first listen to a brief recitative passage, and then focus on an instance of sound imitation within it. The Gospel text, recounting the disciple Peter's betrayal of Christ, in English, is as follows:

on its "forms"; that is, melody, harmony, and even tone itself for Kant are not mere sensations but structured objects of reflection. Even his critique of music's essential intrusiveness, and thus lack of "urbanity" (he compares the inescapable spread of sound to the spread of an odor) is perceptive. Artists like Bach were surely aware that much of their power lay in the audience's inability to "turn [its] eyes away" (*KU*, 330).

And Peter remembered the words of Jesus to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (*Passion*, §46, measures 5-12)

Now take a look at a moment about a quarter of the way through that selection- it's the first example on your handout. In the second measure, the Evangelist hops through an arpeggiated triad on the word "*kraehen*" or "crow", the sound of his voice recalling the sound of a rooster's crow.

[see example #1, handout: §46, measures 7-8]

Directly mimetic moments like these are rare in the *Passion*. The tones, whose native tongue is melody, are here compelled to play the part of mere noise. Though they point to something by reminding us of it, they seem to *mean* little; they are not a language giving utterance, but an auditory reminder. There is also something humorous in these moments: it is the comedy of Bach's noble tones momentarily throwing on the low dress of inhuman, unspiritual sound. One of the most charming things about this technique is that the dress can be thrown off as easily and as quickly as it is put on.

At the same time, it should be noted that this imitative dress is still music's own. We are not fooled into thinking a rooster has snuck into the church; Bach has pointed to the animal's call from well within his musical world. After all, the sound here heard is a dominant triad, and real roosters don't sing chords.² The tonal material of this imitation thematizes its artful distance from its referent, ensuring that it is heard *as an imitation*.³

I also will note here that there are more complicated and richer uses of sound imitation in the *Passion*, but because they are not merely imitative, I'll return to their investigation a bit later.

² cf Kant's discussion of bird-song, and its imitation: *KU*, 302.

³ Any other sound imitations in the *Passion*? See the alto aria "Buss und Reu": "die Tropfen meiner Zaehren" [the drops of my tears] are accompanied by a drip-dropping in the flutes (*Passion*, §10, measure 70).

Type 2: Tone-painting

Can music point to anything besides other sounds? Consider the following recitative section from earlier in the *Passion*. The Gospel text is as follows:

“And they sang the hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them: All of you will be made to fail me in the course of this night. For it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the flock of sheep will be scattered. But after my resurrection, I will lead the way for you into Galilee.” (*Passion*, §20)

In the first verse of this passage we find a second species of musical representation. This is the second example on the hand-out. Just as the disciples’ motion up the mountain will be narrated in the text, the cello accompaniment steps up the degrees of the scale, marked staccato, through an octave.

[see example #2, handout: *Passion*, §20, measures 1-3]

The term of art for this technique is “tone-painting,”- there are in fact several of them in this section- and they each involve a deceptively simple analogy. For the tones do not actually “rise” in space. Perhaps because we feel the so-called “higher” tones more in our head, and the “lower” in our chests, we associate the change in pitch with the up-down direction. More fundamentally, tones in a melody constitute a heard order, and so are strongly analogous to a set of discrete “places” or *topoi* to which one might move. This fact underlies the analogical sense of our talk of musical “steps”: because the scale, a determinate set of discrete pitches in order, is already implied by the melodic or harmonic context, we hear the “rising” sequence here not simply as a change in position, but as a step-by-step motion from one place to another, without skipping any places along the way. Moreover, since tones recapitulate their melodic function at the octave- as when men and women sing a tune together, they sing exactly an octave apart- , we hear that our steps have taken us as far as we can possibly go-- “all the way” to top of the mountain, so to speak.⁴

⁴ There are in fact two ‘arrivals’ at the summit here: first the accompaniment leads us from C# to the C# in the voice on the downbeat of the next measure, then the voice extends the climb to A, the root of the dominant seventh chord pointing to a resolution in D. Together, both climbs make up a harmonic “7-station”,

This sort of tone-painting is knowing and witty. While the sound imitation of the rooster's crow made use of an auditory resemblance, the tone-painting does not resemble, but analogizes. We notice the analogy between the tonal motion and the locomotion noted in the text, and smile at Bach's artistry in coordinating the two. One could imagine an entire Passion oratorio composed this way, with the text continually illuminated or decorated with musical analogies of the action. This would be an amusing, arch, and civilized work, but would suggest that music's representational power is of a decidedly second-order nature. For the *musical* "ascent" here tells us no more than the text already does on its own: its delight is in the artistry—the cleverness, I want to say-- used in contriving the analogy. Indeed, like musical sound imitation, tone painting is always heard as artifice. To take the melodic ascent as a representation, one must intellectually connect the two sides of the analogy, which are in themselves alien to each other.⁵

Type 3: Musical ideas

What about this passage, a few moments later in the Passion? Jesus is speaking to his disciples at Gethsemene, and says to them "sit you here, I will go there and pray." This is the third example.

[see example #3, handout: *Passion*, §24, measures 4-6]

Bach has Jesus stretch out the word "*bete*"-- "pray", as the strings execute a beautiful cadence in the accompaniment. Is this measure of music a representation?

Let's take a closer look at the music. The first three syllables of Jesus' address spell

or "return" passage.

⁵ Tone painting typically makes use of the sort of spatial analogies music is ripe for, and therefore often (I suspect always) involves a musical analogue of locomotion. These analogies are aided by the conventions of the graphics of score-writing: when you look at the score for the above passage, you see the signs for the tones arranged up an incline. Or look at the tone painting from a moment later, where Jesus speaks of the scattering of the flock (§20, measures 8-10). We know that Bach did in fact devote special attention to the appearance of the *St. Matthew Passion* score. The fact that this visual duplication of the analogy is really only available to the musical insider with score in hand underscores tone-painting's cleverness and humor.

out a triad in B-flat, with a deep B-flat chord held in the strings. But as he lands on his fourth syllable, “hier”, the strings add an A-flat to this same triad, generating a mild dissonance, and leaning unmistakably forward towards the next chord. The strings then resolve the dissonance, drawing out a long, rich, major triad on E-flat, into which Jesus begins to speak the word for prayer.⁶ He leans through a dissonant F on the downbeat of the measure, and then holds an E-flat through the first syllable, resting in the tonal home or center of this passage. The accompaniment here begins to cycle through a series of chords, each casting a different light on and around that same E-flat. Jesus’ bass voice allows his words to be set in the middle of the pitch-range of the accompanying strings. He is thus surrounded by the chords which seem to emanate from him. This effect is often called Jesus’ “halo” of strings.

The effect through the first half of this ‘bete’ measure is of a slowly beating oscillation of different gestures away from home. Then, just as Jesus finishes speaking, the strings finally move more dramatically to a dominant seventh chord on B-flat, rooted on the fifth degree of the scale, and featuring a poignant tritone dissonance between the top and middle voices. The dissonant chord is resolved to the home triad, completing the periodic harmonic journey.

The strings form this harmonic period in four voices, the top two moving contrarily towards each other, and the bottom two moving contrarily away from each other. Contrary melodic motion helps maximize the individuality of the voices, without frustrating their harmoniousness. Indeed, the string voices in this passage seem to act on their own for the sake of each other: gracefully making way for one another, or pausing to offer friendly resistance. Here Bach compounds contraries within contraries, intensifying the harmonious diversity of the motion. The crucial dominant seventh chord, unlike the other chords in the sequence, is articulated across several overlapping rhythms, prolonging the tension in that chord as we hear each voice move into place within the leaning whole of the chord. Bach postpones the appearance of the tritone dissonance until the last possible moment. The whole passage is balanced, natural, gentle, and whole. It is a graceful motion that has its end in sight as it begins, but whose particular trajectory is not exactly determined, but rather full of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic contingency along the way. (Let’s listen again.)

⁶ The whole passage seeks its home in E-flat. This home was established in the immediately preceding chorale, “Ich will hier bei dir stehen”, which begins and ends in E-flat major. The Evangelist narration then picks up with an F-chord, which functions as a secondary dominant. The F gets its seventh with the word “Gethsemene”, resolving to B-flat, which will go on to serve as the dominant seventh in Jesus’ prayer passage.

Is this a representation of prayer? Obviously, no sound imitation, as we saw in Type 1, is at work here. Unlike our Type 2 tone-painting, the musical motion here does not resemble some locomotion, by means of an analogy between tones and place. After all, a prayer is neither a noise, nor is it a locomotion. And for this reason, we detect none of Bach's ironic authorial cleverness in the connection between prayer and this cadence. We do not smile at the artful touch: rather, we are moved by what may seem to be a glimpse of a true nature. The lack of isomorphism connects the music and the thought *more* intimately: we are not hearing something that sounds like a person praying, and we are not hearing prayer illustrated or decorated, we are hearing prayerfulness made audible. Here, the music-- the tones in time Jesus sings-- and the object-- a prayerful inner disposition-- are not thoroughly alien to each other, but seem rather to be of a piece.

To say that the cadence "means" or "represents" prayer might be misleading. It would not be possible, without the text, to deduce what in the world the cadence was "about." At the same time, the things in the world it would be the perfect setting for are not limitless. This is not Aeneas sinking his sword into Turnus' chest; it is not Hamlet castigating his mother; it is not even Socrates cooling his feet in the stream. Although we can't spell out the rule according to which, given either the thought or the music, we could derive or compose the other, we might have the curious impression that no other moment than this one is as well captured by this particular cadence in the strings and voice. In its contingency with respect to any rule, it is particular, unlike the two previous Types of representation.

The text makes the notion of prayer explicit for the listener. There are other concepts we might reach for in an attempt to articulate the meaning of the passage: above, I used the words 'graceful,' 'gentle,' 'natural,' and 'whole.' But none of these words, and not even the leading notion 'prayer' seem to get the music just right. Our concepts may be appropriate, but they do not exhaust. This feature of conceptual inexhaustibility was also missing in the sound imitation and tone painting examples. The sound imitation and the actual call of a rooster both involve a quick rising figure: to some extent, they both bear the same sound. The motion of the tones and the motion of the disciples are analogues: they are both step-wise changes in place. Here, the act of prayer and the motion of the phrase are both....*something*. We need not remain silent about what that something is, but we know we won't be able to spell it out satisfactorily.

There is also marked difference in the response of the listener at moments like these, compared with the cases of sound imitation or tone-painting. While we might delight in the

cleverness of either of the former, pleasure is more deeply involved in our apprehension of the third type of representation. “Pleasure” is in fact not the whole story: there is a complex of pleasures and pains in our hearing this passage- pains of longing, pleasures of consummation. No one has ever been moved to tears by a sound imitation, nor by a tone-painting.

Speaking of tears, I'd like to note another, more complicated case of musical representation in the *Passion*, one in which the first and third types are brilliantly combined. For not all imitable sounds are as cheeky as a rooster crowing. What about the sounds of the human voice, especially that voice when it is involved in the inarticulate expression of emotion- the laugh, the sigh, the sob--? Some have thought that musical meaning as such derives from the refined imitation of emotionally expressive vocal sounds. I don't think musical meaning can possibly be accounted for on such terms, but Bach will sometimes allude to expressive sound imitation, at the same time that he transcends it. Take this passage, from the close of the episode of Peter's betrayal we looked at above. It's the fourth example on your hand-out.

[see example #4, handout: §46, measures 9-12]

“He went out, and *wept bitterly*” -- Bach sets the last two words to a weaving, sinuous melody in f-sharp minor, the key of the famous subsequent aria. On the word “*weinete*”-- “wept”-- the line sinks from the tonic f-sharp through the upper half of the minor scale, landing on a chromatic non-scale tone b#. This unexpected tone arrests our motion down the scale, leaning sharply back up towards the scale-tone 5 (c#) which we have just descended through. The Evangelist takes the opportunity of this unstable, hanging arrest to leap up almost an octave, and to wind even more torturously than before back to the tonic and the fifth, framing the final cadence. No one has ever wept so melodiously. Holding key tones over the beats, and making bold moves between the beats, the cry becomes a passionate dance. As the exquisite articulation of the melody takes over, and takes on a life of its own, the sound that reminded us of crying becomes something else: not an imitation of an audible sign of anguish, but a representing of the anguish of regret and penitence itself: sorrowful anguish made audible. As in Jesus' prayerful harmonic period, we here get a glimpse of the otherwise invisible. As in the earlier example, our apprehension is a complex of delectable pleasures and pains. And in both cases, the fully musical idea, unpredictable according to any thinkable

rule, moves us.

In the foregoing descriptions, I have in several places referred to the leaning tendency of particular tones and chords, naming the former by their scale degree, and the latter by the technical vocabulary of 'tonic, dominant, etc.' Analysis of the tonality of a piece is a crucial task in attempting to make its particular meaning clear in speech. In this sense it is similar to the analysis of the meter of poetic verse, the grammar of a sentence, or the logical figure of a proof. The phenomenon of tonality, of the heard relational structure of tones, is all-important to music, and so theoretically interesting, we might be led to say that the meaning of music is simply tonal function. In Zuckerkandl's terms, the meaning of a tone or chord would then just be its "*dynamic quality*." Similarly, music's rhythmic order in time unfolds through the cycling of upbeats and downbeats, and we might add *rhythmic quality*- a tone's position in the time-wave which it itself generates- as another element of musical meaning. On this interpretation, music would not represent anything beyond itself, and our thinking about a piece of music, if it were to remain non-fanciful, would be confined to reflection on the movement and structure of the musical sounds themselves.

There is something incomplete in this conception of musical meaning, however. To be sure, music cannot make Peter's anguish present to us without the means of tonality and rhythm.⁷ But I take it that an essential element of our understanding of such a passage, and of our pleasure in it, is that something *not exclusively musical* is being made present. The moving syntactic relations in time and tone enable music to 'make sense', as it were, but they do not, on their own, make it beautiful. As Zuckerkandl is well aware, a tune may establish a tonic center perfectly adequately and yet bore us to tears. In his treatment, the question of music's meaning is separated from the question of music's beauty or greatness; and thus, the word "beautiful" hardly appears in Zuckerkandl's wonderful guide into musical phenomena, *The Sense of Music*. An alternative approach, which we will see is Kant's, would understand the pleasure in judging the beautiful as itself the reception and contemplation of a particular sort of meaning. Accordingly, we might understand the tedium or vapidness of some music, like the sort we are subjected to in elevators, as an emptiness of meaning; while they are rhythmically and tonally intelligible, these unbeautiful tonal utterances seem to say little or nothing to us, and their deficiency of representational power is essentially linked with their

⁷ What about "atonal" music? We'd have to investigate case by case to see if such music deserved the title "atonal," strictly speaking. Some allegedly atonal music may involve the search for new, non-diatonic "dynamic qualities." Some may depend upon frustrating expected tonal structures at every turn, and thus presupposing tonality as an implicit background (cf "non-Euclidean geometry").

deficiency in pleasure.

To summarize: Deep pleasure in the apprehension of a representation whose meaning is conceptually inexhaustible, a form in sound that seems to be the natural manifestation of an inaudible truth- these are the features of what I want to call a musical idea in the fullest sense. How does music achieve this representational power? What in us is at work as we perceive it? And why does it feel so good? That is, why is it beautiful, and what does its beauty mean? Maybe Kant can help.

II. KANT

Kant's inquiry into taste and beauty makes up the first half of his third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*. Towards the close of the investigation, the question of beauty's meaning leads Kant to a surprisingly expansive treatment of the ways in which representation can happen. Namely, he finds himself required to rethink the relation between the poles of his famous dualism of intuition and concept. The first *Critique of Pure Reason* developed this Kantian duality, according to which spontaneous intellectual acts (the concepts) must be brought together with given sensible forms (the intuitions) to make knowledge possible. Concepts without intuitions are "empty"-- they are mere thoughts, unable to pronounce truths or falsities about the world. Intuitions without concepts are "blind"-- they cannot be taken to represent anything, and so strictly mean nothing. Everything we can know is articulable in a judgment in which intuition and concept are thought together.

What Kant *now* points out is that the exhibition in an intuition of a concept, the "making sensible" of a thought, is possible in two rather different ways (*KU*, 351).⁸ The first way, familiar to readers of the first *Critique*, he calls "schematic." Here we take the intuition as bearing the "monogram" or calling card of the concept, and accordingly take the particular given intuition to be an "example" of the universal concept.⁹

The second way of exhibiting pure concepts Kant here calls "symbolic." He cautions the reader to observe that people usually use the word "symbol" incorrectly: the designation of a concept by a sensible sign is not an exhibition, a making sensible, of the concept at all, but a "mere characterization." In the latter, Kant writes, "the signs contain nothing whatever that belongs to the intuition of the object." The only thing linking the sensible articulation and the

⁸ References noted '*KU*' are to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Akademie page numbers.

⁹ To be precise, in an empirical judgement, the intuition is an "example", in a priori, a "schema".

referent concept, in this case, is the arbitrary or conventional act of our own intellect. The so-called “symbols” of algebra are in truth mere ‘characters’ or tokens in this sense.

But a genuine symbol, according to Kant, is an intuition that represents by being thought in an analogous way as that which it is the symbol of. Kant offers the following example: a hand mill is a symbol of an absolute monarchy, while an organism is a symbol of a constitutional monarchy. The rules according to which we reflect on the relations in each pair are the same: the parts of the hand mill move through the mechanical force imposed by an external impulse, as the members of the absolute monarchy are coerced by fear of the king; while the parts of the organism are self-moved, according to an idea of the whole animal, as the members of the constitutional monarchy act according to their systematic roles in the legal idea of a constitution. (How much longer and more awkward that is to spell out, than it is to present in the unexplained analogy!)

The hand mill and the animal allow us to see, they “submit to inspection”, the different sorts of monarchy, if we are willing to take them symbolically. It may help to be annoyingly precise here, since the enmeshed relation between thing and appearance is especially knotty where analogy is concerned: There is something about the monarchy which is also present in the handmill. It is that ‘third’ thing-- a sort of power relation-- that is *directly* ‘made visible’ here; in other words, both the monarchy and the mill are *examples* of external force. At the same time, the monarchy itself is *indirectly* made visible in the handmill, in so far as they both bear the relevant power relation. Thus, the one is a *symbol* of the other.

Symbolic representation or meaning abounds in our language: a “sub-stance” doesn’t literally “stand under” anything¹⁰, but the spatial and causal relation articulated in an empirical ‘standing under’ is analogous to the metaphysical relation between a thing and its accidents; just as that which “de-pends” on a cause doesn’t literally “hang from” it (*KU*,352). It is striking that Kant’s examples of symbolic language (which work in German as well as English) come from his Table of Categories, the “pure concepts of the understanding.” Apparently we are unable to speak these non-sensible thoughts except by analogizing them to sensible items around us, although for most of us the symbols have petrified, and we are rarely aware of their symbolic character. If this is true, it is likely that no speech is merely “characteristic,” outside of the rarified realm of modern mathematics.

Kant’s notion of symbolic representation will turn out to be crucial in his culminating investigation of the beautiful as the symbol of the good, even later in the Critique. But for our

¹⁰ I know this etymology is spurious.

purposes, I want to direct our attention to how Kant begins the thread of aesthetic meaning a bit earlier, in his discussion of “fine” or beautiful art. There, Kant is occupied with articulating the subtle role of concepts in fine art. We don’t think a work of art is beautiful because we recognize what concept it should be subsumed under. To judge that a poem is an Italian sonnet, or that a painting is an impressionist rendering of an orchard, or that passage of music contains a perfect cadence, all this tells us nothing about these works’ beauty. These judgments are “schematic,” for they determine the given object as an example of the class, in accordance with a rule. But judgments of beauty-- what Kant calls judgments of taste-- do not use concepts this way. The beautiful object seems ideally suited for thinking over, for contemplating, without it ever being decided once and for all what it is. It excites our minds into a maximal activity, what Kant calls “free harmony,” in which our imagination traces every detail and our understanding ranges through a “wealth of thought,” each activity propelling the other. This harmony is “free” in that it is not in the service of rendering a determinate sentence. Kant takes this “quickening,” rather than being exhausting, to be self-strengthening, a becoming-more-alive. He often relies on the term “play” to capture the leisure, spontaneity, and energy of judging the beautiful. In Kant’s conception, the beautiful is not relaxing, but stimulating. We are not transfixed by beauty, but “linger” over it. It doesn’t strike at a moment, but unfolds across time in the extended activity of our reflection.¹¹

In this connection, it is worth noticing one of reasons Kant cites for ranking music below the other arts. He writes that while the visual arts are “lasting,” in so far as their forms endure in space as we reflect on them, music is inevitably “transitory.” Indeed, he observes that we tend to find musical passages which do manage to endure by “involuntarily” lodging themselves in our memory “annoying.” But this criticism might be turned on its head: because musical forms vanish as we linger over them- indeed they must do so to be present to us at all- to have them in the ear is to be immediately aware that they pass us by, slip away, and evanesce. This may, after all, be the source of beautiful music’s particularly heart-breaking power. Music makes intimately manifest the mortality of the “feeling of life” through which we enjoy the beautiful.

Now, Although judgments of taste are free from conceptual determination, they are in fact often rich with concepts, since they always involve the understanding. A beautiful

¹¹ Much art, and much music in particular, has the effect of transfixing us in an overwhelming moment. According to Kant, this is not art of the beautiful, but art of the *sublime*. Perhaps “Sind Blitze, sind Donner” (*Passion*, §33, measures 104 ff) provides an example of the sublime in the *Passion*.

landscape brings to mind the interdependence of the ecological whole and the efforts of human cultivation. A beautiful horse may bring to mind the natural purposes of power and speed, or the human purpose of war. And in the case of art, the artifice of the object always gives some concrete conceptual direction to our reflection. After all, we only know it is art because someone purposefully made it (*KU*, 303). Of course, many artificial expressions are not beautiful. The representations of men and women on restroom doors point to a determinate purpose, we quickly see what they mean, and our grasp of their meaning is what allows us to see them as artificial in the first place. But they are not thereby beautiful, and in fact the determinate nature of their meaning prevents the free harmony through which we judge beauty from getting off the ground. Thus, beautiful art, in so far as it is beautiful, cannot have a determinate meaning, for it cannot be read as an exhibition of an example according to a specifiable rule. In his attempt to say what it *is* an exhibition of, to account for the in principle unaccountable, Kant introduces his notion of “aesthetic idea” (*KU*, 314).

Readers of the first *Critique* know that “ideas”, for Kant, are concepts of reason, in which a totality or whole is thought. The world, as the cosmic whole, is an idea; as is God, as the highest being. Ideas are never given in experience, which is to say, experience always falls short of them. An “*aesthetic idea*” is a totality for the senses; that is, a given sensible form for which no concept is adequate. Kant describes how

the poet ventures to make sensible the rational ideas of invisible beings, the realm of the blessed, the realm of hell, eternity, creation, and so on. Or again, he takes things that are indeed exemplified in experience, such as death, envy, and all the other vices, as well as love, fame, and so on; but then, going beyond the limits of experience by means of an imagination that emulates reason by reaching for a maximum, he ventures to make these sensible with a completeness that no example in nature affords. (*KU*, 314)

Now, by supposition, the mode of representation here cannot be “schematic,” since the intuition is not definable as a case of a rule. It must, rather, be “symbolic”: in our judgment of the given form, we take its elements to be related to one another in a way analogous to the relation among the elements of the non-sensible ideal. Kant quotes a minor poet: “the sun flowed forth, as serenity flows from virtue” (*KU*, 316). I don’t know if this is really all that beautiful, but let’s give Kant some slack. It is not simply the case that the sun is to its rays as moral contentment is to moral goodness. This would be a symbolic representation, but a determinate one, like the handmill and the autocracy, in which the rule instantiated on each side of the analogy could be discursively articulated. Kant’s claim is that in running through

the image of the sun, we find that no determinate articulation is adequate to capture the way in which it is like virtue. Rather, we range through boundless partial characterizations, stimulated towards further contemplation of the image. This is the free play of taste in the presence of the beautiful, and it feels good.

Note that in this example, the poet has quite explicitly directed our reflection towards what the image is to mean. But this is not necessary for symbolic representation in aesthetic ideas. It may even be the case that the less explicit the directing of our reflection, the more stimulating that reflection will become, since its scope will be less circumscribed. On the other hand, to give too little direction risks disengaging the understanding altogether, falling back into meaninglessness. The great artist strikes this balance perfectly, convincing us that the sensible form means something, but letting that meaning escape any final determination.

Kant gives an interesting example of meaningless aesthetic experience earlier in the *Critique*. “The changing shapes of the flames in a fire or in a rippling brook” are not beautiful, according to Kant, even though they pleasantly engage the imagination (*KU*, 243). These scenes, however, fail to call the understanding into activity, and so the play is one-sided. We can easily call to mind musical versions of this formless flickering and babbling. One sign of their one-sidedness is that these sorts of experiences are *relaxing*, they put us at ease by releasing tension. They are a sort of massage for the mind. The beautiful, on the other hand, wakes us up. For in the beautiful, the understanding is maximally active, striving to make sense of the given form, to apprehend its meaning. Recalling Kant’s famous formulation in the first *Critique*, without concepts our aesthetic reflection is *blind*.

Once Kant interprets the forms of fine art as “aesthetic ideas”, it becomes possible to think of beautiful nature as meaningful in the same, subtle way. The *real* sun’s streaming rays give us far less conceptual direction than the poet’s somewhat pedantic metaphor, but as we take them up in a judgment of taste, our understanding is stimulated into the same sort of harmonious activity. Even though we know the sun is no work of art, we reflect on it in taste as if it were the expression of some meaning that escapes determination, as if some truth was made sensible and submitted to our inspection in the concrete appearance. The intense pleasure afforded by fine art, and by beautiful nature, lies in this delicate balance of significance and ineffability: we feel it means something, we know its meaning can’t be articulated. Kant often tries to capture this tension in aesthetic judgment as such with his claim that the judgment is one of “*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*” (“purposiveness-without-a-purpose,” or, perhaps, “fittingness without a fit”). In light of the

account of aesthetic ideas, aesthetic pleasure can be recast as a delight in this 'meaningfulness-without-a-meaning.'¹²

If beautiful forms as such are aesthetic ideas, and aesthetic ideas always "strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience," the meaning of a beautiful form must always point beyond the sensible, towards the supersensible. That is, through symbolic representation art and nature both render the supersensible, sensible. When supposedly "empirical" items like death and love are taken up by fine art, their representation directs us towards an unconditioned principle, and thus towards the unseen supersensible ground of these familiar features of life. Of course, we don't gain knowledge of these grounds by means of art. Rather, our reflection is directed towards them, as we take the beautiful form to be a glimpse of the unknowable.

Some readers have thought Kant's account of fine art as the exhibition of aesthetic ideas puts so-called non-representational art beyond the scope of his theory. Instrumental music, at least in so far as it could not be reduced to sound-imitation or tone-painting, might seem to be a clear case of art that depicts nothing at all. But Kant's account is in fact a challenge to many familiar models of what "representation" is in the first place. If we think of a representation as an isomorphic stand-in, where the thing and its representation are related as original and image, then it is certainly true that much beauty, including beautiful music, is non-representational.¹³ Indeed, *nothing*, according to Kant, is beautiful by virtue of its service as an imitative copy. However, a thing-as-it-appears is not related to that thing-as-it-is-in-itself as original to image. The appearance is not a copy. Rather, things have sensible manifestations by appearing to us. The two aspects are not distinct beings, but rather complementary standpoints. In the case of beauty, we take something supersensible as if it is appearing. The form present to our senses is not an imitation of some absent thing, but a present manifestation of the unseen, and in this Kantian sense a 'representing,' a *Vorstellung*. Precisely because we can't fill in the content of the reference of the appearance though aesthetic judgment, we can never say adequately what is being presented. But in our reflection, the perpetually out-of-reach reference is always pointed to, sometimes with less and sometimes with more guiding direction. In this way, all beauty is representational and

¹² One great irony of the third *Critique* is that while its analysis of beauty begins by privileging nature over art, Kant surprises his readers late in the book by revealing that all beauty, understood now as the exhibition of aesthetic ideas, is a sort of art.

¹³ Alternatively, in a more modern mood, if we think of a representation as an arbitrary token signifier, beauty is also non-representational.

non-representational at the same time.

The notion of an aesthetic idea can help us make sense of the powerful and puzzling way in which Bach's music has meaning. Jesus' cadential prayer passage is a symbol in Kant's technical sense: in our contemplation of it, we sense that our reflection on its audible elements is analogous to a reflection on the elements of an inaudible reality involving piety, gentleness, and loving sound-mindedness. In other words, Bach has found a way to make the holy, inner character of the speaker sensible, he has submitted that character to our inspection. While we might well be provoked into articulating the meaning of the passage in words, we know that just what Bach has articulated in tones will escape us. We can be told that Peter wept, we can witness a depiction of Peter weeping, but Bach's recitative measures make the invisible and inaudible interior of Peter's soul present to us in tones. This art of aesthetic ideas promises to deliver truths to its listener; we feel we are close to understanding something perhaps otherwise unknowable in listening. Because there is no rule according to which these musical passages could be constructed and classified, we are unlikely to call them "artificial", even though they are art. Rather, the sounds seem to arise from a non-sensible principle as if they were natural. Accordingly, we sense that the connection between representation and meaning is not a contrivance linking alien things, but a union of what belongs together.

Our delight in the fittingness of the contingent, understood as meaningfulness-without-a-meaning, may help make sense of poetic pleasures and meanings as such. In a great sculpture, the posture of the figure seems just right, so very just right as to be an expression of an impossible-to-define principle. In his interview with the diabolical Smerdyakov at the bench outside their father's house, Ivan Karamazov notices his half-brother carefully drawing one foot along side the other, playing with the toe of his boot, and then shifting the position of his feet back again, throughout their chilling, obscurely conspiratorial conversation. Dostoevsky has worked his typical magic here: we couldn't have predicted Smerdyakov would do this, and we don't know why Smerdyakov is doing this or what it means, and yet in its unanticipatable contingency it seems so perfectly fitting that it must have its source in the unseen nature that is Smerdyakov's character. We are moved by indeterminate meaningfulness of the aesthetic idea.¹⁴

The frozen gesture of the sculpture and narrated gesture of character have a power

¹⁴ Regarding Smerdyakov, see Kant's discussion of "the beautiful representation of the ugly."

that trades on their indeterminately symbolic function: indeed, this is the way of gesture as such. In his *Doctrine of Right*, Kant suggests that a handshake is an attempt to make the intelligible act of a meeting of wills in a contract *visible*, in a symbolic gesture depicting the two-sided unity of the agreement. He goes so far as to say that the parties thereby “manifest the perplexity” of the intelligible act (*MdR*, 272).¹⁵ Similarly, kneeling and bowing one’s head are not natural indications of humility and supplication; they represent the latter by means of some analogy between the arrangement in space of our embodied selves and the attitude (so to speak) of our minds. We thereby make our supplication visible. Bach’s music can similarly be seen as an audible gesture, a sequence of meaningful movements, giving Jesus’ piety the sensible form of a heard symbol.

The difference between mere motion and symbolic gesture¹⁶ helps capture the difference between tone-painting, and what I’ve called musical ideas. The motion of bowing one’s head or taking one’s knee takes place in space and time. However, Jesus’ prayer cadence does not analogize this motion (that would make it a tone-painting)¹⁷, but symbolizes the same inner change manifested in the bodily gesture, but in tone and rhythm. Where the pitch-painting takes place in the dynamically bare axis of up-and-down, the tonal gesture’s motions occur within a matrix of home, away, tension, and rest. The “fall” referred to in the term “cadence” (Latin: *cadere*) is not a descent in pitch, but a falling-to-rest in the tonal field of dynamic quality. Indeed some of the string voices in our prayer passage rise in pitch as they “fall” to home. The tonal-rhythmic field gives us access to a symbolic gestural power that far outstrips mere pitch-relation, and may far outstrip the material resources of every other fine art. Because music is so rich with tensions and resolutions, pullings, fallings, holding still, balancing, imbalancing, and coming to rest, and because these motions and forces are distilled and disembodied in tonal and rhythmic forms, music is perhaps the most intensely and exquisitely gestural form of representation available to us. For this reason, whenever we most want to make something spiritual manifest to ourselves, we will want to hear it in music.

January, 2015

¹⁵ *MdR* = *Doctrine of Right*, Akademie page number

¹⁶ Note that symbolic gesture can include non-motion (striking a posture), just as music can include silence.

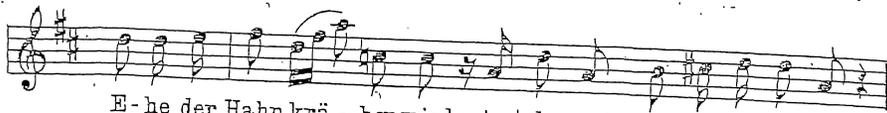
¹⁷ Could the “lowering” of the soprano and bass voices in the second half of the “*bete*” measure be a subtle painting of taking one’s knee?

What does Music Mean? Examples from Bach, Theory from Kant

"Appearances are a glimpse of the unseen."

-Anaxagoras, fragment B21a

1.



E-he der Hahn krä - hen wird, wirst du mich drei-mal verleugnen.

Musical notation for example 1: A single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some slurs and ties.

2.

Evangelist

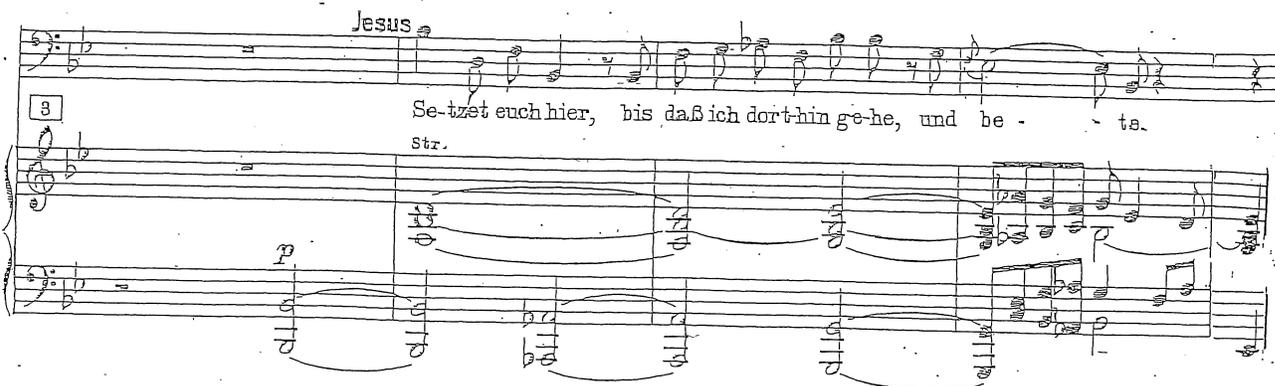


(Chorus I) Und da sie den Lob - ge - sang ge - spro - chen hat - ten, gingen sie hinaus an den Öl - berg.

Cont.
Org.

Musical notation for example 2: A multi-staff score. The top staff is for the Evangelist (Chorus I) in treble clef. Below it are staves for Continuo and Organ. The music is in a key with one sharp and common time. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

3.



Jesus

Setzt euch hier, bis daß ich dorthin ge - he, und be - ta.

Str.

Musical notation for example 3: A multi-staff score. The top staff is for Jesus in bass clef. Below it are staves for strings (Str.). The music is in a key with two flats and common time. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. A dynamic marking 'p' is present.

4.

Und ging her-aus, und wei - - ne-te bit - ter-lich. [100]

The poet ventures to make sensible the rational ideas of invisible beings, the realm of the blessed, the realm of hell, eternity, creation, and so on. Or again, he takes things that are indeed exemplified in experience, such as death, envy, and all the other vices, as well as love, fame, and so on; but then, going beyond the limits of experience by means of an imagination that emulates reason by reaching for a maximum, he ventures to make these sensible with a completeness that no example in nature affords.

Critique of Judgment, §49, 314