Wittgenstein, Music, and the Philosophy of Culture

By Garry L. Hagberg

Abstract

Wittgenstein's scattered remarks on music, when brought together and then related to his similarly scattered remarks on culture, show a deep and abiding concern with music as a repository and conveyer of meaning in human life. Yet the conception of meaning at work in these remarks is not of a kind that is amenable to brief or concise articulation. This paper explores that conception, considering in turn (a) the relational networks within which musical meaning emerges, (b) what he calls a discernible "kinship" between composers and styles, (c) the embodied character of musical content, (d) the close and too-little-appreciated intricate connections between our capacity to make sense in music and in language (and the frequent dependence of the former on the latter) and the interaction of the musical theme with spoken language, and (e) music as a culturally-embedded phenomenon that is, as he said of language, possible only in what he evocatively, if too briefly, called "the stream of life."

Language, for Wittgenstein, is anything but a stable and fixed set of names for things; the simple model of ostensive definition as the sole determinant of linguistic meaning does not survive the first section of *Philosophical Investigations.* Language, rather, is a myriad network of possible and actual actions that take place in particularized contexts, where the interconnecting relational linkages that emerge or reside within those contexts, those language-games, constitute

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in large part the meanings of our words, which constitute the preconditions for our verbal actions. This context-sensitivity applies to art and music as well as to language: art that we see or hear or read is in considerable part constituted by those relational interconnections.[1] Thus the idea of a stable and fixed work of music or art, directly analogous to the model of the stable word given invariant meaning by direct reference or ostensive definition, is equally attractive to a mind seeking organized simplicity—and equally mythical. Works, like words, will take on and drop relational associations as they are moved from context to context, and—importantly—the qualities and characteristics we see in them will also change, as will their networks of relations and associations.

Indeed, Wittgenstein claimed in 1929, in *Culture and Value*, that this is true of his philosophy itself.[2] He writes:

> I still find my own way of philosophizing new, and
> it keeps striking me so afresh; that is why I need to
> repeat myself so often. It will have become second nature
> to a new generation, to who the repetitions will be boring.
> I find them necessary.

What is found boring, or a least needlessly repetitive in one context, will be found necessary and refreshingly reorienting in another: the body of his philosophical work itself functions, on an expanded scale, like the word and like the work. In a later remark that same year he writes, "The human gaze has a power of conferring value on things" (adding: "but it makes them cost more too"). The human gaze, of course, without exception is contextualized, and as such it will situate what it perceives within relational networks. Of words seen in this way, Wittgenstein writes (also in that same year), "A new word is like a fresh seed sown on the ground of the discussion"; that is, it has, or will have, roots and branches that grow out through webs of association. (The word thus here functions just as does a relationally constituted object in the American pragmatic thought of William James, John Dewey, and others.) And, with this heightened significance of context in mind, Wittgenstein wonders about the contextualization of his own cultural ideal: "I often wonder whether my cultural ideal is a new one, i.e. contemporary, or whether it derives from Schumann's time." That question concerns, of course, the content of the relational web within which his sensibility is located—and, I want to say, by which it is constituted.

I. Relational networks

We can thus glimpse in this one way of understanding aesthetic difficulty or inaccessibility: a work, or school of works, can be difficult from the contextualized gaze of one viewer or listener or reader precisely because the content-constitutive relational interconnections are obscure, occluded by a false or inapt layer of relations, or because they are historically inaccessible, i.e. the mind perceiving the work in question cannot gain imaginative entry into the "world" of that work. Also in that same year, Wittgenstein writes, "I think good Austrian work (Grillparzer, Lenau, Bruckner, Labor) is particularly hard to understand." And when he wrote, in the following year (1930), "I once said, perhaps rightly: The

earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover over the ashes," we can make sense of that in relational terms as well: a culture disappears as the network of cultural relations that make works of art, architecture, sculpture, urban design, music, literature, film, and so forth what they are (i.e. where constitutive relations constitute in large part what we can see or hear in them), dissolves or is gradually supplanted by a new set of relations and newly-contextualized associations. The "spirits" that "hover" will then be, precisely, the dormant relational associations that are in a sense there (i.e. they can be reconstituted by a similarly-equipped historical or musicological imagination, or what Michael Baxandall called the period eye[3]), but without this they lie unperceived.

Wittgenstein, throughout his middle and later philosophical work, frequently employs the spatial metaphor of seeing things from different angles, and he is constantly concerned with changing one's point of view on a given problem or issue. This itself implicitly describes a fact about aesthetic perception: the changing of one's point of view, the repositioning of the point from which the gaze emanates, repositions the object seen (as in walking around sculpture, or walking around and within architecture). And that movement will thus change the relational network, however subtly, within which the focal object is seen. We can listen to a string quartet focusing on the cello, hearing the first violin not in a sense for itself, but rather *against* the cello line, and so forth through all the instrumental permutations, thus effecting a similar relational change sonically rather than visually. (Differences of conducting styles can often be discerned in precisely these terms, e.g. Giulini, Muti, Karajan, and Bernstein have very different ways of bringing out or suppressing inner voices or internal versus top or bottom melodic lines.) Here again Wittgenstein sees his entire philosophical body of work in this aesthetic sense, writing (also in 1930), "Each of the sentences I write is trying to say the whole thing, i.e. the same thing over and over again; it is as though they were all simply views of one object seen from different angles."

To place emphasis on the contextual-relational network that activates or deactivates relational qualities or properties (is the repetition boring or refreshingly re-orienting?) runs the risk of suggesting that the object itself at the center of these relations is either interchangeable with any other similarly-relationally-entwined object or, worse, in fact dispensable.[4] But Wittgenstein makes a remark concerning language (in 1931) that holds considerable significance for our understanding of the uniqueness of the given aesthetic object: he wrote, "The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence." This is to say that language is not interchangeable—paraphrase is not quotation, and to read a plot-summary of the *Aeneid* is not to read the *Aeneid*.[5] To examine a chart displaying sonata-allegro form (where the formal interrelations of the composition internally, as well as its formal similarities to other symphonies of the same period, are made vivid) is not to experience a symphonic composition in the high-classical style. It is true that Wittgenstein does not expressly state the point here, but in these remarks on culture his way of describing language very often gives the clue to his distinct way of thinking about music and art: the only way to capture the meaning that (to use his phrase) "corresponds to"—that

is presented by—the work in question is to reduplicate *exactly* the particular work in question (and then—if I am right about the relational determination of content—see it from the identical point of view). Another way to say this is that the meaning is no more detachable from the work than is the meaning detachable from the sentence.[6] That meaning-content invariably will be, again, contextually seated, a fact that the philosopher of language (as Wittgenstein is here suggesting) will have to accommodate—or be condemned to systematically falsify or grossly over-simplify what that philosopher claims to be investigating and describing. To capture the full significance of an utterance, one needs to fully grasp its meaning-constitutive relations, and not merely add up as a sum a sentence's atomistic elements. Thus the thinker—the philosopher of language—as well as, I would add, the appreciator or critic of art, music, or literature—will be like what Wittgenstein describes as the good draftsman: I refer here to the remark of 1931, "A thinker is very much like a draughtsman whose aim it is to represent all the interrelations between things."[7]

One might easily believe that, because the analogy undergirding this discussion just is the analogy between the arts and language, that the interrelations of which we are speaking are only constitutive of a larger *verbal* narrative and thus in truth external to the particular works in and of themselves (because any such narrative would be *about* them, not *of* them). But this is not only a verbal matter: For example, one sees the artistic actions invented and performed by Picasso and Braque by "seeing" (imagining) later Cezanne landscapes "behind" their early analytical work; one similarly sees both the *Aeneid* and Homer "behind" Dante; one sees the Palladian villa "behind" Corbusier; one hears mature Haydn "behind" the early-to-middle Mozart; one hears Schonberg "behind" Stravinsky's mid-career experiments with serialism. And then those are still only one kind of (what we might here call external) contextual relation—they do not all function in the same way. Wittgenstein thus also offers a powerful example of the significance for the determination of aesthetic qualities of relations as perceived *within*, or internal to, the work. (Such cases, seen in this way, motivated New Criticism.) He offers the poem by Frida Schanz:

> Foggy day. Gray autumn haunts us.
> Laughter seems tainted;
> the world is as silent today
> as though it had died last night.
> In the red-gold hedge
> fog monsters are brewing;
> the day lies asleep.
> The day will not awaken.

He then notes that he does not know if the first words "Foggy day" are the title or the first line. And it is remarkable how trivial, by comparison, the poem sounds if "Gray" is the first word—as he rightly says, it "changes the rhythm of the *whole* poem." The relations of all of the lines subsequent to "Foggy day/ Gray autumn haunts us" are altered so deeply that the character of the entire poem is transformed. One might say (if rather deafly or unmusically) that the words after

all are the same, so the meaning is the same, and so the poetic content cannot have changed. But in truth the structuring relations internal to the work change depending on the rhythmic template laid down by where we start—and so does the poem we hear. Constitutive relations are thus not of one type (internal or external—and the clarity of this distinction, on the level of particular cases, is hardly evident), and they do not all situate the work in front of us into a network of other works. Some (like the Cezanne seen behind Picasso, or the Schonberg behind Stravinsky's brief turn to serial composition) do; some concern what Wittgenstein (in *Philosophical Investigations,* Part II, § xi*)* called "aspects of organization."[8]

In speaking of his own work (again in 1931) and the extent to which it is original, Wittgenstein says—having first said, "I don't believe I have ever *invented* a line of thinking, I have always taken one over from someone else"—"What I invent are new *similes*." This is a remark that sheds light in two directions. It tells us about his conception of his work as simile-invention—where what is invented is, we might say, a new network of relational comparisons and the kinds of recontexualization that bring about a new way of seeing the thing (or idea) recontextualized. And it tells us, by extension, about one kind of creativity in artistic production, i.e. one that develops within the teleology of a given style's developmental trajectory (and so in this artistic sense "takes one over from someone else," as in Haydn and early Mozart), and yet puts elements together in such a way that we see a new set of relational interconnections[9]—in a sense, new artistically-embodied similes. Creative curatorial work, like creative or inventive musical programming, would thus be both (1) "taken over from someone else"—it selects and exhibits pre-existing work, after all—and yet (2) creative in generating new constellations of linkages.

But of course not all relational associations are legitimate. In discussing the case of his having very nicely framed and then hung in the right surroundings (itself a revealing remark concerning formal-relational configurations) a picture and then feeling proud as though he had painted it himself—or more precisely, as he corrects the remark, as though he painted a little bit of it—Wittgenstein observes that this kind of relational connection could be no more appropriate than an expert arranger of grasses coming "to think that he had produced at least a tiny blade of grass himself" (also 1931). "Whereas," he adds, "it ought to be clear to him that his work lies in a different region altogether." Aesthetic parallels are evident: the curator who feels as Wittgenstein did about the framing and hanging; the conductor who feels himself to be speaking, not *for* Brahms or Mahler, but *as* Brahms or Mahler; the editor who develops a proprietary sense to the point of feeling a *creative* ownership of the text. Such cases show a category of relational interconnections that go too far, or develop without restraint or without an awareness of and respect for prior established relations.[10]

II. "A certain sort of kinship"

Shortly after the preceding remark, Wittgenstein returns to the matter of the importance of similes, observing that the truth in saying that a person's philosophy is a matter of temperament really amounts to a preference for certain similes (and that such a preference is indeed what constitutes, in part, temperament); such differences of preference underlie, he suggests, far more

disagreements than we might initially believe. Precisely the parallel point could (and I, for one, think should) be said about the arts: sensibility might in fact be, at least in part, a matter of preference for certain artistically-embodied similes in the manner described above, and aesthetic disagreements would then be played out in terms of these differences in relational-network preference.

In connection with this, Wittgenstein notes what he calls "a certain sort of kinship" (1931) between Brahms and Mendelssohn. This is instructive not only because of what he explicitly says—i.e. that it is not that any individual passages in Brahms are reminiscent of passages of Mendelssohn's, but rather that Brahms does with a full rigor what Mendelssohn "did only half-rigorously." Beyond what he explicitly says, we see the distinct way in which comparative analysis—yet another kind of relational interaction between works of art—has the power to cast particular features of a work or set of works in "higher relief," i.e. it brings out a feature that may have been recessive or dormant in our pre-comparative experience of the work. (Incidentally, since such comparisons are virtually infinite, this goes some way towards explaining the inexhaustibility of many works of art.)

Now there is, it is true, a heightened sensitivity (and not surprisingly so, given his work in the philosophy of language) in Wittgenstein's remarks on culture to the fact that art-critical language can as easily mislead as lead. One suggestion, implicit in these remarks, is that there is a sense (notably in the relationally-interactive and comparative sense just described) that works can speak for themselves. (That is, it is as though the juxtaposition of Brahms and Mendelssohn *itself* makes the point.) He writes (in the period 1932–1934), "In art it is hard to say anything as good as: saying nothing." But this remark is written, I believe, with the misleading cases in mind; he overturns it within his own practice a few remarks later with a rather critical verbal encapsulation of the nature of Mendelssohn's overall compositional project: "If one wanted to characterize the essence of Mendelssohn's music, one could do it by saying that perhaps Mendelssohn wrote no music that is hard to understand." And this precisely captures, in succinct verbal form, the now-evident relational feature of Mendelssohn's compositional work that is cast in higher relief through the comparison to Brahms. What Wittgenstein really is most sensitive to, at a deeper level, is the danger presented by the power of language to make everything seem alike, or, I would suggest, to submerge beneath the smooth and uniform linguistic surface just the important and manifold differences that relational comparisons and interactions between works of art bring out. (Much of the language used to discuss the so-called problem—as though there is one uniform and case-invariant question about all the members of this class—of the ontology of the musical work—as though this is one uniform *kind* of entity—does precisely this.[11]) In 1931 he remarked on "the power language has to make everything look the same," adding that this is "most glaringly evident in the *dictionary* and which makes the personification of *time* possible: something no less remarkable than would have been making divinities of the logical constants." (Abstract musical-work ontology can be blind to our practices, and "divinity-making," in just this way.) And in the following years (1933–34) Wittgenstein would dictate his *Blue Book* to his select pupils in Cambridge, in which he warns of dangers presented by a contemptuous attitude toward the particular case, how a craving for generality can

blind us to significant contextually-seated differences, and the undesirable results of hypostasizing a substance out of a substantive and assuming that a singly-named descriptive term (e.g. "beautiful") invariably refers to the same property or quality with uniform and case-transcending criteria of correct employment. He thus writes the remark (the same year as the *Blue Book* dictation):

> If I say A has beautiful eyes someone may ask me:
> what do you find beautiful about his eyes, and perhaps
> I shall reply: the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate
> lids. What do these eyes have in common with a gothic
> church that I find beautiful too? Should I say they make a
> similar impression on me? What if I were to say that in
> both cases my hand feels tempted to draw them? That at
> any rate would be a *narrow definition* of the beautiful.
> It will often be possible to say: seek your reasons
> for calling something good or beautiful and then the
> peculiar grammar of the word "good" in this instance
> will be evident.

A philosophical picture, from which a close scrutiny of the aesthetic particularities of close-to relational comparisons (and the seeing of connections between those relations in turn) will free us, would mislead us directly back into the old presumption that if the eyes and the gothic church are both beautiful, then they will share a common property that is prior to, separable from, and only contingently manifest in those two things. The linguistic corollary of that picture—that aesthetic words are fixed names of stable properties—will mislead us into the presumption that there is no such thing—and thus no such thing of possible aesthetic interest—as the *peculiar* grammars of the words "good" or "beautiful," and that thus (with a picture-driven contemptuous attitude toward the particular case) nothing in this *instance* or *occasion* of the use of this aesthetic predicate will be of any special interest. But if—like the particular features that are cast in higher relief through the comparison of Mendelssohn with Brahms—we scrutinize the details of the case in order to precisely locate our circumstance-specific reasons for using this predicate, what Wittgenstein calls the "grammar" will indeed clarify itself. That is, the particular criteria emergent within this particular language-game for the exacting employment of that term in its webbed relations will emerge perspicuously. In 1934 Wittgenstein enters into his notebook a densely compact three-word phrase: "Brahms's overwhelming *ability*." One can see at a glance how far one would be from genuine and deep aesthetic understanding if one were to draw up a unitary and universal definition of "ability," i.e. the property named in all cases by the generic term, and then—without the slightest attention given to the scores, to the nuances of the compositions and to the extraordinary musical intelligence displayed in treating the harmonic problems that emerge within those compositions—conclude that, according to Wittgenstein, Brahms has *that*. And the necessity of particularity for aesthetic perception and judgment, the need to see what is in Brahms in the most detailed way in order to comprehend the grammar of *this* use of the word "ability," is only buttressed by the previous comparative

considerations. On the irreplaceable value of such considerations, Wittgenstein rather poetically writes in 1937: "The light work sheds is a beautiful light, which, however, only shines with real beauty if it is illuminated by yet another light."

III. Embodied speech, embodied music

During the time of these remarks on music Wittgenstein is making great strides toward a more embodied conception of language. He will go on to suggest, in *Philosophical Investigations*,[12] that pain language, rather than a purely cognitive description of the alleged inner object of pain, is a gradually acquired replacement of pain-behavior.[13] This stands in striking contrast to the purely cognitive conception of language adumbrated in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,[14] where a proposition is conceived as an atomistically assembled picture of a state of affairs. This emerging variety of anti-mentalism manifests itself in his aesthetic thinking as well—in fact it does so at countless turns through his aesthetic thought. But a remark from 1937 captures the stance in memorable, and I expect for many people, familiar terms:

> When I imagine a piece of music, as I do often every day, I always, so I believe, grind my upper and lower teeth together rhythmically. I have noticed this before though I usually do it quite unconsciously. What's more, it's as though the notes I am imagining are produced by this movement. I believe this may be a very common way of imagining music internally. Of course I can imagine music without moving my teeth too, but in that case the notes are much ghostlier, more blurred and less pronounced.

It is of interest that this (I think) familiar mode of imagining music internally is anything but compatible with the Cartesian picture of pure cognition within a hermetically sealed consciousness. Indeed, it is a direct analogue to speaking inwardly (perhaps with a slight silent movement of the larynx), in contrast to the unintelligible pseudo-notion of inwardly speaking a private language that only we can understand (by virtue, as it is pictured on this model, of the inviolable privacy of the inward referents that give the meaning to the private linguistic signs). Wittgenstein comes, in his middle and later philosophy, to see language as not only a contextualized but also an embodied *activity*, and he sees music (and I think all artistic creativity) in the same way. Having entered into his notes the striking and single line (a line that is a reminder that can lessen the culturally-deep plausibility of the Cartesian picture and the philosophical misconstrual of experience that it engenders, thus opening the way to skepticism and its more extreme variant of solipsism), "Let us be human.—," he adds "Language—I want to say—is a refinement," and quoting Faust in his study, further adds his newly-contextualized and now famous appropriation of the words "in the beginning was the deed." These remarks have the power to reorient our point of view in aesthetic as well as in linguistic contexts, and they recover a full-blooded sense of practice-focused embodiment against the abstractions of a disembodied idealism

(of a kind that, given the inducements of certain linguistic forms, remains ever-present in aesthetics).[15]

It would be easy—dangerously easy—at this juncture to pronounce, in general terms, that, given all these considerations, Wittgenstein sees music as a language. But that *general* pronouncement would implicitly suggest that language is one unitary kind of thing, music is one unitary thing, and the latter is analogous to the former. Any such generalization would fail to maintain a philosophically irreplaceable mindfulness concerning both the clarifying value of relational comparisons and the role *contextualized* particularity plays in generating sense, in circumstantially generating, within a determinate language-game, what Wittgenstein called above the grammar of a usage. Thus he says, in these remarks, nothing about the nature of music and the arts *generally* or about their generic relation to, or structural similarity to, language. Seen in this light, this is neither omission nor fault. He says, rather, things like this (in 1938):

> Phenomena akin to language, in music or architecture.
> Significant irregularity—in Gothic for instance (I am thinking too of the Towers of St. Basil's Cathedral). Bach's music is more like language than Mozart's or Haydn's. The recitatives in the double basses in the fourth movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony.
> (Compare too Schopenhauer's remark about universal music composed to a *particular* text.)

And on the same page of *Culture and Value*, we find the comparative-relational remark that a Bruckner symphony can be said to have two beginnings, once with the first idea and then once again with the second—with this remark then itself illuminated by precisely the kind of thing he referred to above as the "second light" of a comparison—Wittgenstein adds, "these two ideas stand to each other not as blood relations, but as man and wife." This, tellingly, is not a comment about *the* relation between the first and second themes of the classical symphony in sonata-allegro form. And to further specify the illuminating relations that arise in this *particular* context of aesthetic judgment, he adds that Bruckner's Ninth is in a way a protest against Beethoven's and moreover that it is rendered bearable by this—it is thus, by virtue of its protest-status, not an imitation. Then that is illuminated by a further relational juxtaposition: "It is related to Beethoven's Ninth very much as Lenau's Faust is to Goethe's." And awakening still another network of relational interconnections and the new aspects they occasion, he adds "that is to say as the Catholic to the Enlightenment Faust" and knowing the rich constellation of associations he has now activated by this aesthetic juxtaposition, adds simply, "etc., etc." It is, fittingly in an especially precise fashion, here that he mentions (aware that he has now occasioned a blizzard of context-linked associations), as a reminder of the significance of the scrutiny of contextualized particularities (precisely the awareness that precludes overarching generalization about art, music, or language), that lines from Longfellow could serve him as a motto: "In the elder days of art, / Builders wrought with greatest care/ Each minute and unseen part, / For the gods are everywhere." It is just such embodied, manifest minute parts that constitute a composition's aesthetic content (rather than disembodied

compositional ratiocination), parts that are *made* manifest in performance, that emerge as salient through comparative or relational juxtaposition, and that—to say it too succinctly—determine the meaning of the work.

IV. Circumstantial sense

In a remark of 1940 Wittgenstein directly links this thoroughgoing aesthetic particularism with the causal model misappropriated from (an over-simplified conception of) scientific explanation in his lectures on aesthetics. He observes that the insidious power of the causal picture is that it leads us to say things such as, "Of course, it had to happen like that," where, believing ourselves to be observing the same effect in each of two cases, we infer the same cause leading to that effect. Given the specificity of the (philosophical) grammar and the sense-determining relations as they emerge within a particular linguistic or artistic or compositional language-game, we ought rather to say, as he says, "it may have happened *like that*—and also in many other ways." Any attempt to identify and articulate a "language of music," where this phrase is taken to mean a system of causal regularities such that a given chord sequence, or a given melodic movement, or a given rhythmic pattern, will invariably function as the cause to a predictable emotive effect,[16] would be constructed on this false (i.e. context-invariant) model.[17] In short, this would be to take a false picture of linguistic understanding and derive from it a misleading picture of musical experience. Later in the same year he writes:

> "The aim of music: to communicate feeling."
> Connected with this: We may say correctly "his face has the same expression now as previously" even though measurement yielded different results on the two occasions.

Then showing that this fact of aesthetic perception—in this case of the recognition of facial-expression—is itself internally connected to the point concerning the contextually-embedded nature of the grammar (again, as understood above) of a given aesthetic expression, where the criteria for the use of an aesthetic term are not invariant across all cases of that term's sensible employment, Wittgenstein adds, "How do we use the words 'the same facial expression?'—How do we know that someone is using these words correctly?" And then, moving to still another refinement, still another level of nuanced particularity, Wittgenstein adds, "But do I know that *I* am using them correctly?," where this question is intended to call attention to the fact that only within certain—and certainly not generically or in all cases of the uses of these terms—contexts will the question of the *correct* use of such terms or phrases so much as arise. And then still beneath this, his latter question links an epistemological to a linguistic point: our sensible use of the phrase may not depend invariably on the speaker's *knowledge* that he is using the term or phrases correctly. Both questions of knowledge and of correctness will arise, *or not*, circumstantially. These are indeed minute, and often unseen, parts, and the close scrutiny of them shows us about linguistic meaning, about artistic

and musical meaning, and about the linguistic practices that are interwoven throughout aesthetic life.[18]

V. Musical sense and linguistic capacities

Be all that as it may, music is an art that possesses the power to continually reawaken the Cartesian conception of experience, i.e. that the outer sensation is the stimulus for a hidden, inner, intangible event ontologically separate from the outside world and inviolably private to the hearer. Not least among the reasons for this power to reanimate the Cartesian image is music's transient nature as sound—unlike painting or sculpture, it is not the *kind* of thing one can encounter as a stable physical object (and it is for this reason that Schopenhauer placed music at the top of the hierarchy of the arts). The phrase "while the music lasts" is instructive: we would not quite know how to take the phrase "while the painting lasts" or "while the architecture lasts" (barring contexts of urban "renewal"). At a time that Wittgenstein is turning his attention to the philosophy of psychology (and investigating with unprecedented subtlety the differentiation of the language-games of the inner and the outer), he writes, "Once again: what is it to follow a musical phrase with understanding, or to play it with understanding? Don't look inside yourself. Consider rather what makes you say of *someone else* that this is what he is doing." And he shortly thereafter offers the reminder, when you say of someone that he is experiencing a theme intensely, to "consider how this is manifested." Yet it is, as he is acutely aware, all too easy to catapult to the polemical antithesis of the Cartesian picture of experience, i.e. to behaviorism. He thus writes next, "One might get the idea that experiencing a theme intensely 'consists' in sensations of the movements, etc., with which we accompany it." But this behaviorist's reduction of experience is just as wide of the mark (albeit wide to the other side) as is its polemical opposite. In truth, this is just another picture, in his distinct sense of the term (an over-simplifying conceptual model that cultivates insensitivity): "Isn't this theory once again just a picture?" We do, evidently, make coherent—and indeed irreplaceable and irreducible—distinctions within circumscribed language-games between the inner and the outer, but, instructively, we do not do so in a way that corresponds to a generic or trans-contextual ontological divide. Our experience-descriptions (and of course, we do not invariably, and perhaps do not so often, *describe* experience) are far more intricate than that, and like aesthetic language, these terms assume their life within—and not across– contexts of usage. And this fact about language is directly parallel to a musical theme, a motif, a melodic idea, a harmonic progression, a rhythmic pattern or sequence. (Hence the impossibility of the dream of a fixed language of music as discussed above.)

Wittgenstein once identified one of the difficulties of philosophy as saying what one knows and no more. *And no more*. This calls attention to the frequently unchained impulse to generalize from a few, or from even one, particular case(s) in order to satisfy a desire for over-arching accounts of philosophically-relevant phenomena that would impose order on the relative chaos of diverging particularities and conceptual neatness on the perceived messiness of individual cases. But as we have seen in the foregoing, it is (or at least often can be) the *differences* that are telling, and it is an awareness of the differences that will

prevent our falling into the grip of an over-generalized, over-simplified picture. (The methodological presumption of long standing, i.e. that philosophical progress requires the imposition of order and alignment of such details, is one that Wittgenstein is repeatedly questioning here; his conception of progress concerns the clarification of a complex view, rather than the imposition of an overarching structure.) It is for this reason that Wittgenstein, as we have seen, does not embrace any generic claim concerning music as a language. Rather, he considers, once again (but here, in these remarks, in new depth) some details that give content in circumstantially specific ways to the analogy between music and language. He writes, "If you ask me: How did I experience the theme?—perhaps I answer "As a question" or something of the sort…" And our ability to discern such internal comparative relations (to hear two successive phrases as antecedent and consequent, or question and answer) *is* dependent upon our mastery of language.[19] Thus the sense-making relational interconnections that we perceive internal to a composition, i.e. within the musical structure itself, depend on language and linguist abilities—which are of course external to that musical work. This is one of the facts that calls into question the dubious distinction mentioned earlier, one perhaps too-often employed without sufficient caution, between that which is internal to the work and that which is external to it: our sense-making capacities in language are underwriting our sense-making capacities in music, insofar as we hear phrases as assertions, as questions, as answers, as calls, as responses, and so forth. Here I think it can be helpful to suggest that one wants to say what one knows and no more—it is true that in this sense the linguistic capacities are seen to underwrite the musical, but we would do well to stop there (in terms of proceeding to a higher level of generality). That is, observing this connection is not at all to explicitly say or implicitly suggest that therefore all musical sense is dependent upon, and posterior to, linguistic sense. There are particular cases where we can say, with equal plausibility, precisely the reverse, i.e. where our capacities for musical discernment underwrite, or make possible, our hearing of subtleties or nuances of meaning or prosody in language. But in *this* context, in the philosophical-aesthetic remarks we are considering presently, Wittgenstein is pursuing the prior ordering: he writes, "Doesn't the theme point to anything beyond itself? Oh yes! But this means: the impression it makes on me is connected with things in its environment—for example, with the existence of the German language [for him] and its intonation, but that means with the whole range of our language games." The structural sense of the music, taken internally unto itself (that is, as we hear absolute rather than program music), is again a mode of relational sense derived from capacities that are, as foundational of our capacity to so much as make sense, external to the piece. Thus we immediately get the remark, "If I say for instance: here it's as though a conclusion were being drawn, here as though someone were expressing an agreement, or as though *this* were a reply to what came before, - i.e. my understanding of it presupposes my familiarity with conclusions, expressions of agreement, replies." It presupposes it, it depends upon it. And this is to say, I am suggesting, that the coherence we hear in music—one might say the conversational coherence, or here also the "grammar" of music, in Wittgenstein's sense—is *sometimes* contingent upon our mastery of the language against which, in these respects, music is being compared. But then to avoid

distortion of other cases one wants to not say anything more general than the cases at hand warrant. One wants to say no more than one knows.

VI. "The theme interacts with language"

One strong attraction that may be felt here is toward a kind of Platonism; here we might want to say that the mold for the theme, as question, and its thematic consequent, that theme's answer, exists prior to the creation, the composing, of them. Thus, on hearing the sensed necessity of a theme's being repeated in order to give it its tremendous power, Wittgenstein asks, "Don't we have an impression that a model for this theme already exists in reality and the theme only approaches it, corresponds to it, if this section is repeated?" That is, working with and from the analogy to language, we might well say (manifesting the impulse to Platonize) that the ghostly image, or again the mold (but of a mental or intangible kind), is pre-ordained by the *form* of the question-answer structure in language (or in the case of the sensed necessity of repetition, by the form of emphatic restatement), and the sonic realization of it is then just that—a *post factum realization* of a prior form. Yet this, as I think we sense as quickly as we say it, seems to falsify compositional creativity—composition is creative, and not the sonic analogue of paint-by-numbers. And so Wittgenstein retorts, to his own Platonic suggestion, "Yet there just *is* no paradigm apart from the theme itself." This retort restores the autonomy of the compositional intelligence—but this is delicate, and it seems to make the thematic structure perhaps *too* autonomous, too separate from, as he said earlier, "the whole range of our language-games" and our "familiarity with conclusions, expressions of agreement, replies." And so—locked within this dialectic that gives voice to the impulse to generalize, to say more than we know—we next see a new retort, in tireless responsiveness, to the previous retort: "And yet again there *is* a paradigm apart from the theme." But now, after the Platonist/anti-Platonist polemic, he voices the moderating (and claim-circumscribing) remark, "namely, the rhythm of our language, of our thinking and feeling." The attempt to see the intrinsic, indeed hermetically-sealed, structured or conversational sense of a thematic line in a manner *wholly* internal to the music is as ultimately hopeless (and for parallel reasons a misbegotten enterprise) as the attempt to theorize word-meaning in generalized terms in isolation from our language-games and the form of life within which they emerge. (One can imagine how poorly one equipped only with formal semantics and a theory of direct reference would do in this world. Indeed, probably as poorly as a musician—or in this case, by analogy to our impoverished linguist, really only a sound-maker—equipped with nothing but a fixed set of isolated or atomistic sounds.) Language has sense, our signs (dangerously put) have life, *in the stream of life*. We should not expect melodic sense, thematic "grammar," to behave any differently. And if we were to follow out a similar line of thought from the phrase "the rhythm of our language," we would find ample reason to reverse the dependency, such that our musical abilities are what seem to underwrite, to make possible, much of the expressive nuance of spoken language. To underscore the creative independence of the newly composed theme, Wittgenstein adds, "And the theme, moreover, is a *new* part of our language." To then underscore in turn the fact that it will function—that is to say, it will find its *use*—within, and only

within, a context of musical "utterance," he adds, "it becomes incorporated into it." (This links to the old problem of the unity of the proposition, but that is for another day.) To state what we know—where these words are given meaning in this context and resonate with all of the foregoing, he concludes this movement of thought with a deceptively simple line: "The theme interacts with language."

It is a seeming—but only seeming—change of topic when, a few sentences later, Wittgenstein writes the words (as an imagined quotation):

"Fare well!"

He then follows this with the remark, "A whole world of pain is contained in these words." His next antecedent phrase, the question, "How *can* it be contained in them?," is followed immediately by his consequent phrase, the answer "—It is bound up with them." And then developing this theme, he adds, "The words are like an acorn from which an *oak tree* can grow." To attempt to give a sealed and unitary definition of the meaning of this imagined or remembered painful use of the words "Fare well!" fails to acknowledge the occasion-specific contributions, the human network within which this expression is used, the stream of life from which it emerges. Trying to give the atomistic meaning of a melodic line starting at middle C, ascending to D, ascending to Eb, then falling back to D, independently of the context, would be blind (or deaf) to parallel sense-determining relations.[20] Wittgenstein clearly keeps this issue in mind, and still later in 1946, we get:

> Irony in music. E.g. in Wagner's "Mastersingers." Incomparably deeper in the Fugato in the first movement of the Ninth. There is something here analogous to the expression of bitter irony in speech.

Leon Botstein, writing on Brahms's *4 Duets for Alto and Baritone, Opus 28,* provides an example of just such an integration, such an indissoluble interaction, of musical theme with language, and it is clear in this case that the interaction—the analogous expression of which Wittgenstein speaks—illuminates in both directions simultaneously. We would not here understand the content of the music fully without the emotionally descriptive language, and we may well understand that emotionally descriptive language anew (or with a humane depth no atomistic account of melodic meaning could capture) upon hearing its analogous musical expression. Botstein writes:

> Though these four duets for alto and baritone represent a more mature and successful approach to the dialogic possibilities of duets than Op. 20, Brahms was more than usually self-deprecating about them. They were written between the fall of 1860 and the winter of 1862, and are dedicated to Amalie Joachim. Brahms maintained a particular affection for Joachim's wife when she and Joachim divorced; indeed, Brahms's sympathy for Amalie over his old friend caused irreparable damage to his relationship with Joachim. In these songs, Brahms uses the contrasting voices as an ironic demonstration of imperfect or misconstrued communication.[21]

These are, indeed, as I called them above, "sense-determining relations." And we impoverish the significance of the work if we deny, owing to a misbegotten

allegiance to an exaggerated formalism, the consideration of such relations. Charles Rosen writes "The isolation of a work of art in a museum inevitably removes some of its significance along with the removal of context: it allows the purely aesthetic values to come forward only by pushing every other kind of meaning into the background. A public concert does the same with pieces of music."[22] One sees the point, but one also perhaps wants to say that Rosen, in referring to "purely aesthetic values," suggests a hierarchy of aesthetic value, where intrinsic, non-relational, or purely formal considerations are of primary critical importance, and the relational, comparative, contextual, and language-interrelated considerations are merely secondary. If the Wittgensteinian considerations we have considered are running at all along the right tracks, this distinction in this way too is called into question, precisely because the very possibility of describing the content of the work of music without such relational considerations was already in question. And, one wants really to say that *some* public concerts do what Rosen describes: his observation points out the considerable aesthetic value of concerts, or series of concerts, that, again like a certain kind of curatorial presentation, place works of music into complex, relation-displaying settings.

VII. A musical stream of life

In a more lengthy entry of 1948, one in which Wittgenstein considers and dismisses a number of false generalized reductions (which is not that each claim, un-generalized, may not play a role *in situ*) of the concept of musical understanding—i.e. relating the musical phrase to be understood (1) to a dance step, (2) to pictorial programmatic images, (3) to the kind of causal linkage between stimulus and response discussed above, (4) to awakened recollections, (5) to gesturing in time with the music, and (6) to kinesthetic sensations—he emphasizes that the very picture of a determinate experiential content constituting the essence of musical understanding is seriously misleading. And this is true not only for its power to re-insinuate the Cartesian picture, as considered above. Wittgenstein says here, importantly, that to understand a piece of music means to understand music as a whole, as a culture-wide, practice-embedded complex set of phenomena. (This stands parallel to, and shares a kind of interdependent and mutually illuminating meaning with, his remark early in the *Blue Book* that to understand a sentence means to understand the whole language.[23]) Sometimes such musical understanding will be, not *signified* by (that way of putting it can be complicit with the Cartesian picture), but rather *manifest* within, facial expressions, gestures, the comparisons drawn and the images chosen to illustrate that understanding, or indeed simply the particular way in which a person plays or hums the piece in question. (A conductor's work extending from first rehearsal to final performance would constitute the maximum manifestation of all of these taken together). Thus, like the understanding of a sentence—or more precisely the understanding of a microcosm of meaning within language ("Fare well!")—the understanding of a phrase, a theme, an exposition, the musical logic of a development section, the now-relationally enriched recapitulation of an exposition section, the hearing of the progressive developments that are undertaken within a set of variations,[24] and so forth through countless cases, will occur within our cultivated sensibilities, within the stream of musical life. And that stream itself,

as Wittgenstein has already suggested in numerous ways throughout the remarks considered here as well as in his earlier lectures on aesthetics, is itself part of—it, in his resonant term, *interacts* with—something much larger. He sums this up in a sentence that exemplifies what it describes, a sentence that, when first read or when read in isolation, can itself seem too general, too indeterminately bounded, and perhaps too grand to be of much help. But seen against the background of all the preceding, or when taken in a way that is enmeshed within all that he has now said about aesthetic understanding, considerably more of its broad and deep significance becomes comprehensible. He concludes: "Appreciating music is a manifestation of the life of mankind."

Notes

[1] I discuss object-constitutive relations more fully in "Imagined Identities: Autobiography at One Remove," *New Literary History* 38:1 (Winter 2007): 163–181.

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). I will provide the year of the remark in the text throughout this article.

[3] See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 29–108. See also Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[4] Some variants of the institutional theory of art made this error; I offer an etiology in "The Institutional Theory of Art: Theory and Anti-Theory," *Blackwell Companion to Art Theory*, ed. P. Smith and C. Wilde (Blackwell, 2002), pp. 487–504.

[5] It is instructive that, while there is such a thing as a reader's digest (that description is also its title), there is no such thing as a listener's digest. But there are greatest hits collections of operatic arias, etc. and to hear these melodic "atoms," stripped of their contexts, is in the relational sense being discussed here to not genuinely hear them at all. The fact that this conforms to our deep intuitions (concerning the need to hear the whole work) on the matter suggests that Wittgenstein is uncovering something deep about the nature of genuine aesthetic experience and its relational embeddedness, i.e. aesthetic experience is not the *kind* of thing that can be fully captured by any reductively atomistic, sensory stimulus-and-response model.

[6] This has been discussed in terms of intransitive aesthetic content; I present this more fully in *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 99–117.

[7] For a fuller discussion of this point see my paper, "The Thinker and the Draughtsman: Architecture and Philosophy as 'Work on Oneself,'" in *Philosophy as Therapeia*: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplementary Volume 66 (Cambridge University Press, 2010): 67–81.

[8] I explore this notion in *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), pp. 202–222.

[9] Ray Monk has shown how relational interconnections are centrally important in understanding persons (which can serve as a helpful model for understanding works of music and art). See his "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character," *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 31, Number 1 (April 2007): 1–40; and "Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding," *Poetics Today* 28/3 (2007): 527–570.

[10] This is a kind of conceptual rupture that has not always been avoided: a series of recordings was released of Leonard Bernstein's performances in which he allegedly identified so closely with the composition that he felt himself, in the performance, to have become the composer. The

interestingly fallacious implication of this conceptual confusion was that this special identification allowed a uniquely privileged interpretation.

[11] For a helpful antidote, see Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[12] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

[13] For a lucid and compact discussion of this matter in connection with the instructive inaccuracy of attempting to offer an account of Wittgenstein's position in behaviorist terms, see Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein* (New York: Norton, 2005). See also my *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), "A Behaviorist in Disguise?," pp. 77–88.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1974).

[15] For a discussion of the impulses toward idealism in aesthetics and their linguist roots, see *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Chapter 2,"Art as Thought," pp. 31–49.

[16] This points to a methodological flaw permeating some experimental work on aesthetic reactions in empirical psychology; i.e. without the sensibility of the subject being taken into account, the stimulus one is attempting to study as cause cannot be accurately isolated or described, and once one has isolated and described the stimulus in a way inclusive of the receiver's sensibility, the result, now particularized to that individual context, no longer carries across from one case to another.

[17] See for example Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959). Any empirical psychological study that would isolate stimuli to determine their atomistic emotive effects would thus be similarly methodologically flawed. (Wittgenstein's deep antipathy to empirical methods in aesthetics can be better understood in this light; this antipathy is not merely a matter of taste for one type of explanation over another).

[18] This is a point that fans out along a number of lines of significance. This is not the place to pursue these lines at length, but some (of particular relevance to what we might call the logic of our critical language) would be: (1) what constitutes what we call "the same" in expressive content is not a matter of invariant stimuli across cases—we might well identify what we call the same expression or expressive content where this sameness does not require identical stimuli; (2) a *generic* question concerning the criteria for correctness in the description of expressive content is similarly not invariant across cases; (3) evidence-based articulated knowledge need not underwrite correct description of expressive content (learning to look and see, or to listen and hear, in the same way is not a function of evidence or deductive argumentation); and (4) more generally, the competent use of our critical-descriptive concepts is not a theory-grounded activity (a point developed at some length in the writings of Frank Sibley; see his *Approach to Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[19] A full examination of the interrogative character of Charles Ives's "The Unanswered Question" would show these observations at critical work and in some detail (this would require a separate music-analytical article). It is of interest that, as the piece progresses, the question posed by the trumpet is asked with greater and greater urgency, although each actual iteration of the questioning theme is, strictly *sonically* speaking, identical or nearly so to its predecessor. The answers following each trumpet statement of the question, by contrast, do change as variations on a musically mimetic theme, i.e. a portrayal of an increasingly felt desperation to provide an answer where none is or ever will be forthcoming. (See notes 5, 16, and 24 on the instructive

limits of the stimulus-isolation model in this connection.)

[20] Examples function rather powerfully as part of the argument here: imagine (to think of a few cases with the melodic movement described here) fragments of Purcell's "Dido's Lament," Miles Davis's "My Funny Valentine," and John Coltrane's "Impressions" being analyzed down to their bare melodic contour and thus regarded has having the same basic meaning. This would be the musical equivalent of identifying the sameness of bodily movement in differing contexts of persons waving their arms from across a field; they may have the bodily movement in common, but the meaning will never be located there, and what such an analysis leaves out is far more important in interpreting the gesture than what it includes (e.g. as though waving to show where the picnic is, or to warn of land mines, or to warmly greet, etc. is only contingently added atop what is wrongly regarded as the genuine bearer of meaning, the basic bodily movement).

[21] Leon Botstein, ed. *The Compleat Brahms* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 309.

[22] Charles Rosen, *Critical Entertainments: Music Old and New* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 301.

[23] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 5.

[24] The experience of hearing and understanding variations can be particularly instructive here: often in understanding the content of a variation we hear the variation in question not only against its predecessor-theme, and not only against its predecessor variation(s), but also hearing, in the musical imagination, what it is not, i.e. the variation may have what we might call subtractive content (where it is only a skeleton or reduction of what preceded it). In such cases, such meaning-content is clearly indispensable and yet *sonically* inaudible, so the isolation of what is heard as a stimulus in sensory terms systematically leaves out as much as it captures.