

## WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND IN MUSICAL EXPERIENCE?

GUY DAMMANN

KING'S COLLEGE, LONDON

Of the many difficult questions that populate the rather treacherous terrain of the philosophy of music, the one that perplexes and interests me the most often crops up in various guises in the myriad books of 'Quotations for music lovers' and suchlike. The following version may be said to capture its fundamental idea. Given that music doesn't seem in any obvious sense to be *about* anything precisely, why do we seem to think that it conveys so much so strongly?

In the long history of attempts to provide an answer to this question in its various forms, one of the most popular starting points has been to draw analogies between music and language. The idea here, generally speaking, has been to show how typical instances of music do seem to signify in certain ways analogous to language; and although the signification is less precise and sophisticated than in language in respect of its semantics, music nonetheless seems to make up for this lack by what might be described as its power of suggestion. Although the analogy is certainly not fruitless, the explanation of why the cognitive decrease seems to be accompanied by an affective increase, as it were, is simply deferred.

For obvious reasons, such analogies between music and language tend to make language the *explanand* and music the *explanandum*; it is felt, where issues of communication are concerned, that, of the two, language has the greater explanatory power. One philosopher, however, who worked fairly consistently in the other direction (i.e. drawing on music to understand language) was Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The simple aim of this paper is to examine one brief example from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* where the analogy, which is more implied than outlined, might be

considered helpful in respect of our initial question. The relevant quotation is as follows:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein's principle concern is clearly to expand the notion of linguistic understanding. So, before we consider what the relevance of these remarks have to our question about music, let us explore a little what is being said about language.

The quotation sets out two paradigms of linguistic understanding. The first seems familiar and is strongly related to the idea of conceptual definition: just as we can only claim to have a definition of a term if that definition does not make use of the term being defined (otherwise it would be circular), so too we might claim to understand the content of a sentence if we can express it equally well in another sentence. And what this principle of paraphrase, as we might call it, indicates is the existence of some conceptually stable object of thought our cognitive access to which may be enabled by language but not necessarily so. The first paradigm, then, is one in which the precise words and their arrangement in the sentence are sufficient but not necessary to what is understood.

The second paradigm is, at first sight, less obviously a central instance of linguistic understanding. According to this model, the precise words and their arrangement in the sentence are both necessary and sufficient to what is understood. That is to say, the thought conveyed by the sentence cannot be expressed independently of that particular sentence. There is a sense, then, in which this second paradigm for linguistic understanding flies in the face of the first: the element of paraphrase which appeared to be crucial in the first is ruled out as impossible. Indeed, the strangeness of this as a paradigm for understanding may easily be conceived: if all our thoughts could only occur in the presence of the entity – linguistic or otherwise – that gave rise to them, not much in the way of thinking would ever have taken place.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I: §531.

Yet despite the inherently cumbersome nature of this idea, Wittgenstein insists that the concept of understanding applies equally to this second paradigm. As he writes a little later on, ‘these kinds of use of “understanding” make up ... my *concept* of understanding. For I *want* to apply the word “understanding” to all this.’<sup>2</sup>

A clue as to why Wittgenstein seems so keen to incorporate the second paradigm may lie in the example of poetry and in the analogy with music. It would thus seem that Wittgenstein is, for the purposes of the second paradigm, concerned with instances of understanding where some kind of aesthetic activity is involved. Possibly, too, the examples are intended to indicate instances where the presence of more affective content is likely. Now if this were to be demonstrably the case, then we would be in a position to make some progress on our opening question about music. This is because we would have, within the concept of understanding, a single axis between a paradigm of conceptual precision and another of affective efficacy. And thus, if music were to be considered an example of understanding in Wittgenstein’s extended sense, we would be able to suggest that music’s affective efficacy occurs not *in spite of* the fact that it doesn’t appear to be ‘about’ anything very precisely, but in some way *as a result* of this very fact.

At present, though, we are some way from being able to support such a suggestion. To do so, two arguments would be required. First, we would need to show that the experience of music is not just analogous to Wittgenstein’s first paradigm, but is an example of it. Second, we would require an argument to show how the second paradigm in some way entails an increase in affectivity. Obviously, conclusive arguments meeting these descriptions would be beyond the scope of a short essay such as this. Nevertheless, I will attempt a very brief sketch of each.

Let us look at the basis of the analogy between the second paradigm of understanding and musical experience. Wittgenstein simply refers to the idea that one musical theme may not be replaced by another without a difference in semantic content. This seems reasonable enough, but there is something distinctly odd about appealing to a musical analogy in the context of a discussion about understanding. Why, one may ask, would we need a concept of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., I: §532.

understanding at all for the case of music? After all, it is not clear that understanding in the semantic sense discussed by Wittgenstein is even related to the typical ‘pure’ musical experience: if I claim to ‘understand’ a movement or work, I am more likely to be suggesting that I understand how the music works, how it fits together, than what it might ‘mean’ in some deeper sense. The question, ‘do you understand French Baroque keyboard music?’, for example, doesn’t seem at all to employ ‘understand’ in the same sense as, ‘do you understand seventeenth-century French?’

So what, in this case, is being ‘understood’ where I understand ‘the way French Baroque keyboard music works’, or ‘how the thematic argument of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony works’? To take the second example – since it is the kind of example to which Wittgenstein’s remarks pointed – we can say that in order to hear a musical theme, part of what is required is to hear it *as* a theme. We require, then, if not the concept of a musical theme, then at least some experience of picking out one collection of notes over another. Part of this experience will derive from the ability to recognize that same theme as apparent in one or more further instances. That is to say, we need to be able not only to single out a particular set of notes from the rest of what we are hearing, but we need to be able to relate this particular set of notes to another set and register them as being in some degree the same, and in some degree as different. In this way, then, hearing a musical theme as such is not simply a passive perceptual process but also requires an act of recognition.

Now, there is substantial debate among musicologists as to how important the following of ‘thematic arguments’ is to our overall experience of music. But what is indisputable, whether we are following the thematic, rhythmic, or tonal structures of a work, or whether we are simply being led through a piece by our ability to pick out certain events, is that the cognitive process involved may be appropriately described in terms of the establishment of relations between musical entities. That is to say, a large part of our experience of music is the determination of the degree to which different entities are the same or different. This determination may seem almost instinctive: it does not take much effort of mind to hear that middle C is somehow both the same as and different from the C an octave above; it takes slightly more to hear that the two main ‘themes’ of the first movement of Beethoven’s fifth symphony are also somehow both the

same and different. But regardless of the degree of effort of mind involved, we may still say that an essential part of the phenomenology of musical experience is a mental process consisting in the determination of cognitive relations.

So what relation does this cognitive process have to the second paradigm of linguistic understanding invoked by Wittgenstein? There seems to be one strong similarity; sufficiently strong to suggest that our understanding of music could count as an example of the paradigm. The similarity is that we appear to be dealing with what one might call a ‘quasi-conceptual entity’; a cognitive entity, that is to say, which is sufficiently strong to be the basis of judgements of adequacy of expression, and perceptions of sameness or difference. Moreover, in both cases, there is a strong sense in which the ‘understanding’ may not occur independently of a particular phenomenological state. On a very plausible reading of the Wittgenstein passage, the phenomenological state of what it is like to read a particular sentence in a poem is a necessary feature of what it is to understand that sentence. Similarly, the phenomenological state of what it is like to hear a particular musical theme is a necessary feature of our cognitive access to its being a particular instance of a theme.

The second argument we were to sketch concerned the idea that the second paradigm necessarily incorporated an affective element. This would be a complicated and lengthy argument to put. Nonetheless, I think we have the requisite starting ground already laid out as a result of the previous sketch. For, on the grounds of what has just been suggested, we may immediately conjecture the following. Where the phenomenology of a particular experience is necessary to a particular ‘understanding’, or where an essential part of understanding something is the experience of ‘what it is like’ to understand it, then the specific kind of understanding may well involve something affective as a necessary part of it.

Wittgenstein’s concern, in the passage we have been discussing, was to broaden the concept of linguistic understanding; to suggest that a purely conceptual paradigm was insufficient. He also suggested that we might incorporate within this concept of understanding elements that might be characterized (by us) as aesthetic and, perhaps at more of a stretch, as affective. In this paper, it has been my intention to show how our experience of music may be coherent with some aspects of linguistic understanding when understood according to Wittgenstein’s model

(i.e. incorporating both paradigms discussed above). Further, I have been concerned to suggest that there may necessarily be affective elements to the act of understanding when construed according to the second paradigm, both in music and language. Whether or not Wittgenstein's expanded model of understanding might offer any guidance for those, like myself, seeking a solution to the age-old conundrum with which we started, but it seems to offer some considerable potential in this respect, particularly so in consideration of both the scope and the economy of the model presented.