

Nick Zangwill, *Music and Aesthetic Reality. Formalism and the Limits of Description*, Routledge, 2015, pp. XVI + 212, \$ 140.00, ISBN 9780415661027

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Although most of the chapters of the book have been previously published as autonomous journal papers, they all constitute a highly unified argumentative line defending musical formalism and realism as regards the aesthetic properties of music. Zangwill's proposal of restating Hanslick's thesis on the essentially autonomous nature of musical beauty comes together with a theory on the role of emotion vocabulary in describing music, and the relation between the literal meaning of such terms and their non-literal use when they indicate genuine musical qualities. Agreeing with Scruton on the irreducibility of musical metaphors, Zangwill proposes and defends a realist alternative to Scruton's and Levinson's fictionalism. His theory thus combines three views: formalism, essential non-literalism of discourse on music, and aesthetic realism.

The book is forthright and well articulated in its theoretical aims and strategies. Zangwill examines the essence of music, what makes music valuable to us for its own sake and how any other values that music can acquire (semantic, political, social) are conditioned. He strives for a theory addressing the general, fundamental questions on what music *is*: in his view, this question is not only not reducible to questions about what music *does* or *why it is exercised*, but has an epistemic priority over them. This philosophical attitude in search of the essence of music should not be taken as a "dull definitional project". What it aims at is the "phenomenon in the world" (p.22), not the word or concept we apply to it; this is a debatable ambition.

The book's clear-cut self-enclosed dialectic firmness comes at a cost: Zangwill is astonishingly parsimonious when it comes to considering actual music: very few musical examples are given and even those serve only as recurrent illustrations; they are not analysed as sources of genuine musical insight. The author anticipates criticism in this regard, stating that his aim is not to "impress with his knowledge of music", but to "maximize the number of readers who know the examples" (p.XII), which seems an awkward thing to say in a book the "central topic" of which is "the aesthetic experience of music" (p.168).

The volume consists of ten chapters, two appendices and a coda, comprising its three parts: *Music and Emotion*, *Describing Music* and *Musical Experience*. The rich Introduction includes a useful concise summary of its contents. The unity of the book is of a conceptual kind, as each of the three parts works on different aspects of the same general theory: this is why the recurrence of its central ideas and some iterations contribute to its clarity, rather than irritate the reader. I will now attempt to discuss some of these points.

The classic problem of emotion in music is the critical core of the work. In the first part Zangwill, following Hanslick, argues that music in itself essentially “has nothing to do with emotion” (p.27). The subsequent two parts develop a theory of describing music and the nature of the “proper musical experience” in the light of this fundamental negative thesis. “Music should be understood in its own terms and not reduced to something else” (p.1). And if it is able to arouse emotions in us, to express them or mime their effects in the case of vocal or dramatic music, it can do so only by virtue of its autonomous, non-reducible aesthetic properties. How can we explain standard emotional descriptions of music? What do we really refer to when we speak of *anguished* flamenco, *proud* pasodoble or an *angry* passage in Beethoven’s *Ninth*? According to Zangwill, nothing genuinely emotional.

The author characterizes central cases of emotion in terms of (1) mental states (2) felt by a person (3) which have intentional content, (4) qualitative nature (5) and are subject to rational requirements (which might not be fulfilled, thus making a particular emotion irrational; cf. p.44). Clearly, not being a person, music cannot (a) *possess* emotion; but neither can it stand to emotion in more complex relations, traditionally deployed in explaining the essential power of music. It is not about (b) *arousing* emotions because, when we listen to music, we have *music* as the intentional object of our experience; and *music* is arguably not a proper intentional object of most ordinary emotions, such as pride, fear or despair. So, if we genuinely fear something while listening to music, we are probably being distracted from it; a composer might feel pride while listening to his own work, but that pride has nothing to do with the “emotional” character of the piece of music in question (perhaps we would rather describe it as shy or hesitant). All the more, our emotional responses to music may diverge greatly –

yet they may all be rooted in the genuine experience of music. The experience itself is prior to the emotional reaction it eventually produces. The same may be said of the objectless *moods* it may induce in listeners. Music can (c) *express* emotions in the purely causal sense, being an actual expression of the musician's emotional state, but this is aesthetically irrelevant; other ways of explaining the musical expression of emotions, including a hypothesis modeled on the notion of *arational* actions, ultimately turn out to be susceptible to criticism. Zangwill refuses to see music's power in (d) *representing* emotions, because of the radical dissimilarity between the object and the means of representation thereof (this point is in striking contrast to many other views on music – including, most famously – Aristotle's, who emphasizes the *similarity* between emotions and the sonic motions of musical elements (cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1340a, W.H. Wackenroder or S. Langer). If “proud Spanish brass band music” (this, it seems, is Zangwill's way of referring to the expressive character of *pasodoble*) represented pride, it would have to represent someone's (perhaps a bullfighter's) object of that pride, which it naturally cannot do. Therefore it cannot represent emotion. Lastly, Zangwill discards the theories of music as (e) *symbolising* emotion as “hopeless” (p.37), taking into account only arbitrary symbolic connections (presentational symbols are not discussed).

Apart from this main discussion, Zangwill offers some standard critical remarks on attempts to study emotion in music empirically: he proposes a methodological bridge indicating the conditions of relevance of empirical data to philosophical questions on music. Somewhat surprisingly, he argues against the indirect emotion theories from the (1) parity of experience of music by autistic and non-autistic people, and (2) the inequality of their capacities in terms of “emotion understanding, imagination and description” (p.75). The first premise is assumed to be supported by the lack of significant differences in galvanic skin response (GSR), indicating “general physiological arousal” between the respective groups of subjects exposed to music. It may be objected that we cannot exclude the possibility that what is captured by this method is not “the musical experience, whatever it is” (p.72) in its entirety, but the purely *pathological* (in Kant's and Hanslick's sense) effect of music, perhaps even the same which makes cows produce more milk

(p.30) or calms them in the slaughterhouse (Sève 2013, p.82). Zangwill also states that, if some recent results showing enhanced GSR in groups of autistic persons were true, it would only strengthen the argument. However, again, a rival explanation – that people with autism, failing to recognize emotional content, respond more vividly on a *pathological* level – cannot be ruled out on purely empirical bases.

Criticising literalism, the doctrine that the emotion descriptions of music refer to emotional mental states, Zangwill notes that we also apply such descriptions to natural phenomena, speaking of “proud rocks” or “angry clouds”. But, in the case of nature, these terms do not literally ascribe any emotional properties to inanimate objects. Therefore, the prevalence of emotion vocabulary by itself proves nothing. We speak of “balanced” or “delicate” music, we inevitably describe music in terms of motion and height: these are metaphors which have nothing to do with emotion (cf. Zuckerkandl’s view denying any literal movement in music, developed in Scruton 1998). It is reasonable to seek a unitary account of such non-literal descriptions. According to the Interweaving Thesis, “emotion descriptions of music are intimately connected with other descriptions that are obviously metaphorical” (pp.43-44). On the premise that a unitary account is desirable, Zangwill controversially criticizes S. Davies’ view that expressions such as “sad” or “high” are dead metaphors and apply literally to music in a secondary, specifically musical sense; but Davies still counts as a non-literalist in Zangwill’s terms, as the secondary meanings of the emotion terms in question do not refer to mental states.

The ubiquitous emotion descriptions of music can be explained by the Aesthetic Metaphor Thesis, according to which they “are metaphorical descriptions of aesthetic properties” (p.41). This position is developed and reinforced as the Essential Metaphor Thesis, according to which “the aesthetic properties of music cannot be literally described” (p.95). The interesting considerations on ineffabilism, ecstasy, (this-worldly) mysticism, immanentism, negative theology and Jewish thought correlated with this view (pp.112-118) make the reader think of Jankélévitch (1961) who, however, is not even mentioned.

Zangwill stands for the Aesthetic Theory of Music: “the function of music is to generate aesthetic properties that depend on sounds” (p.47). He applies to music his own general account

(cf. Zangwill 2001), according to which aesthetic verdictive properties (beauty/ugliness) depend on aesthetic substantive properties (described literally as elegance, dumpiness or, metaphorically, as sadness, fury), which in turn depend on non-aesthetic properties (of physical and other kinds).

In this framework, the “negative emotion paradox” (cf. Levinson 2011) is resolved. It can no more puzzle us that we enjoy anxious, melancholy or mournful music, as these terms identify the ways in which a particular piece is musically beautiful, and *this* pleases us. (Dissolving the paradox is not necessarily a theoretical merit; perhaps it proves the theory of being problem-blind, as all it achieves is to show that this classic Aristotelian question cannot arise in the true experience of music).

What *moves* us in music are not emotions, nor any other content, but pure musical beauty. Whenever we experience it, we represent music as “possessing genuine aesthetic properties” (p.175). Zangwill defends this realist thesis and claims that it provides the best explanation for the normative aspirations of the judgment of taste, better than Hume’s, Kant’s and Scruton’s accounts.

Zangwill’s book is valuable as an exhaustive and entertaining exposition of his distinctive philosophical views on music. It is, however, a highly theoretical construction, collocated in the most recent, specialized debate in the restricted circle of English-speaking scholars. It offers thorough discussions of Scruton (*passim*, notably Ch.9) and M. Budd (Ch.4 – a causal account for the possession of aesthetic/nonaesthetic concepts; Ch.5 – further polemics on the Essential Metaphor Thesis), Levinson, Kivy, S. Davies, D. Davidson. A non-standard interpretation of Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument is given in Ch.5. Other authors, with some exceptions (Hume), are mostly treated as emblems of broadly intended positions (Aristotle, St. Thomas), as objects of uninteresting repeated general attacks (the case of Adorno), or as fruitful inspirations for Zangwill’s own thought (Kant, Hanslick), rather than objects of historically accurate study and contextual scrutiny. Yet one can hardly imagine a clearer and more comprehensively argued statement of musical formalism, realism and non-literalism in up-to-date philosophical terms.

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