

# **Music: God Paradigm**

## **A Metaphysical and Epistemological Query into the Special Qualities of Music**

**(or, why in a lot of words, music kicks the  
ass of all other art forms in communicating  
thoughts, ideas, and sheer emotion)**

**By Brian Liesegang**

Immanuel Kant, in the Critique of Pure Reason and the Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics draws a distinction between what he calls the phenomenon and the noumenon.



The phenomenon, put quite simply, are the objects of perception and sense experience. It is that which appears to our senses and thus to our consciousness (after being schematized by the understanding). The phenomena is any observable fact or event and is thus

considered the object of knowledge. This stands in stark contrast to what he calls the noumenon, which he defines in the Critique as "the reality existing behind all appearances". Um, what?

The noumena is the thing in itself, the real object in which all the qualities recognized by us adhere. According to Kant, we can have no knowledge of the things in themselves because they lie beyond the realm of sensuous cognition. While such conceptions of the things in themselves cannot be cognized through the senses they can be thought of through the application of pure understanding. What could all this possibly have to do with music?



In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche makes the suggestion that music symbolizes the ultimate reality, the reality beyond and prior to all phenomena, the things-in-themselves,...the noumena. While this claim he later discounted, I do believe there is some grain of truth to this speculation. In some sense music can break through to the noumena. This suggested breakthrough is perhaps not in the same manner or with the same capacity Nietzsche would have liked, and perhaps the noumenal knowledge music may grant is not 'scientific' enough for rigorously anal minded epistemologists, but it

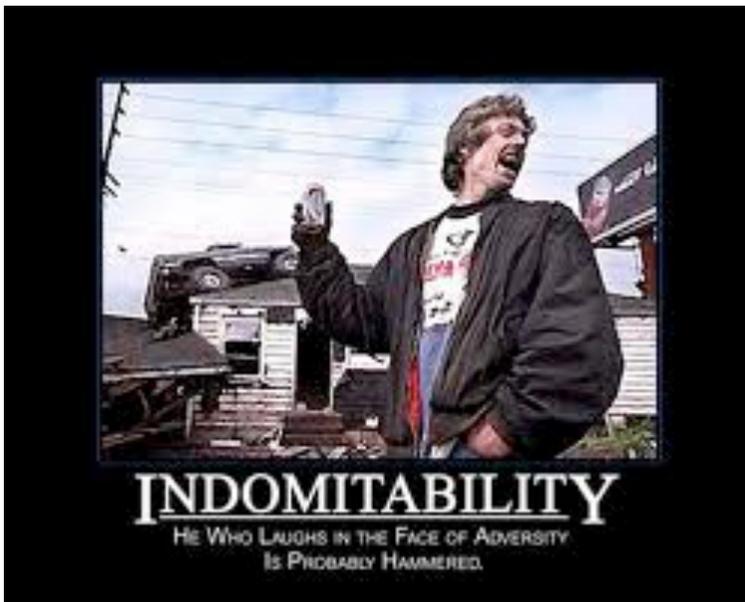
is can be considered an awareness, an awareness of the art and of the thoughts of the artist no other art form can claim to give. To give any validity to this claim I will have to demonstrate two points: (a). That music is dramatically different from all other art forms, and (b). The consequences arising from the difference.

I will begin with the inquiry into why music is so dramatically different from the other arts. The answer to this comes from a few different angles. Consider a painting, book, movie, or sculpture. These art forms portray these things, these objects, without us. What do I mean by this? The other arts remove us from the reality which their objects give us. When we look at a painting or read a book, we are removed from the reality the objects' present...that is, we spectate the art without a great sense of participation. These plastic art forms merely present us with objects. It does not take a great deal of imagination to think of these things, whether it be a story or a depiction of a particular scene- taking place without us. There is a certain sensation of separation.



Consider an example: When I look at Maxfield Parrish's "Daybreak", it arouses a certain pleasurable response. This response is elicited by an object, and the pleasure I receive comes not from my participation in the scene in the painting, but rather from an appreciation of the scene depicted. I am pleased by the object, but it is schematized by the conscious and unconscious activity of my mind and recognized as a separate entity and idea.

Music, on the contrary, expresses feelings, emotions, ideas- **and has nothing to do directly with objects.** Music "...reflects moods, desires, longings, resolves- the whole spontaneous and voluntary side of our nature, which Schopenhauer summed up as will"<sup>1</sup>. With music we sometimes experience a feeling similar to that found in intoxication.



It is like the paradigm Dionysian rapture that Nietzsche discusses in The Birth of Tragedy, with the capacity to break down and even lose inhibitions. Music can do this because it directly effects not only the

---

<sup>1</sup>Salter, William. Nietzsche the Thinker: a study. (Frederick Ungar Publishing: New York, 1968.) p. 78.

mind *but the body as well*. No other art form has this power.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the crowd at a loud concert of some sort. When the music is in full effect, not even the most reserved members of the audience feel as if there isn't a certain breakdown in the barriers of the individual. After all, do people normally enjoy being crushed by 25,000 other sweaty smelly bodies and suffering the bombardment of decibel levels of 110 or more? You would be hard pressed to find a similar audience at Michelangelo's "David".



While that may be a little overboard, and there are of course other variables to consider in the example I gave, but the point I am trying to get across is that the perception of music does not so much involve

---

<sup>2</sup>One must of course consider the effect particular religious symbols may have on those of certain ideologies. A cross held before a devout Christian may sway this person's mind and body, inducing a sensation similar to that described of music, but these, and other such similar effects I see as completely incidental. It has nothing much to do with the particular means of the 'art form'. Rather, it seems to require the vector sum of all sorts of things such as a great deal of background knowledge, belief, and faith for a wooden object to make grown adults drop to their knees. What is going on here is symbolic projection- people believing the notion that all that is outside the realm of their control, and all that is in their control, is in command of the man symbolically depicted on the cross. For those with strong belief, this object obviously has a greater capacity for mental and physical effect than music, but music never did intend to take on head to head something considered omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent, all knowing, etc. It'll lose every time.

a sense of 'watching' anything, but rather brings about a somewhat peculiar and special sense of **participation, an intoxication, a breakdown of the individual.**

With music we feel a certain intimacy that no other art form can recreate. It is certainly conceivable that some may care to argue this point, claiming a painting or a book to have had a greater capacity to sway their affect. Given the subjective nature of taste (that and the fact that I don't want to walk the thin ice of loosely dropping universal quantifiers), I will grant the possibility of this, but I think a deeper analysis demonstrates the general incoherence of such a claim. Let's suppose that someone believes they feel a greater intimacy with literature, or with movies for that matter. Am I to deny the intimacy they feel with this art? No. That's a bit like telling someone they don't love their spouse, despite their claims. No one can rationally tell someone else what they like because what is liked often has little to do with rationality at all. If you don't buy into this statement consider trying to 'rationalize' to an addict why they shouldn't abuse cocaine. They like what they like- no algorithm or exhaustive syllogism will change that fact- it just won't work. But if I can't examine the content of intimacy, maybe what I can do is examine the mechanisms for the intimacy. In other words, I won't make this argument from such subjective grounds as the content and matter of music, but rather from the nature of the form of the art. For this, however, I will have to walk down some paths that may seem a little unusual.

Consider the causal theory of reference. To vastly simplify this important epistemological theory, the claim is that to refer to

something, or for our purposes, to 'know' something, there must exist some kind of causal link. The closer the link, the more we may claim to 'know' or the better we are able to 'refer' with accuracy. A physicist knows more about the particulars of Brownian motion than a blues' guitarist. This seems common sense. Consider a few examples. Ants tracing pictures of Lady Gaga in the sand are not 'referring' to Lady Gaga. Regardless of how perfect the depiction may be, this is merely a coincidence, an accident dictated by simple biological schemas ants adhere to. After all, ants do not have a causal link with Lady Gaga.

When I speak of the Galapagos Islands, or some other place I have never been, I speak with less authority than I do when I speak about my local surroundings in Chicago. Another example: even though I have somewhat of a causal link with LeBron James, anything I say about him, or the accuracy of my knowledge about him, would not be as secure or accurate as someone who actually knew him quite well, after all, while my causal link to James does exist (from the media, perhaps friends of friends, etc.) it is quite far removed. This point should seem fairly obvious.

The same idea holds for intimacy. Intimacy seems to necessitate, or at least strongly suggest a certain closeness. To be intimate with some person, or some idea, you must be somewhat close. With this in mind, it is not at all unreasonable to assert that if I am physically and psychologically closer to person<sub>a</sub> than person<sub>b</sub>, I am more intimate with person<sub>a</sub> than I am with person<sub>b</sub>. I claim, that due to the nature of music, we are closer to both the art and consequently the thoughts of the artist. This point I must qualify.



Unfortunately, at this point I have to raise the question of the 'intention' or the 'purpose' of art. Before digging up two thousand years of philosophical aesthetic debate, I will make what I consider a reasonable claim. Any object considered as a work of art requires at least one of two things: either (a). in the creation of the object the artist was attempting to get across a particular idea, emotion, thought, mood, etc. or (b). the object was tagged with these things after it's creation. This point at first may seem a bit trite, but the reason for drawing this distinction should soon become apparent. Let's expound on this idea and consider some possible counter-examples to this claim.

Some may bring up the possibility of an artist making an object<sub>x</sub> with the sole intention to make money, placing no thought

or idea into the object either during or after the creation. So is this an example of a work of art that slid through the 'intention' fork I drew out earlier? No. My answer to this is that when such a situation occurs, object<sub>x</sub> is not so much art as it is a *product*. I anticipate someone will make an argument for an object<sub>x</sub> being both art and product, so lets dig around a little farther.



Consider the creation of a work of art that arises by accident, such as when you spill some ink on a piece of paper and it somehow forms a tree. Sure, things like this can happen, but the reason why such things and all objects' $x$  can be considered as art, **is that a certain idea, thought, concept, emotion, etc. was applied and tacked to the object, whether it was *a priori* or *a posteriori* to the creation of the object.** So what about a work of art by an artist like Jackson Pollock who neither tags an idea, thought, concept, or emotion to the work while he is making it nor after it is finished? He doesn't even touch the canvas! For his work, and all art for that matter, it is necessary that intention for the object exists for it to be considered a work of art, regardless if that intention is made by the artist himself, or the audience perceiving it. Intention is of crucial importance, for without it (as mentioned in the discussion of the causal theory of reference above), there would be no possibility of accurate reference<sup>3</sup>. The idea of reference will become more important as we go on. In any case, without intention, all art would have about the same significance as a pretty rock high on a Tibetan mountain where no one can see it. While of course such a thing may be considered beautiful, it is not to be called art (unless of course someone were to retrieve it and put it on display, etc.). The concept of an object being a work of art does not exist in the object 'in-itself',

---

<sup>3</sup>I am not saying here that if someone misunderstands the *particular intention* of a work of art that it is not art. When something goes wrong at this level it seems to have the flavor of what J.L. Austin would call a failed utterance in that it is similar to such an event when an illocutionary act fails to bring about the intended perlocutionary act. Something is done, so to speak, but the specific act is not accomplished, or in other words: Intention still exists, the audience just failed to perceive it correctly.

for the very notion of art requires some amount of human granted intent for the object to exist as so.

So where am I going with all this? It's time to tie this all together.

My claim is that we are more intimate with music than we are with any other art form. Why? I have already mentioned that to make this claim coherently I must get past the subjective psychological nature of taste and make the claim on philosophical and physiological grounds. For this I have assembled the necessary background knowledge, what is left is to put the puzzle pieces together.

All art requires intention, either before or after its' creation. With intention comes the ability and the possibility of reference. What I want to demonstrate now is how music transcends the normal barriers of reference to the ideas, thoughts, concepts, mood, etc. in both the art and the artist. How does this come about?

All other art forms besides music must appeal to some form of specifics to get their ideas across. By specifics I mean that they must rely on a conscious mediation device to get their concepts, ideas, emotions, across. Nietzsche speaks in The Birth of Tragedy of how music may get across feelings that come from the will "...without specificity, without the trivializing effect of a given plot, setting, or circumstance such as those that poetry, fiction, or the visual arts must use"<sup>4</sup>. The consequence of this is that music does not merely

---

<sup>4</sup>Lenson, David. The Birth of Tragedy: Companion to the Text. (Twayne:Boston, 1987). p. 82.

reflect the phenomenon in the same manner that the other arts do, but rather "...directly imitates the Will, the thing-in-itself, that mainspring of consciousness"<sup>5</sup>. What?

Kant introduced the notion of the applied conceptual schemata on the objects of our experience, but I will take time to note that the ideas presented here do not hinge on someone buying into Kant's system. Cognitive psychology and studies in artificial intelligence have demonstrated that we parse the environment. By this I mean that we through all sorts of biologically hardwired strategies process the environment, whether it be satisficing techniques, heuristics, or other conceptual tools that enable us to have a coherent conscious experience in a world of infinite complexity and scope. These strategies for representing the environment to our phenomenology act similar to that of a filter. Using this knowledge of how we process the world, I would like to apply the Kantian term of the "things-in-themselves" to the world beyond our schematization, that is, the world unmediated by our mentally imposed order. The more times these noumenal "things-in-themselves" pass through the cognitive 'filters' of our mind, the more their essences' are lost. These essences' we may never know in our conscious experience, but the closer we are able to approach their unmediated objects, the greater we can know these objects in-themselves. I propose that in music, because it does not rely on the specificity that other art forms require, the barrier between the art, the artist, and his audience is broken down to a large degree.

Let me clarify this point by appealing to some points made in

---

<sup>5</sup>Lenson, David. p. 82.

an article by McClamrock entitled “Autonomy and Implementation” (1990). In this article McClamrock defends the utilization of higher-level explanations by demonstrating that they capture certain generalizations that would be lost at a lower-level and that the higher-level explanations provide insightful illuminations and extensions to the lower-level analyses of the particular system in question. The point of the paper is basically to defend cognitive and psychological accounts of mind in light of certain reductionistic arguments. This may seem a bit distant from the topic at hand, but the relevance will be made clear.

There are multiple levels at which we are able to realize an object which are dependent on our higher-level realization of the object. Consider a graph plotting electric frequency over time. If we look at this graph as having been plotted from the emissions of a “...radio signal emitter, [we] will see as salient the high-frequency switching transients of the transistors and the exact frequency of the clock signals”<sup>6</sup>. But what if the graph was made from a computer? If so, we would have completely missed the differences between 0’s and 1’s that were represented by different DC voltages. Our understanding of the graph and to what we granted significance would be seriously altered. This idea can be illustrated as well by considering the somewhat famous “duck-rabbit” conceptual shift.

---

<sup>6</sup>McClamrock, Ron. “Autonomy and Implementation” (Univ. of Chicago, Not yet published) p. 4.



Different levels of realization reveal completely different ways at looking at the same set of data.

As stated earlier, we use particular rationally and biologically imposed strategies for representing the world to our consciousness. As a necessary and unfortunate consequence of this it is impossible for the rational mind or the active intellect to ever know the thing-in-themselves. While we can't see such things-in-themselves in rational thought due to the mind's insistent schematizing, is it possible that we can in non-rational or almost unconscious thought? Can we

experience a flood of incoherent conceptual shifts? Can we simultaneously realize multiple levels of the same data?

In some sense... yes. Subjects in dreams, subjects under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, or subjects extremely intoxicated are able to experience such a sensation. Obviously it is quite difficult to 'rationally' give an explanation or excuse for this irrational behavior, but this does not mean we can disclaim its' significance. Due to the sometimes unfortunate legacy of Socrates, demigod of wakefulness and sobriety, we possess a tendency to discount 'knowledge' gained in such states. Why? Such knowledge is certainly not considered 'scientific' knowledge. We don't go into dreams or intoxication grasping hard to the hypothetico-deductive method. But through such occasions we do gain experience, and this experience can be considered knowledge of a particular sort.



During an hallucinogenic experience, Aldous Huxley, in the Doors of Perception speaks of how he 'perceives' objects to be devoid of time and space relations. Rather such objects have significance only in what he perceives as their "being and meaning". Without getting into a pro-psychedelia commentary, I think there is something to be learned from his account of the experience. In such states our cognitive 'filters' and mental strategies lapse to a particular degree, that is, our schematization of the world is not as rigid as it is in 'normal' rational cognition. This leads to some ramifications on the metaphysics and epistemology of music.

I spoke earlier of how music is significant in that it does not

appeal to some form of specifics to carry ideas. When we listen to music, regardless of what state we are in, we cannot fall victim to various levels of realizability. Sure, we can listen to a particular part in the music, whether it be a certain cello or percolating hi-hat line, but the sensation felt is not subject to the same conceptual shifts that most sense-data and art forms are. The musician, in his or her act of creation, is not appealing to specifics (whether it be in his own mind or that of the listeners) to get a particular mood or feeling across. When we listen to music, we don't organize the noise into particular, specific meanings. There is something more primal and instinctual going on. Any formalities, whether it be a particular specific idea or memory, arise only as a result of what is tagged on after the creation and uptake of the listener. This may require some further explanation.....

We all have songs that remind us of particular people or events. This comes as a result of unnecessarily correlating two events. That is, there is nothing that necessarily exists in a particular song that relates our subjective experience unless we wrote the song to express that particular experience. Another artist did not have the same experience, he is just relating his own. However, we may be able to relate more closely with an artist that exists in an ecological niche similar to that of our own. This idea may explain why rural agricultural societies statistically prefer country music or why urban black youth appreciate rap. Of course there are other factors to account for, such as sociological issues, peer pressure, etc. So why do we still like Mozart so much? Of course not many of us are running around with similar life experiences to this artist, but we

still are capable of experiencing similar moods, feelings, and ideas. This is why perhaps the music of Mozart will probably exist with more reverence than extant texts. While some of the fundamental human issues presented in Sophocles' Oedipus will exist forever, the specifics of the events will not. I'm sorry, simply most people have a tough time relating to the experience of a king. I can feel bad for the travails of Oedipus, but this feeling exists in isolation from my own experience. Mozart, on the other hand, speaks, and with a vivacity of mood and affect that transcends my own experience. In music there exists a minimal amount of places in which certain rational cognitive filters may grab hold. We can date a piece of work on the basis of the instruments used, or perhaps some of the formal structure, but we can't so much date the feeling.

I must demonstrate some of the filters existing in other art forms. Literature relies on language, for language is the means of that particular art. We all know the hazards of translating a work from one language to another. In this process much of the work is lost. Maybe not the main ideas, maybe not the whole character..... but obviously something has changed. In any case, the experience of reading Tolstoy in Russian, and reading Tolstoy in English are two very different things. Different languages carry different complexity, different meanings, different subtleties....different thought. It seems half the disagreements regarding the arguments of Plato and Aristotle have to do with problems of how to translate particular words<sup>7</sup>. So what? As literature relies on the mechanism of language,

---

<sup>7</sup>e.g. Does 'aitia' translate to 'cause' or 'because'. The list could go on *ad infinitum*.

it must be prepared to accept the consequences of the weakness of the means. How can we have precise access to the thoughts, the ideas, and the phenomenology of an author if he must rely on an imperfect manner of getting these things across? Thought, to a large degree, relies on language. Since different people and different cultures have either a different comprehension of a particular language, or a whole different language altogether, language serves not only as a means to communicate thought from one person to the next, but as a tremendous filter as well.

All plastic arts, in that they occupy a position in time and space, must suffer similar consequences. Besides the fact that they are twice removed from the thoughts of the artist in presenting us with an object which is a representation of a representation, all these art forms, whether it be painting, cinema, etc., must rely on certain specifics, be it be color, shape, word, or texture. The fact that their ideas are both transmitted by specifics and comprehended by specifics makes them susceptible to the problems of the conscious mind. The conscious mind must translate these twice removed ideas before they can be realized and enjoyed by the mind in anything close to approaching some Dionysiac state.

This is where music reigns. Music is the only art form capable of transcending formal consciousness by transmitting the emotions, the thoughts, the ideas, and the mood of the artist directly and basically unmediated to the mind of the audience. Music grants us access to the phenomenology of an artist in a fashion no other art can claim.

But what about music notation with all its language; time

signatures, major and minor keys, tempo etc.? Is this not a reliance on specifics? No, this is all but a mere system thrown on top of the creation for some to understand the form and recreation of the particular piece. Ideas put forth in music can easily be understood without any background knowledge of such systems. From the look on a baby's face when presented with the melody emanating from its' wind-up lullaby toy, as opposed to the look on its' face when presented with white noise we can tell there must be something special about the medium. After all, can a baby distinguish between Shakespeare and a bunch of words randomly presented on paper? I think not. There are skills to be learned, specifics to experience. Even at a young age music has the ability to soothe and to disturb. But while music can tolerate and even lose this form, the other arts cannot- after all, we can't take language or life events from literature or deny our visual schematization of the plastic arts. When any such system is imposed on music, whether it be notation or computer generated MIDI control data, something is lost, for music "...reminds us of important complexities, of pain and suffering, [of jubilation, of apathy]... that can't be satisfactorily elaborated in language"<sup>8</sup>. The ramblings of Socrates seem a bit wrong here. Consciousness seems at best to be applied as a critical tool, it is the instinct that creates. Music is perceived through this instinct, it is felt rather than merely 'seen' by the senses. Music thus is not as likely to fall prey to the often mistaken and always mediated constraints of the rational mind.

So what is all this talk about music granting noumenal knowledge? After all, music does not grant us knowledge of God.

---

<sup>8</sup>Ackerman p. 18.

Music does not grant us the metaphysical nature of the cosmos. What Music **does** grant however is a more or less direct link with the thoughts, the ideas, the dreams, the phenomenology of another person. Such knowledge is beyond our normal sense experience, for it comes relatively baggage free of all imposed mental schemata. Without the application of a subjective schematization of the concept or idea transmitted in music, we are able to realize, or at least feel, the thing-in-itself of anothers' mind. When I hear the music of Nick Drake, the dulcet tones and post language transmissions of Sigur Ros, or the anger and apathy present in the works of Kurt Cobain, I am gaining access to the mind of another, an access I can get no other way, through any other medium.