




Chapter 10

Does Music Represent? A “Heavy” Defence of Representationalism

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Abstract

Does music represent the world? If the point of art in general, and music in particular, is to help us understand the world, then music must surely be *about* the world, and so it must represent it somehow. In contrast to this view, Roger Scruton defends an anti-representationalist position, arguing that, as an abstract art, music has no power to represent the world. In this paper, I develop a four-point critique of his view, using the work of Michael Morris (2012), Aaron Ridley (2004), Robert Walser (1992), Peter Kivy (1990), and Carl Dahlhaus (1989), as well as a comparison of the metal and classical genres of music to make my case.

Introduction

One of the most intriguing questions within the philosophy of music is whether music can represent the world. If the point of art in general, and music in particular, is to help us understand the world, then music must surely be *about* the world, and so it must represent it somehow. This view – representationalism – is rooted in cognitivism. As Michael Morris (2012: 556) explains, cognitivism about music as an art asserts that “...the point of music as an art is to put us in a position of being right about the world because one is attuned to the world.”

Scruton (1997, 2017) argues against this representationalist view of music and presents an argument that it is “...an abstract art, with no power to represent the world” (Scruton 1997: 273). In short, his view is that without *misrepresentation*, there can be no representation, and owing to its abstract nature, music cannot be misrepresented. As a result, he concludes that music cannot be a representationalist art.

Scruton’s view - anti-representationalism - has been vigorously opposed in the literature. In this paper, I join the attack against Scruton’s anti-representationalism by means of a four-point criticism of his argument. I draw on the work of Michael Morris (2012), Aaron Ridley (2004), Robert Walser (1992), Peter Kivy (1990) and Carl Dahlhaus (1989) and use a comparison of the metal and classical genres of music to make my case for what I call a “heavy” defence of representationalism.

Scruton’s Argument Against Representationalism in Short

In *Representation in Music* (1976 [2017]), and again in his *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997), Scruton claims that despite music being used to “...express emotion, heighten the drama, to emphasise the meaning of ceremony” (Scruton 1997: 273), representation is *not* one of its properties. To develop his position, Scruton considers the phenomenon of representation, as one might find it in the mediums of “drama, poetry, sculpting and painting,” (*ibid.*). In his analysis, music is inherently different from the other forms of art listed.

It is important to note that Scruton considers pure music when arguing for his anti-representationalist position. Pure music (or absolute music) is a concept that is widely utilised in some form throughout the philosophy of music. The term absolute music was coined in 1846 by Richard Wagner, who used the term to expose the limits of instrumental music and justify his own conception of opera (Bonds 2014). Wagner wanted music that would bring about social revolution and thus derided the idea of pure or absolute music. In contrast, the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick argued that only absolute music could

realise the highest potential of the art owing to its purity (*ibid.*). As Carl Dahlhaus (1989) explains, pure music entails the idea that music is a “pure” idea with no extramusical elements. In other words, pure music is music that is absent from all representations stemming from non-musical aspects (Kivy 1990). In other words, pure music is music that is not about anything. It is “autonomous, self-contained and wholly self-referential” (Bonds 2014). Importantly, as Morris (2012: 557) points out “...there is nothing in the definition of pure music which prevents pure music from being programmatic: it is just that if there is programmatic pure music, it cannot be programmatic in virtue of the presence of some additional representational device.”

Scruton focusses on developing an analysis of pure music to conclude that music cannot be represented. His argument is as follows: without *misrepresentation*, there can be no representation, and owing to its abstract nature, music cannot be misrepresented. As a result, music cannot be a representationalist art. However, how good is this argument?

Criticising Scruton: Rejecting Scruton’s Anti-representationalism

As Morris (2012) notes, the very idea of misrepresentation in music is something most of us do not ever think about, and in fact, the very idea of misrepresentation hardly ever occurs to us in any art, be it painting or poetry. Why not? As Morris (2012) rightly notes, there can be no correct or incorrect representation without the possibility of incorrect representation. However, this does not apply to artistic representation at all, since it is not clear that artistic representation is concerned with correctness or incorrectness in the same way that archaeologists’ observations of a stone tool would be.

However, denying that artistic representation is concerned with correctness does not mean that its representations cannot be inadequate, i.e., that its representations can fail (without misrepresenting). Morris (2012) provides an excellent example here – the example of technical deficiency. A composer, for example, may just not be very good at using the orchestra to, for

example, conjure up the idea of a storm. Their composition may be disappointing to us listeners in that regard. However, this is just a simple inadequacy of the composer to the task and thus cannot be understood as misrepresentation.

Another example that Morris (2012) gives us is kitsch music, where a composer creates a facile and sentimental piece of music that does not sufficiently highlight the significance of the subject. Think here of a work such as the score of a film. Most of the music created for a film is designed only to accompany a scene and fill the silence; it has little capacity to distinguish its subject but instead serves to heighten the scene that it accompanies. That is not to say that all pieces designed to accompany films are a kind of kitsch music, as composers such as Hans Zimmer, with his soundtrack for the movie *Interstellar*, have shown that these musical pieces can still hold their own when representing their subject and correctly conveying opinions on said subject.

Already, we are sceptical that Scruton's argument is any good. A second way in which Scruton's argument can be shown to be deficient is to focus on how it is dependent on the notion that music is an abstract art. The reason that Scruton views music as abstract art certainly stems from his focus on pure music. However, the concept of pure music is a highly problematic way of understanding music, especially because it attempts to differentiate music from all other art forms, believing that it is elevated above other art forms (Bonds 2014: 298). "Most scholars", Bonds writes, "... recognised that the conceptual dichotomy of absolute and programme music was unsustainable; over time, the two extremes came to be seen more and more as opposite ends of a conceptual spectrum" (Bonds 2014: 298). This conceptual spectrum is the Romantic music-aesthetic paradigm, which, until today, has dominated the main part of Western classical music culture, including most theories of musical meaning.

A third problem is raised by Aaron Ridley (2004)—the idea that context can be eradicated within the sphere of music. This is important for my case against Scruton, since, for him, context is

the component of an art that differentiates it from being abstract or representational (Scruton 1976: 279).

Ridley (2004) refers to the issue as ‘Music from Mars’ – as if it were possible to have music without a context. Ridley (2004: 2–6) counters this idea with two arguments. First, he notes that “There is nothing natural or self-evident about the claim that music is autonomous.” Therefore, the assumption upon which Scruton bases his argument is problematic. The second point that Ridley (2004: 7–8) makes against Scruton’s assumptions is a related one – that the timing of this reimagining of music was coincidental with a period in which all of the art was being rethought and romanticised. As we have seen, the idea of absolute music itself is a nineteenth-century invention, with Dahlhaus (1989) describing the rise of absolute music in the same terms that Thomas Kuhn applied to the history of science: a “paradigm shift”, as it relied on a total “reversal of esthetic premises” (Dahlhaus 1989:7). Through this, it can be understood that the prospect of pure music, which Scruton relies upon in his theory, is a highly contestable basis upon which to rest his claims.

The fourth point that can be raised against Scruton’s argument that music is unable to represent the world is to consider the artist-audience relationship in music. Owing to subcultures forming around genres of music and persons following the works of specific bands/composers, fans could reasonably be said to have at least some understanding of the artists they follow. The same can be said of the artist somewhat understanding their audience, especially with the rise of social media in today’s musical world. Audience members can gain a glimpse into the perspective of the artist and thus allow them, albeit potentially misguided, insight into an artist’s intentions; for example, knowing about Jason Becker’s battle with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) based on his public statements will allow the listener a glimpse into understanding the subject of his *Triumphant Hearts* album. The artist-audience relationship then provides context for the understanding of musical works. As Byron Almén noted, “...the listener perceives and tracks a culturally significant transvaluation of hierarchical relationships within a temporal span” (Almén 2003: 12). Recognising culturally

significant ideas is part of the listener's job and requires active involvement of the imagination of the member of the audience. As Boghossian points out, when listening to music, we do not hear mere sounds. We hear the music *in* the sounds (Boghossian 2002: 50). As a result, context is essential as a point to raise against Scruton's position.

To close this section, consider that Scruton uses five points to determine the capacity for an artwork to represent. I will only consider points two, three and four by deconstructing them, tackling the issues with the point and providing examples of music that fit his criteria and can be considered representational.

Scruton's second point calls for the ability to differentiate between the subject and the medium to be recognised before representation can occur. This can only happen if one is aware of the subject of a work of art. Owing to music being a purely sonic form of art, an association of sound with extra-musical concepts is the main way for this event to occur. Thus, one must utilise context, but we must look at context as though there are different degrees of context rather than its existence or lack of existence within a piece. The use of Latin choirs in orchestral pieces may cause one to think of churches or religion through association, whereas the use of screams in metal music can instead invoke thoughts of intense anger through knowledge of how humans typically express themselves. Thus, these minute aspects of context and association guide one's mind towards a possible subject and allow for recognition and thus representation. A different example would be the use of the Phrygian dominant scale, which, owing to its flattened and augmented second, gives it a distinct sound, and the constant use of music written with this scale in mind when depicting the Middle East leads to an association between this scale and the Middle Eastern regions. This point of Scruton's also prevents an art that mimics a subject from being a form or representation. While music may mimic many sounds, or their aspects, which are found in the world, this mimicry is only a component of musical representation. The use of mimicry narrows a listener's mind to what the subject of the song is; for example, *Le'Château Abandonné* by Gulheim Desq, utilises mimicry of the sound of cawing at the beginning to evoke

an ominous atmosphere and bring the listeners' mind closer towards its subject of an abandoned Chateau.

Scruton's third point (1976: 263) states that 'Interest in a representation requires an interest in its subject'; thus, one must know the subject of an artwork before it can represent the world to its audience. The use of pure music again inhibits Scruton's perception of music and its capacity to represent this point. To deny any knowledge of an artist and their preconceptions denies the music of its dependence on some form of context, a quality that all art shares. Scruton (1976:277) uses the example 'we cannot assume that a composer may sit down with the honest intention of creating a piece to be heard as, say, the quarrel between Mr. Pickwick and Mrs. Bardell's lawyers' to highlight that music which may represent this scenario could just as easily represent a forest fire. I disagree with Scruton's point, as through the use of association and repetitive musical motifs being used in tandem with a character or scenario, an artist can guide the audience's mind towards the subject. Another issue posed by this example is that it has an extremely high degree of specificity. If another art form were to try and represent this, the result would be closer to the depiction than the representation would be. Nuances such as the identity of individuals are hard to convey; doing so through the motifs, one could be associated with a character or individual and thus represent their presence. To deny music, the capacity to do such is similar to putting a blind person before a portrait of a mountain and expecting them to recognise that it is a mountain. The visual association between a mountain and a depiction or representation of a mountain can only occur when one has the external context of what a mountain is. An example of the use of motifs to represent a subject could be James Bond's theme song.

While many metal and classical works of music share common attributes, which may not be apparent at first, when investigated, the link between the two genres becomes evident. As shown in the works *Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity* by Robert Walser (1992), many metal works, such as those written by the guitarist Yngwie Malmsteen, have been heavily inspired by classical music. This tends to feel off to

some people because, like all forms of art, it is an inherently biased idea about certain genres, which can lead to assumptions about the music and subject, which could cause misrepresentation. Through this mental association, these inherent ideas can either form part of the representation or misrepresentation is art. The very clash between these surprisingly related genres leads to many overt opinions on how complex the works of each genre are.

Scruton's fourth point (1976: 273) puts forth the criterion that 'A representational work of art must express thoughts about its subject, and an interest in the work should involve an understanding of those thoughts'. Lyrics are an aspect of music that can directly state an artist's opinion of an aspect of the world, but the same can be done through other musical aspects. Music is capable of doing so through the use of musical structure and theory when a piece is being constructed. The major or minor key sets the emotional tone, whereas the tempo, tone and type of sound convey different opinions and grant depth to the emotional tone that is portrayed. An example would be the contrast between what is conveyed by an electric guitar, with a distortion pedal in comparison to an acoustic guitar. The more aggressive distorted sound of the electric guitar will cause whatever is being conveyed to have a different tone than the acoustic guitar. The overdriven electric guitar may come off as a more aggressive, rough sound, whereas the stock violin may have a less aggressive, softer sound. The distorted guitar's aggressive sound can be found in numerous songs, but the example I will use is *Backbone* by Gojira, where it creates an aggressive intensity. The acoustic guitar cannot achieve a sound as aggressive as the overdriven electric guitar and instead utilises its properties to create sounds and represent aspects of the world that match its sounds. An example of this would be the classical guitar piece *Asturias* by Isaac Albeniz, which utilises the tremolo technique to create a different form of intensity from the aforementioned song *Backbone*.

In this section, I have raised four points against Scruton's anti-representationalist argument and then critically discussed three of his five points that form part of his argument. I've used examples from classical music and heavy metal to make my case that Scruton's argument does not hold.

Conclusion

I showed in this paper that Scruton's anti-representationalism is untenable by means of a four-point criticism of his argument. I used the work of Michael Morris (2012), Aaron Ridley (2004), Robert Walser (1992), Peter Kivy (1990) and Carl Dahlhaus (1989) and compared the metal and classical genres of music to make my case for my "heavy" defence of representationalism. The conceptual edifice of absolute music is, in my reading, a historical event that originated in the 19th century and is thus unsuitable as a basis for an assertion of a position on representation in music.

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